

**The Racial Disparities and Influences on Art and Social Culture Through the Work of
Jean-Michel Basquiat**

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1. Introduction

In the late 1970s one of history's most notable neo-expressionist artists began to take over the metropolitan streets of New York City with his unique phrases and eclectic style. His name was Jean-Michel Basquiat. His rare style of painting and graffiti background would make Basquiat one of the first bridges of street art into the world of fine art. Much of his success was due to his silent ways of raising awareness to discrimination and police brutality within New York City. This becomes apparent within his art through the ongoing war on graffiti made by New York City in the late 1970s through 1980s. Unfortunately, this war along with the rise of stop and frisk and brutality lead to the death of fellow graffiti artist Michael Stewart. Following this event, Basquiat would begin to identify himself as a misread black man within his artwork creating double meanings to his paintings. This concept would reflect in specific artworks including *Defacement (Death of Michael Stewart)* and *Irony of a Negro Policeman*. After his death Basquiat's influence on the art world would continue on and the symbolism within his work would be comparable to newer contemporary artists such as Raymond Pettibon, and artist that makes conscious efforts to address political and social injustices that are rising within the United States. Due to this rise in police brutality in the today, Basquiat's work becomes relevant again by becoming relatable to youth of color. Thus, leading to the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2012 that would relate to the content embedded within Basquiat's paintings.

This thesis will discuss Basquiat's entry to the world of art as a young graffiti artist as well as the cautionary faced by graffiti artists in New York City during the late 1970s through early 1980s. It will also outline Basquiat's self-liberation as man of color through his art as well as his retaliation towards police brutality and discrimination through his paintings and consider the similarities and differences between the content of his work and of contemporary artist Raymond Pettibon by analyzing the political and racial aspects both artists shared in regards to inequality within the United States, thus ending on the influence of the Basquiat and the arts on the international activist movement, Black Lives Matter.

2. Artist Background

Jean-Michel Basquiat was born to a Haitian native father and Puerto Rican mother on December 22, 1960. The young artist was raised in a multilingual household and this would be reflected in his artwork soon to come. At the age of seven, Basquiat was hit by a car while playing in the street outside of his Brooklyn home resulting in severe trauma and long-term hospitalization. During his time in the hospital, his mother, Matilde, gave him the book, *Grey's Anatomy*. The book would be the source of inspiration for Basquiat when depicting human forms that would later be represented in his artwork. As Basquiat grew older his parents divorced and the tension between he and his father would grow unbearable, leading to him to run away from home on several occasions. In 1977, he was enrolled in City-As School in Manhattan, New York for gifted children where he would meet Al Diaz. The two would become famous in the world of graffiti due to their invention of the pseudonym SAMO. Basquiat would later turn the heads of many famous artists and art patrons with his first solo show in the gallery of Annina Nosei in 1982. This is where he would meet his first art dealer Tony Shafrazi. Following his newly acclaimed fame, Basquiat would create friendships and partnerships with gallery owner Larry Gagosian, Bruno Bischofberger and many more in the art world. He would then begin to have his gallery work showcased next to fellow artists such as Julian Schnabel, Francesco Clemente and soon to be best friend Andy Warhol. After a few short years of working collaboratively with Warhol, the two would become almost inseparable and working together simultaneously with the help of curator Henry Geldzahler. After negative reviews of their collaborative show the two

artists took a break from their friendship and Basquiat would continue to thrive in solo exhibitions. In the winter of 1987, Warhol passed away; this would cause Basquiat to become inconsolable in result he returned to the use narcotic drugs. On August 12, 1988, Basquiat was found unresponsive due to a drug overdose and passed away in his Brooklyn apartment.

