

12

King of the Line

The Sovereign Acts of Jean-Michel Basquiat

Frances Negrón-Muntaner with Yasmin Ramirez

*For the subway crown motif—
“king of the line”—is always there.*

ROBERT FARRIS THOMPSON¹

Every line means something.

JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT²

When evoking artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, it is difficult not to think of kings. Born to a Haitian father and a Brooklyn-born Puerto Rican mother in 1960, since the beginning of his career as part of the wall-writing team SAMO© in the late 1970s, Basquiat consistently probed the limits and possibilities of sovereign symbols, particularly crowns.³ A globally recognizable emblem of monarchical and divine power, royal status, and glory, Basquiat’s incorporation of the crown is evident in multiple ways: from his signature sign—a pared-down, three-peaked crown that he deployed in thousands of paintings, drawings, and objects—to his own hair, which he at times styled into crown-like spines to claim his status as king of the art world.⁴ In the words of historian Robert Farris Thompson, Basquiat “continually crowned himself king of painters, calling on fortune to extend his status.”⁵ Yet what exactly did being “king” mean for, and in, Basquiat?

For Basquiat and others of his generation, to be art royalty was to be recognized as a major artist, among or above towering (white) figures such as



Figure 12.1. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Untitled (Crown)*, 1988.

Leonardo da Vinci and Pablo Picasso and famous contemporaries such as Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and Cy Twombly.⁶ It additionally meant to conquer all media, that is, to have your work featured in every important gallery, museum, biennial, and art magazine in the world as well as to have legions of prestigious patrons and corporate heads buying (and bowing to) your talent. Moreover, within the context of the 1980s—when art acquired the liquidity of money and artists were treated as celebrities—royal rank included having an entourage who catered to your every wish, parting the crowds when you pulled up to nightclubs, and having access to expensive goods, including designer clothes and drugs.⁷ In sum, being king meant undisputed stardom, a status unavailable to the vast majority of artists.

Yet while Basquiat's graffiti sought to occupy specific art "territory" in downtown Manhattan, and he more than once expressed a real or figurative desire to "fight" other artists like Julian Schnabel or Andy Warhol,⁸ his

attention to crowns went beyond a desire to be famous or assert control over others. It also went further than what critics Jordana Moore Saggese and Richard Marshall have described as Basquiat's "obsession"⁹ or "interest"¹⁰ in commerce, although this is not irrelevant. Instead, we would argue that Basquiat was less fixated on trade than invested in visualizing the relationship between capitalism, modernity, colonialism, racism, and Western sovereignty. Basquiat was similarly consumed by the challenge of disrupting Eurocentric knowledge and institutions that delegitimize and marginalize African, Afro-diasporic, and indigenous epistemologies and imagination.

In this regard, Basquiat's use of crowns and related symbols constitute a critical vocabulary of contestation that resignifies the concept of sovereignty in at least three distinct, if at times overlapping, ways. At one level, as Basquiat mined black stereotypes and inquired into the production of racist/colonial orders, his texts recall scholar Scott Richard Lyons's notion of "rhetorical sovereignty" in the context of Native American studies. According to Lyons, the goal of most Native American writing is to achieve sovereignty through the eradication of "stereotypes, cultural appropriation, exclusion, ignorance, irrelevance," and the "rhetorical imperialism" embedded in U.S. (and European) law and discourse.¹¹ At another level, Basquiat's pursuit of a (royal) place in Western art history led to a persistent inquiry into the relationship between subjectivity, lineage, and authority for Afro-diasporic artists. In this, Basquiat dialogues with Barbadian writer George Lamming's term *sovereignty of the imagination*, defined as "an unending process of thinking of how one has always to rework the ways in which one claims and exercises the power and the authority of an individual."¹² Finally, Basquiat's frequent deployment of crowns to honor black men is akin to Frantz Fanon's characterization of postcolonial "true sovereignty" as the affirmation of black dignity and self-worth.¹³ Overall, Basquiat's ontological and critical view of sovereignty sought to leverage the might of black (art) kings toward a different mode of knowing, relating, and being. Or as Basquiat once put it in a poem: "You can't sell a human / You've done this scratching / This was not blank."¹⁴

By reading Basquiat in this way, we are not implying that he is "theorizing" in conventional or disciplinary terms. We are instead arguing that Basquiat produced critical, complex, and "implicated"¹⁵ thought regarding the

nature of royal status, sovereign power, and the political and symbolic order that came about with the conquest and settlement of the Americas and the extension of the imperial project to Africa. Specifically, by representing “bodily, emotional, and psychological sensation,”¹⁶ through various aesthetic means, including collage, repetition, improvisation, copying, scaling, designing, and color, Basquiat generated a dense sensorial archive that revised, related, and recontextualized black, Caribbean, indigenous, and other knowledges, affects, and memories. Inviting an active engagement, Basquiat’s signifying practices resemble a “decolonial” hypertext where viewers/readers can “delink” from “the colonial matrix of power,”¹⁷ in Walter D. Mignolo’s phrase, through multiple “networks of nodes which readers are free to navigate in a non-linear fashion.”¹⁸

Revealingly, although Basquiat’s iconic vocabulary of sovereignty appears more centrally in the 1980–1983 period, it continues to be present in his work until 1986, nearly the end of his career. Equally significant, the waning of these images and words and their displacement by Afro-diasporic spiritual figures, animals, and images of flight can be understood in part as a reckoning with the complexities and limitations of sovereign discourse as a black praxis of liberation. Within, across, and in between texts, Basquiat demonstrates an awareness of the importance of representation to legitimizing royal and sovereign claims and raises two core questions that have haunted not only Basquiat but many other black artists and political thinkers throughout the twentieth century: Is black sovereignty, even of or in the imagination, viable or desirable? Can sovereignty ultimately offer a path to freedom?

Enter the King

Given the ubiquity of the crown in Basquiat’s work and public persona, family and peers have offered various accounts regarding its source and meaning. According to Basquiat’s father, Gerard, “the crown meant that he was from royalty.”¹⁹ Suzanne Mallouk, Basquiat’s companion in the early 1980s, claims that the crown originated in *The Little Rascals* show, a favorite of the artist: “there is a crown—sketched on the screen—and a title: King World

Productions.”²⁰ For fellow artist Francesco Clemente, “Jean-Michel’s crown has three peaks, for his three royal lineages: the poet, the musician, and the great boxing champion.”²¹ Scholars have similarly weighed in. While for critic bell hooks the crowns symbolize fame and were “offered as the only possible path to subjectivity for the black male artist,”²² for Moore Saggese they refer to the “assertion of the artist’s power.”²³ Yet though all these versions may be part of the story, Basquiat’s crowns are less a stable sign or symbol than an evolving method of producing and authorizing decolonial knowledge.

In its initial iteration, the crown inscribes and enacts the power of a black artist to recognize and render visible what he considers honorable and prized. This is evident in one of Basquiat’s first paintings to include a crown, *Untitled* (1981), where he draws a blue cityscape populated by buildings, street signs, and a plane flying overhead. These images are in turn related to other keywords and symbols: a crown in the middle of the composition, a crowned male head to the left, and a notary seal to the right of the crown. In the bottom right of the canvas, Basquiat writes *RESPO*—possibly a truncated form of the Spanish term *respeto* (respect)—and places it at the top of one of the buildings. In this context, Basquiat appears to simultaneously authorize himself as an artist, confer value on specific objects and figures, and demand respect from the city. The crown acts, in Marshall’s words, as “Basquiat’s own trademark as well as a symbol of respect and admiration that he bestows.”²⁴

The ways that crowns authorize and perform recognition of royal status—and the stakes of such acts—are even more evident in numerous works on canvas and paper from 1981 to 1983. In these, Basquiat “proliferated sovereignties”²⁵ by placing crowns or crown-like haloes on top of the heads or names of both famous and “ordinary” black men to note achievements obtained against great odds, honor the dignity denied by racism, and signal Basquiat’s own identification and kinship. With equal force, Basquiat acknowledged boxing legends Jack Johnson and Sugar Ray Robinson, jazz great Charlie Parker, an unknown man arrested by unscrupulous cops (*Untitled*, 1981), and a sweeper in a prisoner-style uniform holding a broom in the manner of “an African warrior posing with his spear” (*Untitled*, 1981).²⁶ Through the aesthetic act of crowning, Basquiat redefines what royalty is

and how (by whom and why) this status is conferred, recasting nobility as a “figure of speech” that can be granted by the black artistic imagination.

