



JIM CROW (1986) BY JEAN MICHEL BASQUIAT, PAINTING ON WOOD

I chose this work of art because of its discourse : Jean Michel Basquiat, a young African American artist in the New York avant garde scene, experienced and expressed the double consciousness throughout his short life.

William James, employed the term “*double consciousness*” to describe the psychological state African Americans experienced during the post-Emancipation era : “*this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro (...)*”¹

Jim Crow illustrates the mythic realities of Basquiat’s racial history and condition. Luciano Caprile writes, “[Basquiat’s] blackness (...) provided him with an extraordinary narrative element to extrapolate from the myths and the rites of origin and put [it] on display, as a visual profanation and an existential declaration.”²

In this painting, Basquiat includes textual and pictorial markers as visual topography to establish a physical and familiar context, the fact of using two means -painting plus writing- can also be seen as a “double” expression that reflects the artist’s double identity. It is painted on wood that has the appearance of a whitewashed wall of a house, an aesthetic common and familiar in the American Deep South. Listed are various rivers - this list could be a reference to *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*³ - but scrawled repeatedly is MISSISSIPPI, and prominently in the center is a

¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Influence of Anxiety: Race and Writing in Jim Crow Times* (date?)

² Jean-Michel Basquiat: *The Word and the Image*”, Luciano Caprile (date?)

³ *The Weary Blues*, Langston Hughes (1926)

black skeletal figure that stands beneath an arch and sign labeled JIM CROW. The American Deep South is populated by marginalized citizens, mostly African Americans, who were oppressed, by de facto discrimination and Jim Crow legislation, it is reasonable to argue that this painting seeks to point out and overturn certain “standards”. Louis Armand wrote : “*The linguistic elements in Basquiat’s painting not only engage this work in a wide-ranging dialogue with historical and cultural discourses, but also render, with compelling poetic economy, a critique of those discourses*”⁴. Those linguistic elements appear to be a coded language that the artist left for the viewer to decipher - like in *Jim Crow*. Basquiat acknowledged his manipulation of words, stating : “*I cross out words so you will see them more; the fact that they are obscured makes you want to read them.*” Basquiat’s work, with its ironic use of text - and particularly its erasure - is the visual equivalent of “*signifying*” that Henry Gates defines : “*Signifying is a technique of indirect argument or persuasion, a language of implication*”⁵

Commentators have consistently focused upon Basquiat’s race, “*in a manner that insists upon the stereotype of the black artist as a kind of metonym for the “dark continent” itself, recalling all the worst clichés of post-Freudian psychoanalysis, as well as centuries of European racism*”⁶. A typical example of this can be found in an interview given by Basquiat in 1988 and published in *New Art International*. The interviewer, Demosthenes Davvetas, addresses Basquiat’s “*primitivism*” in a way that not only seeks to define the artist within a limited scope, but also challenges the artist’s right of refusal to act out the primitivist role. Questions repeatedly include words and phrases like “*graffiti artist,*” “*totems,*” “*primitive signs,*” “*fetishes,*” “*African roots,*” “*magical,*” “*cult,*” “*child,*” “*weapon.*”, making it clear that Basquiat was only seen and defined as a black artist.

Basquiat experimented a “*progressive construction of the artist’s discordant identity*”⁷, in trying to define his identity, and his place in society. He often questioned his origins, his multicultural background and his heritage, making references to African American art. The aftermath of his African - American identity’s assertion was the stigmatisation by the Art world as a “*primitive*” artist. To conclude, what I found interesting in “*Jim Crow*” work of art is its duality : a complex and meaningful message illustrated in a simple and straight forward way.

⁴ Jean Michel Basquiat and The Art of (Dis)Empowerment”, Louis Armand (date?)

⁵ The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.(date?)

⁶ Jean-Michel Basquiat and “The Art of (Dis)Empowerment” , Louis Armand (date?)

⁷ Leonhard Emerging- Jean Michel Basquiat : 1960-1988