3. Graffiti and Basquiat

In the 1970s, after an increase of self-expression among inner city youth, graffiti began to flood the New York City subway system. The location was ideal for graffiti artists because of the low population of commuters during the late-night hours. Young artists participated in the activity as a way to voice resistance against authority. The graffiti movement as well as its artists were quickly integrated into the uprising hip-hop culture that had also been brewing within New York City during the seventies.¹ As mentioned by Rachel Masilamani in her article, "Documenting Illegal Art: Collaborative Software, Online Environments and New York City's 1970s and 1980s Graffiti Art Movement," graffiti's roots were specific in a tagging style tradition, similar to graffiti, Basquiat's roots did too.² The population that had embraced the graffiti were lower class Latino and African American teens.³ Though Basquiat's affluent background was different than that of most graffiti artists, he fled to the streets and began his artistic career. During his time at City-As School, Basquiat along with close friend Al Diaz, developed his infamous tag name "SAMO."⁴ The term came about during a lucid conversation between Basquiat and Diaz calling the marijuana they were consuming, "the same old shit," which they later shortened to "SAMO" and adopted it as their tag.⁵ Together they would flood lower Manhattan with their tag following different statements from 1977 through 1979. These statements including, "SAMO is dead," or "SAMO as an expression of spiritual love."⁶

Basquiat's graffiti was not an activity he decided to take on as a bored teen. The term not only derived from the abbreviation of "same old shit" it also stood as a playful alternative for the racial slur "Sambo."⁷ His graffiti revealed a powerful poetic and powerful visual gift, as mentioned by writer Laurie Rodrigues.⁸ She goes on to mention that his aesthetics are what builds a productive play of what the mainstream society constructs of race as well as "providing an escape from the epistemic necessities of blackness".⁹ Before he would transition into the fine art world, Basquiat had showed sensitivity to racialization within America through his poetic style graffiti. It has been said by several scholars that Basquiat indeed has an obsession with his intellectual property, suggesting that issues such as ancestry, modernity, or personhood, things that "commodified American Africanism, "were reasons he began graffiti in an attempt for self-liberation."¹⁰ By mentioning his roots within graffiti as well as his motive to create art, when analyzing his artwork viewers can witness these cries for social justice or even self-acceptance and liberation within American society as a black man. The roots of SAMO did not die during his transition into fine arts; it transferred into a much larger society outside of the city's socialite-driven scene into the mainstream world of galleries.

Although graffiti was prominent during the 1970s, the war between the city and graffiti artists was at an all-time high. The high cost to remove vandalism throughout the city, as well as its relation to crime caused the city to "require" an increase of police presence in locations that were prone to graffiti. In the early 1980s, the rise of the hip-hop culture caused minority groups to face an even larger spread of discrimination from society and the police force. In a way, it could be presumed to be how authorities were responding to the blossoming revolution of the hip-hop culture. The association of the "dangerous black man" and hip-hop were evident, due to rappers like N.W.A (Niggas with Attitude), Biggie Smalls, and Tupac Shakur, that began to combine racial, violent and political commentary within their music. Songs like, "Fuck the

Police” (1988) contained lyrics that promoted street violence and discord between police. This resulted in society to believe the idea of “dangerous black man”, resulting in police viewing this racial group as a threat to society. Due to these misconceptions an increase of stop and frisk would be targeted towards black men.

3.1 Stop and Frisk

In December 1968, the 8-to-1 decision of *Terry v. Ohio* supported the search and seizure of three Ohio men by a state police officer. The United States Fourth Amendment, however, protects people against unreasonable search and seizures unless there is a warrant or probable cause. An Ohio Warrant Court stood in favor of the officer who claimed he felt that his safety and the safety of others were endangered by these men that were dressed in plain clothing-without probable cause other than, “standing suspiciously” on a street corner.¹¹ Due to the ruling of *Terry v. Ohio*, the government therefore “formalized the authority of the police to stop citizens on the street based on a standard of proof lesser than probable cause.”¹² Due to the increased rate of investigations, some of which did not meet a probable cause threshold, the question of social injustice began to arise.