Likewise, Basquiat’s crowning of both the famous (if suffering) and the socially invisible visualizes a politics that recalls literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the “carnavalesque.” As Bakhtin suggested, in European carnival, not only do people in the lower social rungs represent themselves as royalty, and “real” royalty is made fun of, but also social and political life itself is represented as “a perpetual ‘crowning and uncrowning,’” asserting the possibility of social change and transformation.²⁷ Moreover, Basquiat’s recognition of black royalty recalls the syncretic carnival traditions of the Caribbean in which participants “named their own leaders, expressing hierarchy in their own community that built on memories of different types of African social organization.”²⁸ In this regard, the crown operates as a metaphor, in literary scholar Mark Rifkin’s sense of “redescribing reality, disorienting current modes of description and classification in order to reference ‘the polysemy of being.’”²⁹

Even further, the act of crowning not only may confer worth, recognize value, or reclassify categories of knowledge; it also literally directs the viewer’s gaze to the subjects’ upper bodies, particularly their heads. While Basquiat has called his portrayal of faces “instinctual” and journalists such as Cathleen McGuigan have linked them to the early influence of Picasso,³⁰ his attention to heads is neither arbitrary nor does it conceptually resemble Picasso’s. Following scholar Simon Gikandi, Picasso viewed African art objects (including sculpted heads and masks) as means or raw material to modernize European painting rather than as a form of engagement with black bodies, histories, or aesthetics.³¹

In contrast, Basquiat’s emphasis on and placement of heads positions black subjects on higher ground, moving them away from visual representations that locate them in subordinate or subservient positions in relation to other figures, objects, or aesthetic traditions. By emphasizing heads—or as Basquiat sometimes wrote in Spanish on his canvases, “cabezas”—Basquiat unsettles the Eurocentric assumption that black or African-descended peoples are closer to nature through the sensuality of their bodies and insists on their creative capacities. In curator Kellie Jones’s succinct words, “the intellect is emphasized, lifted up to notice, privileged over the body and the physicality

that these figures—black men—commonly represent in the world.”³² Or in other terms, to the extent that in the Americas, the possessor of knowledge became naturalized since the sixteenth century as a “western Christian man,”³³ Basquiat’s crowned heads overtly refute the idea that blacks (and other nonwhite groups) could be conceived as matter/nature/object rather than mind/human/subject.³⁴

Moreover, the focus on heads explicitly references African knowledge, cultural, and religious systems such as sub-Saharan sculpture, in which the head is represented as exceptionally large and often highlighted by wearing elaborate hairstyles and headdresses, among other items.³⁵ In Yoruban visual and philosophical thought, one of the most influential in the Americas, the head is also “a metaphor for supremacy and chieftainship”³⁶ and the place of *ashé* (power) as well as a person’s *ìwà* (character).³⁷ The importance of the head is similarly present in Afro-diasporic arts and religious practices with which Basquiat was probably familiar. This includes the Haitian vodou concept of *mèt tèt*, or the “master of the head,” the spirit that is particular to each individual. The head is likewise the “seat of vodun power where a vodun [spirit] rests when it enters the body during possession,” as Suzanne Preston Blier has noted.³⁸

Equally relevant, crowns are important elements to signify artistic distinction and create “brand” recognition in black and Latino popular cultures. In the 1970s graffiti scene, Basquiat’s first artistic setting, crowns were drawn to connote rank and identity as wall writers competed for the title of “king” of specific subway lines and other public spaces that they claimed.³⁹ The one that had the most visible tags or was “up” the longest at any given moment was recognized as “king of the line” until inevitably he or she would be “knocked off” by another more prolific or visible writer.⁴⁰ In addition, when a graffiti writer became famous either for the quality of their work or its ubiquity and others acknowledged the feat, a crown could appear next to the writer’s tag to mark this status. Similarly, sports figures, singers, and other artists often claim royal titles both to indicate their exceptional abilities as well as to defy race, gender, and other hierarchies.⁴¹ Among the many examples in the jazz world alone, which was widely referred to in Basquiat’s work, are Count Basie (William James Basie), Lady Day (Billie Holiday), and Duke Ellington (Edward Kennedy Ellington).

Given these multiple associations, it is not surprising that Basquiat deployed crowns to visualize his own worth in the art world. Royal symbols were a way to establish genealogies that secured his place as a legitimate successor in a line of (Western) art kings and to enjoy immortality. A key example is *Red Kings* (1981), a painting that comprises two crowned and simply drawn skull-like faces against a red background. Within the eyes and nose of the face to the left, Basquiat places the letters Q, B, and S, suggesting that the image may refer to Basquiat himself and perhaps allude to his New York origins: all three letters correspond to city subway lines, including one that connects east and west, and two Brooklyn routes. On the right, there is a second crowned face, which has been read by some critics as reimagining Picasso's *Self-Portrait Mougins* (1972).⁴² If this second figure can be viewed as referencing Picasso, the text implies that Basquiat is as great a king of the art world as the Spanish master. The succession motif similarly appears in other works such as *Dos Cabezas* (1982), a playful portrait reportedly produced in a few hours after Basquiat visited Andy Warhol in his studio. Here, Basquiat depicts himself to the left of Warhol, his own crown-like hair standing on end and reaching slightly higher above Warhol, whose face is, however, larger in the frame.

The ways that crowns can denote exceptional artistic talent also make them accessible and economic symbols to represent the battle over who can compete for, and be excluded from, royal status in art history. By seizing the signs of sovereign power, Basquiat aimed to symbolically take on the racism of the art world itself, an industry that writer Greg Tate described during the 1980s as “a bastion of white supremacy, a scone of the wealthy whose high-walled barricades are matched only by Wall Street and the White House and whose exclusionary practices are enforced 24-7-365.”⁴³ One of his most well-known treatments is the overt *Obnoxious Liberals* (1982). In this painting, three men appear under a crown to resist the force of the “obnoxious liberals”: a chained black figure named “Samson” who stands in between the word *ASBESTOS* repeated three times and the word *GOLD*; a black and red figure in a top hat resembling the vodou *lwa* of the dead Baron Samedi holding five arrows and wearing a sign on his chest that reads “NOT FOR SALE”; and a third male figure in his underwear featuring a cowboy hat whose face is framed by dollar signs. In this instance, via crowns and other signs,

Basquiat contested the subordination of artists to both white and moneyed interests to raise one of the ultimate questions of Western art: who are the true sovereigns of the modern art world, artists or (white) patrons?

Furthermore, Basquiat's insistence on the sovereignty of the artist recalls the Spanish painter Diego Velázquez's move in *Las Meninas* (1656). In this canonical painting, the artist dared to imagine himself as sovereign of the canvas, equal to the king who was his patron. While historian Michel Foucault arguably misreads *Las Meninas* as emblematic of a "classic" rather than "modern" episteme, he nevertheless contends that one of the reasons that *Las Meninas* gestures toward modernity is because for the first time in Western art, "That space where the king and his wife hold sway belongs equally well to the artist and to the spectator."⁴⁴ Before this point, the European artist's role was to create images for, and of, royalty, to praise and sustain dynasties. Velázquez, however, not only turned a royal portrait into a self-portrait, he depicted himself among the royal entourage and visualizes himself as part of the royal family. By placing the painter as part of sovereign power, Velázquez portrays the royal family as his subjects as well.

Basquiat extended Velázquez's critique as he sought to erode Western conceptions of royalty as inherently white, European, and of noble (or upper) class. Yet both artists suggest that the exercise of institutional sovereignty requires aesthetic acts and that artistic production is not only essential to maintaining sovereign power but also to undermining specific political orders. This may explain why Basquiat rarely visualizes "real" kings, rulers, or military leaders such as Napoleon, Benito Mussolini (aka Il Duce), or even the Haitian revolutionary hero Toussaint L'Ouverture wearing crowns. Overall, although Basquiat's sovereign acts are political in the sense that he questions how and by whom power is exercised, he never makes them on behalf of states or nations, and the crown rarely represents actual sovereigns (mere heads of state). Instead, the crowns tend to recognize those who are black kings of imagination and connote the transformative act of regarding and imagining oneself and others as royal (having a "big head").

Significantly, from 1982 to 1985, Basquiat expands his study of Western sovereignty as a form of state and discursive power that seeks control over territories, resources, and populations while he experiments with multipanel paintings, canvases with exposed stretcher bars, and increasingly dense writing, collage, and new imagery. Through more elaborate means, Basquiat ex-

pands his critique of the long-term devastation brought on by the European settler colonial and capitalist project, which in the name of God and the king subjugated and enslaved Africans and indigenous people. In these works, Basquiat focuses not on the power of black sovereigns but on how European (and American) sovereignty and its symbols are implicated in the process of colonial dispossession. At this juncture, Basquiat's working premise is akin to that of Maori scholar Nin Tomas: "the concept of 'sovereignty' justified brutal force and legalized the taking of lands and territory from people who would not otherwise have willingly given them up. Notions of 'the Crown' as the central, ultimate, sovereign source of all political and legal power, clinched the deal."⁴⁵

The toxic power of European imperial sovereignty is manifest in several of Basquiat's best-known works, including the aptly titled *Native Carrying Some Guns, Bibles, Amorites on Safari* (1982). At the top of the canvas, Basquiat provides an ironic touch by writing "COLONIZATION: PART TWO IN A SERIES, VOL. VI," possibly referring to the European colonization of Africa and the first wave of European imperialism exemplified by Spain and Portugal in the sixteenth century (followed by the Netherlands and Britain), the expansion of "crown rule" into parts of Asia in the nineteenth century, and the rise of the United States in the twentieth. On the left of the canvas, Basquiat paints a black male with eyes wide open, carrying a crate that reads "ROYAL SALT INC®"; overhead is a crown next to various phrases and words linking sovereign power, capital, religion, and colonialism. In this case, capital is connoted by the reference to "INC" (incorporated) and to salt, one of the earliest human currencies and forms of taxation. On the right, Basquiat sketches a simply drawn and expressionless safari-clad male figure with a rifle by his side. Above him is a series of capitalized terms that suggest what is required to make "JOLLY GOOD MONEY IN SAVAGES": "NO-BLE," "PROVISIONS," "POACHERS," "GOD," "MISSIONARIES," "TUSK\$," "\$Kin\$." The fact that between the men is an arrow originating from the black man's eye to the second's face implies that the black figure is both "eye-ing" the latter and aware of the greed that drives the colonial venture.

In the lower right corner, Basquiat mines the connection between European sovereignty and capital further, by ironically writing "I WON'T EVEN MENTION GOLD (ORO)."⁴⁶ The reference to gold is a reminder of the implicit part 1—the colonization of the Americas—and how this imperial

history informs and anticipates colonial occupation in Africa. One way that Basquiat links these junctures is through drawing an arrow upward from ORO to a series of terms. First he points to the words “CORTE,” “CORTE” (crossed out), and “CORTE Z” or “CORTE” “Z”; then he writes BISHOP (comma) and LANDAU, both crossed out.

The mention of “LANDAU, BISHOP” is possibly a reference to the Spanish missionary and Franciscan friar Diego de Landa, who in 1562 led an inquisition against the Maya in Yucatán, which included torture, killings, and the burning of numerous Maya codices and thousands of religious objects. Here, Basquiat seems to refer to the role of God, church, and state in the colonial enterprise, and the injustice of imperial law. Although de Landa appeared before the Council of the Indies with the charge of launching an illegal inquisition that killed Mayans and aimed to erase the group’s religious, cultural, and historical memory, the court took no official action on the case. Eventually, de Landa’s order exonerated him and later named him the second bishop of Yucatán.⁴⁷

The relationship between gold and the variations of the word *corte* can likewise be understood as referencing Hernán Cortés, the Spanish “conqueror” who also stopped at Yucatán before sailing to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán. The “z” in “CORTE Z” may allude to both Cortés’s last name, sometimes spelled “Cortez” with a “z” in English, and to the Aztec empire. The single “corte” (which means “court” in Spanish) possibly relates to the sovereign power of the king, while the crossed-out “corte” suggests how Cortés, with the support of the Spanish royal court, produced a historically devastating *corte*, or “cut,” in the indigenous world. This slash came after the Aztec ruler Moctezuma II gave the Spaniard gifts of gold and the latter held Moctezuma hostage, demanding even more gold in ransom. Eventually, the European hunger for gold killed Moctezuma and destroyed the Aztec empire.

Moreover, the inclusion of the word *savages* is significant. The term underscores the importance of categories of knowledge and language to European and U.S. imperialisms and is in itself a core category of colonial domination that determines who is and is not considered a human. As scholar Jodi A. Byrd has noted, “Savage, animal, and female were differentiated in order to cohere civilized, human, and male.”⁴⁸ It likewise refers to the ways that blackness has been historically associated to savagery in the Eurocentric imagination. In Fanon’s concise terms, “Black Africa is looked on as a region that is inert, brutal, uncivilized—in a word, savage.”⁴⁹ Not surprisingly, it was also a category familiar

to Basquiat. From the start of his career, art critics insisted on labeling him a “black primitive”⁵⁰ despite his evident knowledge of Euro-American art history and awareness of his relationship to it. Basquiat himself once commented that most reviewers “have this image of me . . . [as a] wild man, monkey man.”⁵¹

Basquiat’s emphasis on “savage” is then not merely descriptive. Its prominence can be grasped as a call for a different epistemology, one that insists on and has faith in the unsettling effect of words on the world. In Rifkin’s terms, “the ostensibly animistic belief in the ability of language to effect alterations in the material world has been repeatedly castigated in Euro-American intellectual work as ‘savage philosophy.’ . . . Thus, the ‘error’ labeled ‘savage’ lies in understanding language as exceeding representation, as not simply reflecting but helping constitute material phenomena.”⁵² Fittingly, toward the end of his life, and after many conflicts with the white-dominated art establishment led him to declare that “nothing [was] to be gained” in the art world, Basquiat expressed a desire to leave painting behind and become a writer.⁵³ Writing, however, had been a key part of Basquiat’s sovereign signifying acts from the start.

Say the Word

While crowns constituted Basquiat’s most iconic sign, language was no less central to his critique of Eurocentric knowledge and assertion of sovereignty over the Euro-American art tradition, or “the royal house of western painting,”⁵⁴ in critic Dick Hebdige’s terms. Since his days as SAMO© with Al Diaz, Basquiat’s “literary graffiti” sought to gain recognition while challenging the privatization of public space and the racism of the art world.⁵⁵ Over time, language increasingly figures as source material and includes quotes originating in books, poems, aphorisms, and songs. As Basquiat put it, “I get my facts from books, stuff on atomisers, the blues, ethyl alcohol, geese in the Egyptian style.”⁵⁶ In retrospect, the extent and depth of Basquiat’s incorporation of language is such that artist/scholar Fahamu Pecou has recently observed that his work should not even be described as “paintings” at all but as writings. In Pecou’s words, “writing was his medium.”⁵⁷

Contrary to some early reviewers and critics who have written that there is no “logic” to Basquiat’s words or more current approaches that view his writing as mostly an artistic innovation “amalgamating” language and image,⁵⁸

You are reading copyrighted material published by The University of Arizona Press. Unauthorized posting, copying, or distributing of this work except as permitted under U.S. copyright law is illegal and injures the author and publisher.

we argue that his words neither constitute “nonsense writing”⁵⁹ nor that their importance is purely formal. Rather, through relating text and image, Basquiat repeatedly probed both the signs of sovereignty and the sovereignty of signs, that is, the seemingly arbitrary and miraculous process through which words acquire and sustain authority and power. Noted by Luca Marenzi and others, this is evident in his great attention to terms that refer to legal processes, such as *copyright*, which protects certain intellectual property, and *notary*, a seal that makes specific words lawful “literally as magic,”⁶⁰ or, as Basquiat once stated, “alchemy.”⁶¹ Basquiat likewise evoked not only writing in his texts but also the erasure and repression of stories, knowledge, and histories by way of “scratching on these things”: crossing out, smudging, and painting over letters.⁶² Expectedly, Basquiat’s first dealer advised him to avoid text in his paintings even though this had become common in contemporary art because, according to critic Rene Ricard, “the words bothered the collectors . . . [and] the words tended more and more frequently to raise unpleasant issues.”⁶³

Deploying collage and cut-up techniques that were partly inspired by writer William Burroughs, Basquiat employed words in a similar manner as he did crowns: to move and direct the reader’s eye to consider alternative associations that disrupt knowledge that has become so naturalized that it appears as “empirical truths.”⁶⁴ In Ricard’s terms, “Using one or two words he reveals a political acuity, gets the viewer going in the direction he wants.”⁶⁵ Basquiat’s drawing/together, writing/apart, and re/positioning linguistic signs and symbols, including lines and arrows that point the way, recalls both the “cannibalizing” tendencies of Caribbean culture⁶⁶ and the Martinican writer Édouard Glissant’s notion of “poetics of relation,” both of which reject binary thinking and articulate a “creolization” of thought. Or in art historian Henry F. Skeritt’s words, “In the concept of Relation, Glissant offers a framework to move beyond these polarities. . . . Instead of fixed places of origin, he offers sites of connectivity, where multiple histories and ways of being can coexist. Instead of roots, he offers the dynamic process of creolization, a poetics defined by its openness to transformation.”⁶⁷

In Basquiat, a turn to “creoleness,” as he himself once called it, is not surprising and emerges from several contexts. For one, Basquiat had Puerto Rican and Haitian family roots and lived experience in the Caribbean, a region in which the clashes between Native, African, Asian, and European peoples and

knowledge systems have produced not only syncretic cultures but also ways of thinking about culture as syncretic. Moreover, Basquiat came of age at a time and in a place—New York City, 1960–1980—where numerous creolizations involving different ethnic and racial groups were prominently in motion.⁶⁸

Basquiat's generation was among the first to dance to James Brown's "Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud" (1968), Joe Cuba's boogaloo fusion, as well as disco and funk. This generation was also the first to read black and Puerto Rican history comic books and other "alternative" popular reading materials. In addition, they actively participated in the creation of Nuyorican poetry, Afro-diasporic spoken word, and hip-hop, cultural forms that critiqued racism and coloniality and were themselves grounded in notions of empowerment via "the word."⁶⁹ Not coincidentally, in the early 1980s the idiom "word" carried similar connotations as the Yoruban concept of "ashé," which refers to the power of language to make things happen, enable change, and bring balance to the world: "When one agreed with someone or when another did something 'supreme,' you praised them by saying 'word.'"⁷⁰

During this period, a collective faith in language was validated in both the cultural realm and the larger political context as new forms of speech and discourses were part of broader political movements available via the mass media. Growing up, Basquiat probably watched figures such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. speak on television and listened to the demands of Black, Puerto Rican, and Native American civil rights movements that would identify cultural production and symbolic disruption as fundamental to liberation. Equally important, the struggles of these years—as exemplified by groups like the Young Lords, the Black Panthers, and Real Great Society—were organized as much around basic survival issues, such as affordable housing and access to employment, as around new ways to understand, represent, and narrate the self and collective history outside colonial frameworks (see chap. 9).