The issue of stop-and-frisk is still a topic of controversy within New York City. The New York City’s Bar Association reported on the New York Police Department’s stop-and-frisk policy regarding the “highly controversial feature of policing” under the Administrations of former Mayor Michael Bloomberg.¹³ The policy raised many concerns despite its substantial reduction crime within the city. A report stated that eighty-five percent of stop-and-frisk stops are male black or Latino men.¹⁴ Although police have made efforts to imply that the cause of this high percentage was because most criminal activity is done within predominantly black or Latino neighborhoods. The report continues on to state that this policy has violated the rights of a large number of men stopped but also “stigmatizes a substantial segment of the population and further alienates and marginalizes young black and Latino men who face ever more difficult hurdles in progressing within society. In addition, the policy engenders distrust in the affected communities, and mutual disrespect between the police and the younger generation in those communities.”¹⁵ Another report shows the increase in stop and frisks within New York City just ten years after the death of Basquiat. The chart based on “Stops by Race” (Fig 1.) shows a dramatic increase of the significant racial disparities by the black community from 1998 throughout 2012. Although these reports came after the time of Basquiat’s death, they remain as a reminder of the ongoing racial disparities faced by minority groups. As mentioned, stop and frisk became formalized by the government in 1968, this controversial law is significant throughout Basquiat’s paintings that portray the black body as a presence of negativity within a socially unjust society.

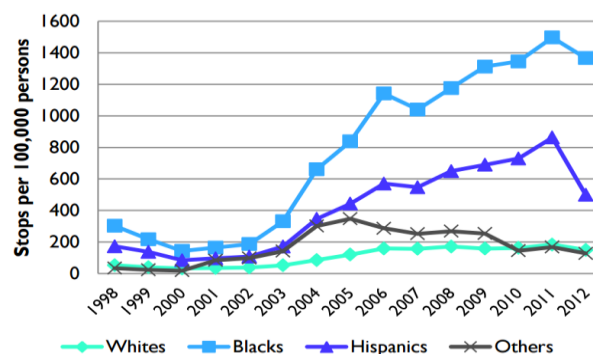


Figure 1. *Stops by Race (1998-2012)* Source City of New York, NYPD, Stop Question and Frisk Report Database

4. War on Graffiti

It is important to note that prior to 1972, graffiti was not illegal or considered an act punishable by law. In 1972, mayor of New York City, John Lindsay, declared a war on graffiti calling it a “visual pollution” and claiming it was a financial burden on the city. After the anti-graffiti legislation was passed, the act of spray painting on a public property was from then on considered a punishable act. Graffiti artists from that point forward were labeled thugs and criminals, despite the support from some mass media claiming it was a positive pastime for the city youth.¹⁶ Five years later, the New York City funded a twenty-million-dollar power-wash program that would chemically remove the paint used to tag subway trains. Graffiti artists saw this removal as an opportunity to re-apply new tags due to the open space since writing on top of another artist’s work was considered disrespectful.¹⁷ Mayor Lindsay’s attempts diminished due to lack of consistency, in the 1980s newly appointed Mayor Edward Koch reopened the war on graffiti only this time targeting minority communities.¹⁸

Mayor Koch’s anti-graffiti campaign slogan stated, “make your mark in society, not on it.”¹⁹ His fight against graffiti linked the negative connotations of graffiti onto black and Latino communities, continuing to imply the people within these communities were a threat to the city. The legislation fueled hostility between low-income minorities and New York City. Police tactics became increasingly violent and security for the MTA (Metropolitan Transport Authority) was elevated. Those that were associated to the graffiti culture fell to violence when the MTA and New York City decided to protect city trains by building large razor wire lined fences around train yards and using attack dogs for an additional line of protection.