In keeping with the valorization of writing in Haitian vodou, Basquiat repeated words, numbers, and symbols to interrupt settled meanings and bring different realities into being.⁷¹ Basquiat's repetitions recall Rachel Beauvoir Dominique's fruitful observation: "[O]f special importance is the spellbinding mastery of sequence and number: counting, literally translated as *kontwol* (control) in Creole. . . . Line, stroke, numerology, alphabet, gibberish . . . aesthetics of sign and symbol. . . . 'Circle, square, alphabet and

*number, elements of order . . . the fact of writing more significant than what is actually written. "E.T.C. **I.BA.L.SA.FS.NJ. E.Z."*"⁷² Repetition, as well as other hip-hop practices familiar to Basquiat such as assonance, alliteration, and rhyme is also related to a broader black poetics in which, as Hebdige has written, "duplicity, doubleness, and undecidedness are divested of the negative connotations generally attached to them in Western culture."⁷³

In addition, Basquiat often refused spelling conventions, a practice that can be read as a rejection of the process of language standardization that favors the institutions, groups, and interests of the powerful. This is evident in the ink drawing *Flats Fix* (1981), which pays tribute to working-class Brooklyn.⁷⁴ A bare black-and-white drawing, it features a thin irregular tire above capital letters that read "FLATS FiX" rather than the grammatically "correct" "flats fixed." This gesture reminds us of curator Donald J. Cosentino's generative question in relation to the lack of standardization of Haitian Kreyol: "In the rendering of a given word, which history is empowered, and which obscured? Whose pronunciation is privileged? What are the politics of naturalization?"⁷⁵

Less discussed, Basquiat frequently invoked U.S. minoritized languages and cultural codes to dispute the Eurocentric project of epistemological homogenizing.⁷⁶ In art critic Robert Farris Thompson's words, "Jean-Michel gracefully embodied the power to deal with history and facts in several languages."⁷⁷ Equally relevant, though Basquiat adopted various languages, he did not translate to the U.S. cultural center—that is, privilege the English monolingual observer—thus requiring a multilingual literacy to fully engage with his texts. This is consistent with SAMO© cocreator Al Diaz's comment concerning the importance of linguistic plurality to their wall writing: "some things can't get translated. Bilingualism was a way to 'see' that opened up artistic possibilities and new meanings."⁷⁸

One of many examples of this method is *Anybody Speaking Words* (1982), a text portraying a black figure with a cracked-open head against a yellow background in which the word "OPERA" is reiterated three times. Whereas English speakers may read the idiom *opera* in the context of Italian musical traditions and Italian speakers may also interpret it as "work of art," Spanish-speaking people will further recognize the word as related to the verb *operar* (to operate). True to form, in *Anybody Speaking Words*, Basquiat ap-

pears to be referring to “OPERA” in all of these senses: from a neck cavity, music seems to pour out while the body is made of multiple lines implying stitches, veins, and DNA strands, suggesting either that an operation took place or it is required. The text itself is “art.”

Although Basquiat knew some French; referenced Haitian religion, history, and culture; and at times saw in kreyol a powerful trope for his own artistic practice, he mostly employed Spanish, a language that he associated with Puerto Rican history and experience to demonstrate mastery over the high-art tradition, insert Latin America and its diaspora into global history, and inscribe specific Puerto Rican structures of feeling that are rendered invisible by U.S. sovereignty. Having lived in both Puerto Rico and New York, Basquiat was probably exposed to not only the stigmatization of Spanish-speaking groups in the United States and the pressure for Latino immigrant children to lose their native tongue but also American efforts to impose English in the Puerto Rican school system. To insist on Spanish was then a knowing defiance toward colonial control and submission to American national culture on the island and diaspora.⁷⁹ In choosing Spanish, Basquiat affiliated with a broader Puerto Rican linguistic politics that for nearly a century at that point viewed the retention of “la lengua materna,” or Spanish mother tongue, as a mode of resistance and contestation.

Significantly, Basquiat enacted this critique in personal, performative, and textual ways, underscoring its political importance. Personally, as Farris Thompson observed, Basquiat “switched to Spanish when he wanted to make a covert point or camouflage a question”⁸⁰ and to establish the terms of financial negotiations. According to Farris Thompson, “One day, in the summer of 1986, a friend (who spoke Spanish) appeared at his door in the company of a rich and famous woman. I was there, and watched them walk around. Suddenly, the woman asked, point-blank, ‘How much is that painting over there?’ Jean-Michel (in a whisper) to his friend: *¿para tí o para ella?* (For you or for her?) Meaning: high price for a stranger, low price or even no price for a friend.”⁸¹

Textually, Spanish words abound in Basquiat’s work, within and in titles such as *Crowns (Peso Neto)* (1981), *El gran espectáculo—The History of Black People in 3 Parts* (1983), and *J’s Milagro* (1985). Basquiat also introduces Puerto Rican (and other Latin American) vernacular terms such as *gringo*, which

explicitly imply distance from American (white) identity and U.S. actions on the global stage. An example is the early painting *Gringo Pilot (Anola Gay)* (1981); in this work, Basquiat references the devastating act of Paul Tibbets, pilot of the Enola Gay, the plane that carried the first of the two atomic bombs dropped on Japan during World War II. Basquiat likewise frequently juxtaposed Spanish and English to produce new meanings and associations that refuse translation. A largely overlooked example is the poetic *Fuego Flores* (1983), which includes a black figure who appears to be declaiming in the midright of the canvas against a multicolored background, and to the top left, a sequence of words in English and Spanish. The first two rows read as a standard translation: “FLOWER—FLOWERS, FLORES and “FIRE—FIRE(S). FUEGO.” Below them, however, Basquiat twice encloses “FIRE” and “FUEGO” in an elliptical shape to radically redefine what the words will now mean: “FIRE—FLORES.”

Additionally, the association of English and Spanish serves to highlight commonalities and differences in the black experience of the Americas and pressures English to convey Afro-Latino perspectives. The word *cabeza* (head), found in the titles of and within various works, is significant, as it inscribes specific Afro-Latino worth in contrast to European and American artists such as Warhol and Picasso, both of whom originate in nations that have been (and in many ways continue to be) colonial powers in Puerto Rico. Basquiat similarly named Afro-diasporic figures such as griots in Spanish, as it is evident in the multipaneled *Grillo* (1984), which includes references to African and Afro-Caribbean religious practices. Basquiat’s extensive usage of the term *Negro* can likewise be understood to simultaneously refer to a pre-civil rights era, when the devaluation of enslaved Africans and their descendants was certified by law, but also in the ambivalent way—as a term of endearment and depreciation—that it is employed among Puerto Ricans.

Moreover, in the bilingual *Cassius Clay* (1982), Basquiat’s ambiguous tribute to boxer Muhammad Ali, he ironically integrates several of these modalities. Here, Ali appears as a masklike head with a “big red mouth” against an envy-green background speckled with various, mostly Spanish, words. Written on Clay’s hair, is the common (and racist) Hispanic Caribbean phrase

pelo malo (bad hair) to describe Afro-textured hair, which is, however, knocked out by the fact that the boxer is a “ROMPE CABEZA” (literally, “head breaker,” but also puzzle) and a “CAMPEON DE BOXEO” (boxing champ). Intriguingly, while Basquiat places a crown on the “reality” that Clay is a champ, he only dignifies the challenger Floyd Patterson’s name with a crown even if Patterson (like Basquiat) does not refer to Clay by his chosen name and despite the fact that Patterson lost on two occasions to Ali, signified by writing and crossing out the name “FLOYD PATTERSON” twice.⁸² At the end, Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali is subtly rendered as “malo,” certainly a famous champion but perhaps not “the greatest” king.

In this regard, curator Kellie Jones’s assessment that Basquiat relied on Spanish to primarily refer to the intimate and the feminine, including “family, food, and community . . . the Spanish-speaking world, and the realm of the mother,” is not altogether accurate.⁸³ Whereas Basquiat did draw on Spanish to reference a range of intimate practices and memories (cooking in *Arroz con pollo*, 1981) and family figures (*Abuelita*, 1983) he most often referred to political figures (conquistadors like Hernán Cortés, Puerto Rican politician Luis Muñoz Rivera) as well as terms associated with capitalism (*peso neto*), slavery, racism, and colonialism as they were specifically experienced in Latin America and the Caribbean (*gringo*, *negro*, *pelo malo*).