5. Death of Michael Stewart

On September 15, 1983, Stewart left a downtown Manhattan club. Unaware of nearby officers, he began to tag the subway wall at the First Avenue and 14th Street station. After his arrest, Stewart was escorted by police to Bellevue hospital bound, brutally beaten and without a pulse. After two weeks in a coma, he was pronounced dead in his hospital bed. Reports given by witnesses claimed to have seen police mercilessly kicking Stewart after he was already handcuffed. Medical records also suggested that the cause of death was due to forced trauma on Stewart’s neck, most likely caused when police had him in a choke hold with their batons. Basquiat, also a close friend to Stewart, quickly realized that this tragic event could have easily happened to him if he were put in the same situation and still doing street graffiti. A statement from his ex-girlfriend, Suzanna Mullock, shared that Basquiat took his friend’s death to heart and cried to her, “It could have been me.”²⁰ Following the homicide, Basquiat produced his painting on the wall of his friend Keith Haring’s studio²¹; *Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)* (1983) (Fig. 2), in reaction to his friend’s death and also to bring awareness to the brutality faced by people, specifically, men of color by the police in New York City.



Figure 2. *Defacement (The Death of Michael Stewart)*, 1983, Basquiat, acrylic and marker on wood, 63.5×77.5cm, Collection of Nina Clemente

5.1 Defacement: Black Lives and Basquiat

Due to the lack of scholarship regarding this specific work of art, analyzing the thought process of Basquiat within this piece becomes difficult. However, his work and symbolism has become extremely relevant within the Twentieth Century due to the rise in arguments based on racial equality and discrimination. This idea became a source of inspiration for Williams College Museum of Arts when creating a series of discussions regarding the relatability of *Defacement* and Basquiat himself to current day issues within society including racial tensions and movements. In a small panel, The Reading Room at Williams College Museum of Art, three scholars Chaedria LaBouvier, Franklin Sirmans and Jordana Saggese discuss the topic, “*Defacement: Ambivalence, Identity and Black Lives Matter*,” all in correlation to the painting as well as the iconography Basquiat portrayed as it relates to artists, youth, and political strife today.

Chaedria LaBouvier, begins the discussion with the topic of representation within the figures of *Defacement*. As examined earlier in this paper, the center figure of the painting is a dark black, ghostly figure that lacks personalized features. This is where Saggese calls attention the idea that Basquiat was implying that this figure in fact could have been him or any black graffiti artist at this time point, she continues to say that he begins placing himself within the painting by removing personalization to figures or adding relatable phrases and symbols.²² LaBouvier goes on to say that Basquiat’s copyright symbol, as seen in the “O” of *defacemento*²³ written at the top of the painting, became a topic of interest because it is a symbol that becomes consistent within all of Basquiat’s work as a commentary on state violence, trademarking and protection of himself as a black artist.²⁴ This is when the group briefly mentions the frequent use of dollar signs, crowns and trademark symbols within Basquiat’s work as a representation of the market and relating it to validation of ownership of people of color and himself whether it is in a market, cultural or artistic value.²⁵ A statement made by artist Kenny Scharf in a conversation between he and LaBouvier supports the thought that the death of Michael Stewart was allegedly inclined. In the conversation Scharf shares that just days before the death of Stewart, he too was attacked by police in the same area, in confidence saying he realizes the only reason they did not kill him was because he was white.²⁶

6. Irony of a Negro Policeman

Irony of a Negro Policeman (1981) (Fig 3.) is a painting that can be seen as a representation of a black police officer under the oppression of the social culture of the 1980s. A black man taking on the career that worked to enforce laws that were created to maintain power over his own race was antithetical. Scholar Richard Schur argues that Basquiat was negatively characterizing the American black male within this piece. Upon analyzing the painting, Schur noted that Basquiat in fact did have a critically view black community throughout specific paintings²⁷ For Schur, *Irony of a Negro Policeman* furthered racism and racialization within American life²⁸. He also continued on to state that Basquiat did not create “dignified portraits of black humanity” nor did he fight for the demand of social equality.²⁹ Based on this belief that Basquiat reinforced the notion of black inferiority, I would argue that this particular painting did not purposefully depict an African American male in negative terms, but instead allows the white viewer to understand the symbolism within the painting which is represented by a black male in a role traditionally assigned to white males. The policeman symbolizes racial supremacy and was a threat to minorities.



Figure 3. *Irony of a Negro Policeman*. 1981. Acrylic and oil stick on wood, 182.9 x 121.9 cm. Private Collector

Moving onto the background of the piece the viewer can see that as like many other paintings of Basquiat lacks balance and proportion. This allows the viewer to see Basquiat's edgy style that was originally in his graffiti work, including the use of words and descriptions. The artist once stated, “I cross out words so you'll see them more... the fact that they're obscured makes you want to read them.”³⁰ Artistic practices such as revelation and concealment are things Basquiat employed with his use of written text. He is able to use presumptions made by society within his work, but also challenge the viewer to think open-mindedly about the correlation between the text and subject matter.³¹ African American contemporary artist, Kara Walker, has said, “Invisibility can be a form of power.”³² Using Walker's quote to think further about Basquiat's practice of concealment, the idea of allowing the viewer to seek out a word and partially scratched out phrase for a deeper meaning provides him with the power to get his audience involved and interested in the painting. When looking at *Irony of a Negro Policeman*, Basquiat uses this inclination towards invisibility to define what the figure depicted represents by including text around it.

When looking around the canvas, words that are offset to the right of the image can be

seen as descriptive of the subject matter. These words include, “Irony”, “IRONY OF A NEGRO POLICEMAN,” “PAWN,” and “(LEFT)” All four terms are written in a dark red color. Rather than focusing on the coloring of the text, the meaning behind each individual word plays a heavy role when analyzing the piece. To begin, the words are scribbled off to the right-hand side of the officer starting with, “IRONY” and “IRONY OF A NEGRO POLICEMAN” As previously mentioned, the concept of a black officer would typically be unrealistic during times of racial segregation, however, Basquiat is implying that this officer is in position of “power” post-segregation which would be frowned upon by certain racial parties. Supporting this statement is his first point of “irony,” by insinuating that people of color were once thought to have a constant life of oppression and are now moving into positions of “equal” power. The second focal point is the last two terms shown on the bottom right corner of the canvas. They read, “PAWN” and “LEFT.” The phrase together can be affiliated with a hierarchy of scale, one being a person of low rank receiving a command from one that is of higher rank. To define the text, we can think of the game of chess. The pawn is a game piece that stands in the front line and holds the lowest of values in respect to the other pieces; the pawn is then manipulated to further another’s positional purpose. Given these elements, the viewer can conclude that the irony within this painting leads to the idea of control by higher superiorities.

As discussed, police brutality and racial profiling towards minority groups, specifically men of color, were increasing at fast rates due to the legal system turning the other cheek to racially unjust crime. For instance, the case against the officers charged with the murder of Michael Stewart but set free due to lack of evidence. In a documentary of Basquiat’s life, directed by close friend Tamara Davis, art collector Peter Brant said, “Basquiat was not an artist that was easily accepted by the art world, he was considered an artist that could be on the cover of New York Times due to his underground aesthetics.”³³ Although Schur’s analysis of *Irony of a Negro Policeman* I would infer that Basquiat’s work did support the plight of minorities, due to the fact that many of his pieces tackled socio-cultural and socio-economic issues that other artists during this time period may have been hesitant to touch. In addition, having the mindset and skill of a street artist within the gallery world gave him an advantage to appealing to a larger audience.