Ultimately, Basquiat’s multilingual textuality has much in common with Nuyorican poetics and poets like Abraham Jesús “Tato” Laviera who use Spanish to disrupt the hegemony of English and Anglophone culture and destabilize dominant meanings. Or in Laviera’s voice, “pues estoy creando Spanglish / bi-cultural systems . . . two dominant languages / continentally abrazándose / en colloquial combate.”⁸⁴ He is also part of a longer Afro-Latino genealogy, emblemized by figures such as the public intellectual and historian Arturo Alfonso Schomburg (1874–1938). Like Schomburg, Basquiat referenced Afro-Latino history to complicate Anglocentric narratives on blackness and viewed what he would call “Spanish American” black history as a central part of global history. Basquiat’s work thus recalls Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s well-known argument of “signifyin’” as a method “to critique the nature of (white) meaning itself, to challenge through a literal critique of the sign meaning of meaning”⁸⁵—except that white/black is not the only axis of power at play.

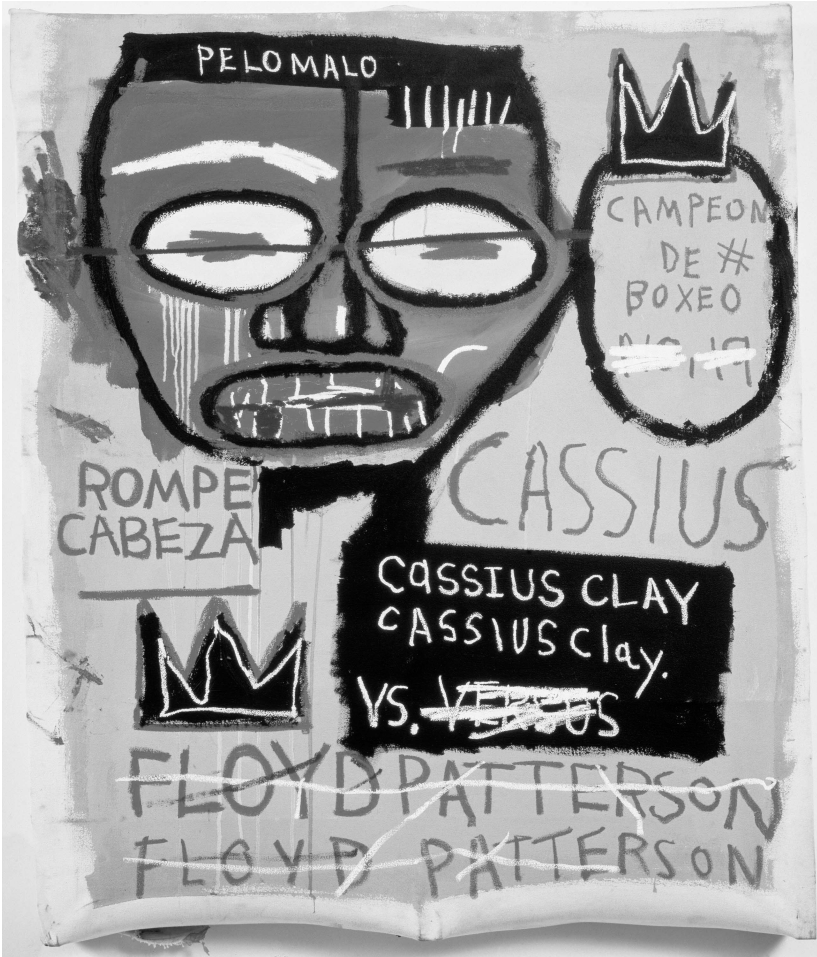


Figure 12.2. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Cassius Clay*, 1982.

Sovereign Impossible?

Through the acts of writing and crowning, Basquiat repeatedly demonstrated that the affirmation of black sovereignty and royal status can produce a forceful critique of capitalist and colonial structures. Yet as multiple critics have argued, there is a caveat. Even when Basquiat recognizes black achievement or condemns European and U.S. colonialisms, he does not

fail to note that whereas the rhetoric of sovereignty can be transformed into a compelling idiom of contestation, becoming sovereign in Western terms within the current symbolic, economic, and political order may be inherently violent and expose the black subject to various and continuous forms of violence.

One of the most telling signs of this violence is in how Basquiat often visualized the faces of those he recognized as kings, particularly the famous: with hallowed eyes, frozen features, and/or bloody mouths. An understudied example is *Lye* (1983). In this text, Basquiat paints a black male face with empty eye sockets and a red mouth on the top left of the canvas and a Mona Lisa figure wearing black on the bottom-right side. In between these images, he places a yellow crown over the names “NAT” “KING” “COLE©.” Above the crown, he writes “PROCESSED HAIR.” “KONKED” “GASSED” “#@!?)” and draws a line linking the words to the head. Through doubling the sign of “King” with a crown, Basquiat acknowledges that imagining the self as royalty is an impressive creative act and notes all the transformative work that it entails, from the singer’s adoption of the name “King” (which was not his surname) to his “konked” hair and his breakout Academy Award–winning song referencing the most iconic work of Western art, Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* (c. 1503). At the same time, the text appears to ask, “What was the price of becoming King?” And one plausible answer is “Lye”—referencing both the act of accommodating white expectations and the corrosive chemical found in hair relaxer products.

In this way, Basquiat’s work demonstrates how even a black critique of Western sovereignty may be couched in terms intelligible to the powerful and primarily make sense in that context. Although Basquiat’s work appears to fully validate philosopher Charles Taylor’s dictum that “nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm,”⁸⁶ it also goes further in proposing that Eurocentric recognition is a form of “imprisoning” that locks colonized peoples in the other’s conception of self and recruits them into the reproduction of existing power relations, what bell hooks named “the tragedy of black complicity.”⁸⁷ This is partly the case because, as political theorist Glen Coulthard (chap. 2) has argued, the recognition offered by dominant institutions is “*asymmetrical and nonreciprocal*” (his emphasis). To the extent that recognition is always “granted” to colonized or racialized peoples

without eradicating the colonizers' authority and legitimacy, sovereignty enacts a "failure to significantly modify, let alone transcend, the breadth of power at play in colonial relationships" (Coulthard, chap. 2).

Moreover, Basquiat suggests that the desire for sovereignty distorts what the black subject wants, producing self-alienation. There is perhaps no better example in Basquiat's corpus than the heartbreaking *Irony of Negro Policeman* (1981). In this text, he portrays a black officer wearing a badge shaped like a crown on the right side of his chest. To the left of the officer, Basquiat writes the words "IRONY," "IRONY OF NEGRO PLCEMN," and "PAW," a word that resembles *pawn* and implies that the officer may also have a "bestly" side. The officer's hollowed features and severed arm and leg further conjures that he has been dismembered by his desire. The importance of Basquiat's insight cannot be underestimated and elaborates on Fanon's trope of "black skin, white masks"⁸⁸: if the black subject draws from the (white) sovereign an image of the self, the result will likely be "sovereign" desire, both in the sense of "colonial" and "overbearing."

In addition to the quandary of recognition, Basquiat considered the difficulties of nation-state sovereignty projects for Afro-diasporic polities and politics. This is not surprising given the three national contexts that shaped his own family's history. Haiti, where Basquiat's father reportedly escaped political persecution, is the site of the first successful slave revolution in the world (1804) and is an independent nation-state that continues to be militarily intervened and economically exploited by global powers. Puerto Rico, from where his maternal grandparents migrated, has been a colonial possession for its entire modern history, since 1493, and is currently on the verge of financial collapse even if it has been a colony of the self-described wealthiest democracy in the world for 119 years. Finally, Basquiat grew up in the United States, a nation-state whose prosperity and influence has been greatly produced by the removal of already-constituted indigenous political entities, the enslavement of Africans, and the imposition of U.S. state sovereignty on other nations.

A demanding text that examines the pitfalls and paradoxes of sovereignty in the Caribbean is the densely drawn *50 Cent Piece* (1983). Here, he evokes three Caribbean contexts—Haiti, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica. Each na-

tional space is inscribed in part by alluding to the names of leading political icons. These include “DR. FRANCIOS DUVALIER” (François Duvalier) and “L’OVERTUR” (Toussaint L’Ouverture) from Haiti, “L S M N O R E R” (Luis Muñoz Rivera) from Puerto Rico, and “MARCUS GARVEY” from Jamaica. While the text mentions various figures, the title of *50 Cent Piece* most likely refers to the “Elizabeth II” version of the Marcus Garvey coin issued in 1975, which was worth 50 cents. Consistently, above Garvey’s portrait, Basquiat writes “RT EXCLLNE,” which approximates what appears on the actual coin, “The RT. [right] EXCELLENT,” an honorary mode of address in Jamaica that is used for members of the Order of National Hero; below the image Basquiat writes “BANK OF JAMAICA TM.”

The focus on Garvey and the form of visualization as currency critically evokes tensions between national sovereignty, race, fame, and capitalism. At one level, issuing currency is one of the most important national sovereign powers even if the very small denomination of the coin suggests a limited or low value, and American economic hegemony. At another level, the coin underscores Garvey’s importance to state discourse as the country’s first declared national hero even if he had a strained relationship with Jamaica, a nation he once described as “the place next to hell” due, not coincidentally, to poverty and lacking a “system of economics.”⁸⁹ Fittingly, Garvey often described himself in cosmopolitan not national terms. As he commented in 1935, “My garb is Scotch, my name is Irish, my blood is African, and my training is half American and half English, and I think that with that tradition I can take care of myself.”⁹⁰

Garvey is then a transnational subject defined by continuous movements and crossings of national lines: at various points, he immigrated to Central America, the United States, and the United Kingdom; politically, he led a so-called messianic back-to-Africa movement headquartered in Harlem that sought land in Liberia in response to the relentless racism and violence against blacks in the United States. Toward the end of his life, he became an exile in his own homeland, deported from the United States to Jamaica only to leave again for London, where he died “alone . . . broke and unpopular” according to a premature obituary.⁹¹ In this regard, Basquiat’s memorialization of Garvey’s as a “big head” on a coin underscores the limits of

black intellect, creativity, and fame to affirming sovereignty over the self or a black national polity.

At the same time, *50 Cent Piece* overtly contextualizes many of the challenges of contemporary Caribbean sovereignty on the “collective memory of an ongoing history of violence” that points to a specific sovereign power: the United States.⁹² Deploying words and symbols, Basquiat references the brutal U.S. occupation of Haiti, to which he assigns two endings—1921 and 1936—rather than the standard 1915–1934. The alternative periodization may be aimed at highlighting the 1921 U.S. investigation of abuse claims in Haiti in which the marine commander declared that over two thousand Haitians had been killed resisting the occupation; it could similarly refer to the forced migration of Haitians to Cuba and the Dominican Republic during this period. Moreover, while the 1936 year does not appear to refer to any specific event, in offering different end dates that do not match the “official” dates, these numbers suggest that the occupation continued beyond 1934 and that it is ongoing.

50 Cent Piece likewise considers the central place of movement to Caribbean national politics. In addition to different spellings and repetitions of “back to Africa,” which call attention to the desire to migrate in order to escape the American state violence toward blacks, *50 Cent Piece* also contains the phrase “Operation Bootstrap,” the name given to Puerto Rico’s U.S.-led economic modernization plan that stimulated the mass migration of hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans to cities such as New York starting in the 1940s to serve as cheap labor. Significantly, Basquiat writes “OPERATION BOOTST/RAP” at the same level and in proximity to “US OCCUPATION OF HAITI ENDS 1921,” linking different migratory flows originating in U.S. invasion and economic dispossession. Perhaps to underscore that the Puerto Rican exodus is a result of the invasion and not simply an immigrant phenomenon, Basquiat does not mention Luis Muñoz Marín, the Puerto Rican coarchitect of the migration policy, but his father, Luis Muñoz Rivera, who was acting as secretary of state and chief of the cabinet for the autonomist government of Puerto Rico when the United States invaded the island on July 25, 1898.

50 Cent Piece, however, is relatively rare in Basquiat’s corpus in that he envisions that the Caribbean will, regardless, stay afloat by making use of its own, spiritual, devices. This view is connoted through the reiteration of the

phrases “300 CUBITS LONG” and “THE ARK,” which alludes to the dimensions of Noah’s biblical ark but similarly contains at least two other referents: the slave ship and the vodou spirit of water, Agwe, who possesses a boat and receives offerings in small vessels made of bark and other materials. The evocation of Agwe is present in both the portraying of the ark against which the word “WOOD” is written on the side of the ship and in the crossing out of the phrase “THE ARK” to say “T E A K,” a type of wood found in Asia and Latin America. In relating all three referents, the ark signifies the various means that blacks in the Americas have imagined to protect what is valuable in Caribbean life and escape the many “floods” that accompany it, including slave ships, invasions, dictators, and destructive policies imposed from inside and outside.

At the same time, though Caribbean survival is imagined, sovereignty ultimately appears as impossible. This is despite, or perhaps because, as Basquiat writes, the islands possess coveted wealth via excellent “BLUE RIBBON” commodities—“SALT,” “SUGAR,” “RUM WHITE,” “BANANAS,” “BAUXITE,” and, more importantly, “BRAIN” (like Garvey)—whose worth make them subject to external market and political forces. Sovereignty is then elusive regardless of whether the islands are nation-states, like Jamaica and Haiti, or are territories, like Puerto Rico, that belong to wealthy nations like the United States, as they remain measured by value systems that classify them as useful or useless according to the interests of current and former colonial powers. If as Bataille suggests, “life beyond utility is the realm of sovereignty,” to be sovereign would require that “one must step out of the relations which condition him or her for being useful . . . [and] break up the temporal sequence in which the past, present and future are so arranged as to make expectation possible.”⁹³

Significantly, the figuration of capital as an impediment to sovereignty is not limited to Caribbean history and space. A work that can be read as a metatext of how capitalist greed throws black political and spiritual sovereignty out of balance is *K* (1982). Here, Basquiat draws two symbols of sovereignty under the phrase “SEPARATION OF THE ‘K.’” On the left side, Basquiat writes the name of an imagined Egyptian king “AOPKHES.” Below this name he paints a nonhuman figure, a heart, and a set of scales. Basquiat seems to be referring to the female Egyptian demon Ammit—who was



Figure 12.3. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *El gran espectáculo—The History of Black People in 3 parts*, 1983.

known as “Devourer of the Dead,” “Greatness of Death,” and closer to this analysis, “Eater of Hearts”—and Anubis, the god of the afterlife. According to Egyptian mythology, Ammit sits under the scales of justice of Ma’at, the goddess of truth, where Anubis weighs the hearts of the dead against an ostrich feather. If the heart is heavier than the feather due to the gravity of past deeds, it is judged to be impure. Ammit will then devour it, and the soul will die a second death and not continue the voyage toward immortality.

On the right side, Basquiat paints a crown with the word “ORO” (gold) topped by dollar signs. Below it, the name AOPKHES is written four times, one of them as a question. In the bottom right of the canvas, a human face appears trapped. The left side thus alludes to an African society’s construction of its own systems of engagement in the human and supernatural world in contrast to the colonial equation of royal power with gold. Significantly, the text evokes ambivalence to the question of whether African sovereigns are an alternative to capital by writing at the bottom of the left panel, “¿Disease culture?” Yet in answering assertively in the panel on the right—“Dis-ease Culture”—Basquiat seems to propose that the African pharaoh and his gods, powerful as they may be, are no match for King Gold.

By stressing that the opposite of the desired black sovereignty (defacement) is produced both when capital superexploits labor (slavery) and when it handsomely pays off (stardom), Basquiat suggests that sovereignty via capital is an illusion that ends up isolating and consuming you. This insight continues to resonate and influence younger artists who have witnessed the marketing of black bodies in ways that Basquiat himself may not have even imagined possible. In his *Branded Head* (2003), which features an African American man with a raised scar in the shape of the Nike logo,⁹⁴ visual artist Hank Willis Thomas makes a similar observation as Basquiat albeit in starker terms: that sovereignty imagined through capitalist recognition as a brand is not freedom from, but submission to, capital—even if people may often enjoy branding themselves.⁹⁵

This leads to an unavoidable conclusion: it is capital that “rules” art, politics, and life, rather than famous artists. Even when the artist or black king appears to be the sovereign of the artwork—crowning and uncrowning, writing and crossing out at will—the victory is pyrrhic. To the extent that capital’s logic is sovereign in the conventional sense of supreme or absolute control,

all peoples, men included, are subject to the market.⁹⁶ This reminds us of political theorist Wendy Brown's assessment of Marx's critique of sovereignty: "Man is proclaimed king but limited by his powerlessness and alienation; his crown ultimately serves to bewilder, isolate, and humiliate him."⁹⁷ If capital rules and racialized/colonized lives are instrumentalized as labor or as consumers, neither nation-state status nor commodified stardom can produce a sovereign black man or polity.

Moreover, Basquiat's gendering of sovereignty as male and his coupling of black sovereignty to white male recognition calls attention to another limitation. Like other black intellectuals such as Marcus Garvey, who, in Agustín Lao-Montes's words, "conceived . . . a trans-nationalist project in search of sovereignty and peoplehood, and therefore partly as a battle between Afro-diasporic and western masculinities,"⁹⁸ Basquiat was unable to free himself from this deadly pairing. Tellingly, while he frequently placed crowns on top of celebrated black musicians and athletes, visualized African and diasporic cultural practices, and by claiming the crown located himself in a pantheon of black kings,⁹⁹ Basquiat rarely, if ever, alludes to black visual artists with whom he had commonalities, such as Wifredo Lam, Jacob Lawrence, and Romare Bearden, suggesting that he alone was in line to succeed the greatest white male artists.

In this sense, although a handful of scholars (including Negrón-Muntaner) have argued elsewhere that Basquiat linked creativity to his mother(’s) tongue and recognized women as bearers of the gift of communication in rare images such as *Abuelita* (1983), a portrait of his maternal grandmother seemingly coming from the market,¹⁰⁰ it is clear that for Basquiat the struggle over art history, public space, and sovereignty was a male affair.¹⁰¹ As Greg Tate has observed, "to Basquiat 'making it' . . . meant going down in history, ranked beside the Great White Fathers of Western painting in the eyes of the major critics, museum curators, and art historians who ultimately determine such things."¹⁰² Which is why crowns are for kings, not queens, and why it is only kings, as evident in paintings such as *Charles the First* (1982), who "GET THEIR HEADS CUT OFF."

Yet whereas Basquiat equated black sovereignty with masculinity and mostly focused on the challenges of black recognition by white institutions,

he was no less aware that even if understood as relating to the self and not to territories or polities, any project founded on a desire for control faces a most unyielding obstacle: the physical body itself. His many representations of human bodies (black or white) as fragile, vulnerable to physical trauma and emotional breakdown, attest to everyone's inability to be fully sovereign over ourselves in the most basic of ways.

This is present in *Untitled (Head)* (1981), where Basquiat investigates how the head—the epicenter of Western rationality and African intelligence and rank—has both inside and outside dimensions and is a precarious construction put together by uncertain physical and emotional circuitry. In the print *Back of the Neck* (1983), Basquiat draws anatomical and X-ray-like images of various body parts. At the center is an X-ray of a spinal column, the term *SPINE* followed by a copyright symbol and an opaque crown resting above as if to affirm that we do not even own our bones, however grand our ambitions. More explicitly, in the three-panel installation titled *Gravestone* (1987) in memory of artist Andy Warhol, the central panel repeats the word *PERISHABLE* twice, while the left features the images of a black rose and cross, and the right a white and red mask-like face. Moreover, the style in which the surface is painted—smudged, crossed over, barely readable—reinforces the human destiny of eventual decay and death.

Exit the King

Not surprisingly, toward the end of his life, Basquiat painted fewer crowns and related terms, choosing to largely abdicate the Western language of sovereignty. In Basquiat's last years, his emphasis was increasingly on the human body and its frailties—dangling feet, severed hands, bleeding hearts, damaged kidneys—and his surfaces were wood and found materials. There are also less human heads and many more depictions of animals, particularly the previously dreaded monkeys or “monos” as well as Afro-Caribbean spiritual beings such as African griots. European law was giving way to African and Afro-diasporic *lwás*, a plural, reciprocal, and complex manner to conceive of power and take care of the self.

The timing of this shift may not have been accidental or purely intellectual. In addition to Basquiat receiving criticism regarding the repetition of his imagery, this was also the year in which he faced one of the most painful moments of his career. Whereas *New York Times* critic Vivian Raynor wrote in 1984 that Basquiat had “a chance of becoming a very good one [painter], as long as he can withstand the forces that would make of him an art-world mascot,” in 1985 she concluded that Basquiat had already become “a mascot.” Basquiat had famously responded that “I wanted to be a star, not a gallery mascot,”¹⁰³ but perhaps the damage was done. Three years later, Basquiat died of an overdose, seemingly unable to cope with the loss of friends and negative reviews.

Retrospectively, it is undeniable that Basquiat’s career illustrated the power of sovereign acts to challenge symbolic structures, including on his own turf of art history, the street, and museum walls. A testament to this is that Basquiat is persistently remembered as he initially wished he would be: as one of the great and therefore, immortal, kings of art history. Basquiat’s success in being viewed in this way is such that a simple outline of his signature crown is enough to connote him. For instance, after Basquiat’s death, artist Keith Haring memorialized him with a painted triangle full of crowns titled, *A Pile of Crowns, for Jean-Michel Basquiat* (1988). Almost a decade later, in the opening scene of Julian Schnabel’s film *Basquiat* (1996), the artist appears as a young boy being crowned the heir of modern art after looking at Picasso’s *Guernica*. Most recently, a range of commodities, including sneakers, mugs, and the Urban Outfitter “Junk Food Basquiat Crown Tee,” hauntingly conjure Basquiat through his crown.

Yet similar to Caribbean diaspora intellectuals Claude McKay and C. L. R. James before him, the arc of Basquiat’s work tends toward the conclusion that being king over institutions, discourses, or even the self is not the same as freedom; that in this sense, the vocabulary of sovereignty may still be too tied up with unitary notions of power, utility, and control. It is perhaps in this context that one of Basquiat’s last paintings, *Riding with Death* (1988) can be considered as a particularly compelling visualization of another direction. If in most other works the black figure has his arms up, as if he was being arrested by sovereign desire and frightened by white recognition, the arms of the rider are lower, without a halo or crown, down to the bone, re-

fusing the gaze, soaring to the unknown. Prefigured through his own works such as *Gold Griot* (1984) and Da Vinci's *Allegorical Composition* (c. 1472–1519) and deploying an “ashé” gesture—“right hand up, left hand down, calls on God and the horizon”¹⁰⁴—he references a different source of power in the religious practices of the African diaspora, in which death “is a new beginning . . . a passage into the spirit realm.”¹⁰⁵ Basquiat himself never made it to this new place where freedom may have dethroned sovereignty; but here, still as king of the line, he is drawing from it.

Notes

1. Robert Farris Thompson, “Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets: The Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat,” in *The Hearing Eye: Jazz and Blues Influences in African American Visual Art*, ed. Graham Lock and David Murray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 254.
2. Cathleen McGuigan, “New Art, New Money” *New York Times Magazine* (online), February 10, 1985, <https://www.nytimes.com/books/98/08/09/specials/basquiat-mag.html>.
3. Greg Tate, “Nobody Loves a Genius Child: Jean-Michel Basquiat, Flyboy in the Buttermilk,” in *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 62.
4. Jordana Moore Saggese, *Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 103. According to Moore Saggese, in 1982 alone, Basquiat drew halos and crowns in at least sixteen works.
5. Thompson, “Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets,” 267.
6. Tate, “Nobody Loves a Genius Child.”
7. Moore Saggese, *Reading Basquiat*, 2.
8. Henry Geldzahler, “New Again: Jean-Michel Basquiat,” *Interview*, April 18, 2012, http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/new-again-jean-michel-basquiat/#_. Originally published January 1983. See also Anthony Haden-Guest, “Burning Out,” *Vanity Fair*, April 2, 2014, <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/1988/11/jean-michel-basquiat>.
9. Moore Saggese, *Reading Basquiat*, 122.

10. Richard Marshall, "Repelling Ghosts," in *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, ed. Richard Marshall (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992), 16.
11. Scott Richard Lyons, "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing?," *College Composition and Communication* 51, no. 3 (February 2000): 462.
12. David Scott, "The Sovereignty of the Imagination: An Interview with George Lamming," *Small Axe* 12 (September 2002): 123.
13. Alexander Hirsch, "Sovereignty Surreal: Bataille and Fanon Beyond the State of Exception," *Contemporary Political Theory* 13, no. 3 (August 2014): 288.
14. Larry Warsh, ed., *Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Notebooks* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015). See also Dieter Buchhart, "Basquiat's Notebooks: Words and Knowledge, Scratched and Sample," *Cleveland Art* (online magazine), January/February 2017, <https://www.clevelandart.org/magazine/cleveland-art-januaryfebruary-2017/basquiats-notebooks>.
15. Dick Hebdige, "Welcome to the Terrordome: Jean-Michel Basquiat and the 'Dark' Side of Hybridity," in Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, 65.
16. Mark Rifkin, *The Erotics of Sovereignty: Queer Native Writing in the Era of Self-Determination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 2.
17. Walter Dignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), xxvii.
18. Christopher Keep, Tim McLaughlin, and Robin Parmar, "Hypertext," *The Electronic Labyrinth* (1993–2000), <http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/elab/hfloo37.html>.
19. Quoted in Moore Saggese, *Reading Basquiat*, 6.
20. Quoted in Moore Saggese, *Reading Basquiat*, 55.
21. Francesco Clemente, "For Diego," in *Basquiat* (Milan: Charta, 1999), L. Exhibition catalog.
22. bell hooks, "Altars of Sacrifice: Re-membering Basquiat," in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 43.
23. Moore Saggese, *Reading Basquiat*, 54.
24. Marshall, "Repelling Ghosts," 16.
25. Brent Hayes Edwards interview.
26. Eric Fretz, *Jean-Michel Basquiat* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Biographies, 2010), 86.
27. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 306.

28. "Carnival in Brazil and the Caribbean" (2006), Encyclopedia.com, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/carnival-brazil-and-caribbean>.
29. Rifkin, "Introduction," in Rifkin, *Erotics of Sovereignty*, 16.
30. McGuigan, "New Art, New Money," 10.
31. Simon Gikandi, "Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference," *Modernism/modernity* 10, no. 3 (September 2003), 468.
32. Kellie Jones, "Lost in Translation: Jean-Michel in the [Re]Mix," in *Basquiat*, ed. Marc Mayer (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 2005; repr., London: Merrel, 2010), 171.
33. Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of Decoloniality," in *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, ed. Walter Mignolo and Arturo Escobar (New York: Routledge, 2013), 312.
34. Gikandi, "Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference," 456.
35. I thank Elizabeth West Hutchinson for pointing me in this direction.
36. George Brandon, "Orisha," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/orisha>.
37. Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, eds. *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 131.
38. Suzanne Preston Blier, "Vodun: West African Roots of Vodou," in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, ed. Donald J. Cosentino (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 67.
39. There are a number of resonances between Basquiat's use of crowns to signify power and higher purpose and the Latin Kings gang founded in Chicago. Yet given that the organization did not have a distinct branch in New York, the Almighty Latin Kings and Queens, until 1986, it is unclear if Basquiat was familiar with their iconography. According to multimedia artist and Basquiat colleague Michael Holman, "I didn't really hear about the Latin Kings until the 1990s. [Basquiat] never mentioned them"; e-mail message to author, March 19, 2017.
40. Richard Lachmann, "Graffiti as Career and Ideology," *American Journal of Sociology* 94, no. 2 (1988): 237.
41. Moore Saggese, *Reading Basquiat*, 55.

42. Simon Abrahams, "Basquiat's Crowns (1981–82)," EPPH (website), November 20, 2010, http://www.everypainterpaintshimself.com/article/basquiats_crowns.
43. Tate, "Nobody Loves a Genius Child," 234.
44. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 15.
45. Nin Tomas, "Maori Concepts and Practices of Rangatiratanga, Kaitiakitanga, the Environment, and Property Rights," in *Property Rights and Sustainability*, vol. 11, *Legal Aspects of Sustainable Development*, ed. David Grinlinton and Prue Taylor (Leiden, The Netherlands: Nijhoff, 2011), 220.
46. hooks, "Altars of Sacrifice," 71.
47. David E. Timmer, "Providence and Perdition: Fray Diego de Landa Justifies His Inquisition Against the Yucatecan Maya," *Church History* 66, no. 3 (September 1997): 477–88.
48. Jodi A. Byrd, "Mind the Gap: Indigenous Sovereignty and the Antinomies of Empire," in *The Anomie of the Earth: Philosophy, Politics, and Autonomy in Europe and the Americas*, ed. Frederico Luisetti, John Pickles, and Wilson Kaiser (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 120–121, 122.
49. Frantz Fanon, "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness," in *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove 1961), 10.
50. For a broader discussion on the representation of Basquiat as a "primitive" artist, see Moore Saggese, *Reading Basquiat*, 4–5.
51. Jean-Michel Basquiat in *Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Radiant Child*, directed by Tamra Davis, 2010.
52. Rifkin, "Introduction," 15.
53. Klaus Kertess, "Brushes with Beatitude," in *Jean Michel Basquiat*, ed. Richard Marshall (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992), 50–55.
54. Hebdige, "Welcome to the Terrordome," 60.
55. Cited in Fretz, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, 44.
56. Quoted in Louis Armand, "Jean-Michel Basquiat and the Art of (Dis)Empowerment," reproduced in <https://culturenightlosangeles.wordpress.com/tag/afri-can-symbol-system-in-basquiats-paintings/>.
57. Fahamu Pecou, remarks at Jean-Michel Basquiat conference, Brooklyn Museum, March 26, 2016.
58. This last reading is becoming more visible in recent exhibits such as "Words Are All We Have: Paintings by Jean-Michel Basquiat," curated by Dieter Buch-

- hart at the Nahmad Contemporary Gallery, New York, and on exhibit from May 2 to June 18, 2016.
59. Fretz, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, 70.
 60. Luca Marenzi, "Pay for Soup / Build a Fort / Set That on Fire," in *Basquiat*, catalog of an exhibition held in Museo Revoltella, Trieste, May 15–September 15, 1999 (Milan: Charta, 1999), xxxiv.
 61. Geldzahler, "New Again."
 62. Buchhart, "Basquiat's Notebooks."
 63. Rene Ricard, "World Crown: Bodhisattva with Clenched Mudra," in Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, 48.
 64. Robert Farris Thompson, "Activating Heaven: The Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat," in *Aesthetic of the Cool: Afro-Atlantic Art and Music* (Pittsburgh, PA: Periscope, 2011), 38–43; Warsh, *Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Notebooks*; Rifkin, *Erotics of Sovereignty*, 14.
 65. Cited in Fretz, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, 87.
 66. Joan Dayan, "Vodoun, or the Voice of the Gods," in *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Snateria, Obeah, and the Caribbean*, ed. Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 27.
 67. Henry F. Skerritt, "Book Review: Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*," Henry F. Skerritt (blog), August 16, 2012, <https://henryfskerritt.com/2012/08/16/book-review-edouard-glissant-poetics-of-relation/>. See also Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).
 68. See Juan Flores, "The Diaspora Strikes Back," in *None of the Above: Puerto Ricans in the Global Era*, ed. Frances Negrón-Muntaner (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 211–16, and Frances Negrón-Muntaner, *Boricua Pop: Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 145–76.
 69. Franklin Sirmans, "In the Cipher: Basquiat and Hip-Hop Culture," in Mayer, *Basquiat*, 94.
 70. Yasmin Ramirez (unpublished essay, May 2014).
 71. Sidney Mintz and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "The Social History of Haitian Vodou," in Donald J. Cosentino, ed., *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 129.
 72. Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique, "Underground Realms of Being: Vodoun Magic," in Cosentino, *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, 169, 170, 172–73.

73. Hebdige, "Welcome to the Terrordome," 64.
74. Fretz, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, 63.
75. Consentino, *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, xiii.
76. For discussions of the relationship between Basquiat and language, see Frances Negrón-Muntaner, "The Writing on the Wall: The Life and Passion of Jean-Michel Basquiat," in Negrón-Muntaner, *Boricua Pop*, and Thompson, "Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets."
77. Thompson, "Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets," 257.
78. Al Diaz, remarks at Jean-Michel Basquiat conference, Brooklyn Museum, March 26, 2016.
79. Frances Negrón-Muntaner, "Sin pelos en la lengua: Last Interview with Rosario Ferré," *CENTRO: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* (2012): 154–71.
80. Thompson, "Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets," 257.
81. *Ibid.*, 30.
82. Matt Christie, "On This Day: Muhammad Ali Toys with Poor Floyd Patterson," *Boxing News*, November 22, 2016, <http://www.boxingnewsonline.net/on-this-day-muhammad-ali-toys-with-poor-floyd-patterson/>.
83. Jones, "Lost in Translation," 170.
84. Tato Laviera (Abraham Jesús "Tato" Laviera), "Spanglish," *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/58198>.
85. Cited in Moore Saggese, *Reading Basquiat*, 99.
86. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25–73.
87. hooks, "Altars of Sacrifice," 30.
88. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 2008).
89. Carolyn Cooper, "Why Is Marcus Garvey a National Hero?," *Gleaner*, August 19, 2012, <http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20120819/cleisure/cleisure3.html>.
90. *Daily Gleaner*, January 19, 1935.
91. George Padmore, "Marcus Garvey Dies In London: Lost Wealth and Prestige Before Death," *Chicago Defender*, May 18, 1940, 1.
92. Rifkin, *Erotics of Sovereignty*, 3.
93. Mete Ulaş Aksoy, "Hegel and Georges Bataille's Conceptualization of Sovereignty," *Ege Academic Review* 11, no. 2 (April 2011), 219.

94. Sonia K. Katyal, "BRANDED: On the Semiotic Disobedience of Hank Willis Thomas," *Brooklyn Rail*, March 4, 2016, <http://brooklynrail.org/2016/03/critics-page/branded-on-the-semiotic-disobedience-of-hank-willis-thomas>.
95. For further discussion on Basquiat's relationship to capitalism, see Frances Negrón-Muntaner, "The Writing on the Wall: The Life and Passion of Jean-Michel Basquiat," in Negrón-Muntaner, *Boricua Pop*, 115–44.
96. Gail Turley Houston, *Royalties: The Queen and Victorian Writers* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 63.
97. Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 107–8.
98. Agustín Lao-Montes, "Decolonial Moves: Translocating African Diaspora Spaces," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2007): 314.
99. Brent Hayes Edwards, e-mail message to author May 15, 2017.
100. Negrón-Muntaner, *Boricua Pop*, 2004.
101. Ibid.
102. Tate, "Nobody Loves a Genius Child," 237.
103. *Basquiat*, catalog of an exhibition held in Museo Revoltella, Trieste, May 15–September 15, 1999 (Milano: Edizione Charta, 1999), 136.
104. Thompson, "Activating Heaven."
105. Elizabeth McAlister, "A Sorcerer's Bottle: The Visual Art of Magic in Haiti," in Consentino, *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, 309.