7. Relevance in Current Day Artwork

Irony of a Negro Policeman and *Defacement (Death of Michael Stewart)* are significant representations of Basquiat’s view on racial discord during the late 20th century. They are as relevant to current day American society as they were then. Basquiat’s work created opportunities for artists following him within fine art galleries and museums to shatter the barrier of cultural misappropriation. Since his death in 1988, Basquiat’s influence has been evident within emerging contemporary artists that have taken advantage of the opportunities he has unknowingly given them and have used them to also portray the disparities between the police force, government and also racist groups within society. A quote by human rights activist Malcolm X says:

America today finds herself in a unique situation. Historically, revolutions are bloody ...Revolutions overturn systems. Revolutions destroy systems ... But today this country can become involved in a revolution that won’t take bloodshed. All she’s got to do is give the black “man” in this country everything that’s due him, everything.³⁴

In relation to this, we as an audience can see the influence and similarities that are coming about between the work of Basquiat and his fight for underrepresented groups as it flows into the work of current artists and their willingness to also fight for a revolution of social change. Uprising artists and their fight for equality and awareness of inequality within their artwork represent this revolution.

7.1 Comparable Content

As this paper has established the content and style of Basquiat has undoubtedly constructed a pathway of favorable circumstances to not just minority artists, but also artists that made the bold decision to use their talents to call attention not only to racial disparities, but also politics within the United States, for example Raymond Pettibon. Although Pettibon and Basquiat range in scale of differences including ethnicity, economic background and more, the argument they make within their artwork towards a larger political and legal system are remarkably similar. In 2017, the New Museum in New York City hosted an exhibition dedicated to the work of living artist Raymond Pettibon. The show not only integrates some of the world's most vigorous political leaders it also, in a manner similar to Basquiat, was dedicated to the oppression of minorities within America. The artwork included controversial leaders such as Adolf Hitler, Ho Chi Minh, Ronald Reagan and also Donald Trump. Pettibon is a Los Angeles based artist and has, "made a career out of angst- and menace ridden art."³⁵ Similar in style to some of Basquiat's early work, he focused on a "comic-book" sense of imagery including text around his figures. The text within his work is said to be solely, "amusing and sardonic."³⁶ In a drawing of an officer and a man of color, Pettibon writes in the top left corner, "You people." (Fig 4.) This phrase is an obvious interpretation of racist ideas and actions made by some white police officers. The officer is of white descent; his face has a smug look on it. His eyes are gazed down at the man and his mouth is turned in a face of disgust. Pettibon only draws a less than profile view of the man on the left-hand side of the image. His race and ethnicity is unknown however his skin tone is implied by shadowy markings on his lower cheek and chin. His hair texture is drawn coarse and he wears a white collared top.

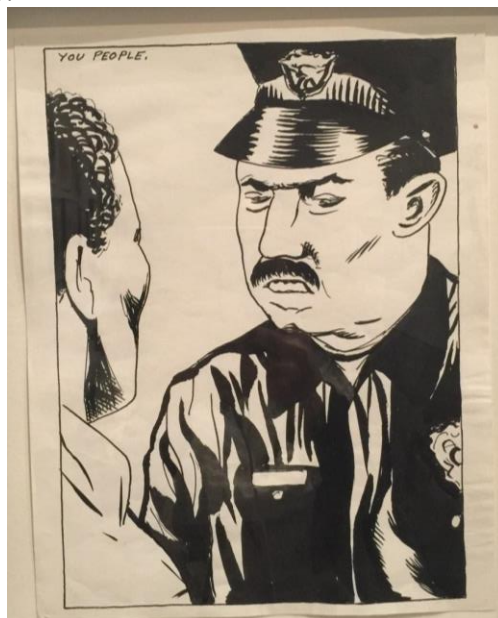


Figure 4. *No Title*. Ink on paper. New Museum, New York. 2017

This drawing is not the only presentation Pettibon took within his work when undertaking the topic of racism. In a different drawing in the same show, the artist uses the Statue of Liberty, a symbol that is known to represent unity and freedom, and abstracts the facial gestures of the great figure from what is known to be a strong expression, to a face of sorrow and adversity. (Fig 5.) As seen in the drawings below the arm of Lady Liberty are the words, “But don’t try to pass for white.” (Fig 6.) The two images stand as representations of an ongoing sense racial supremacy within America.

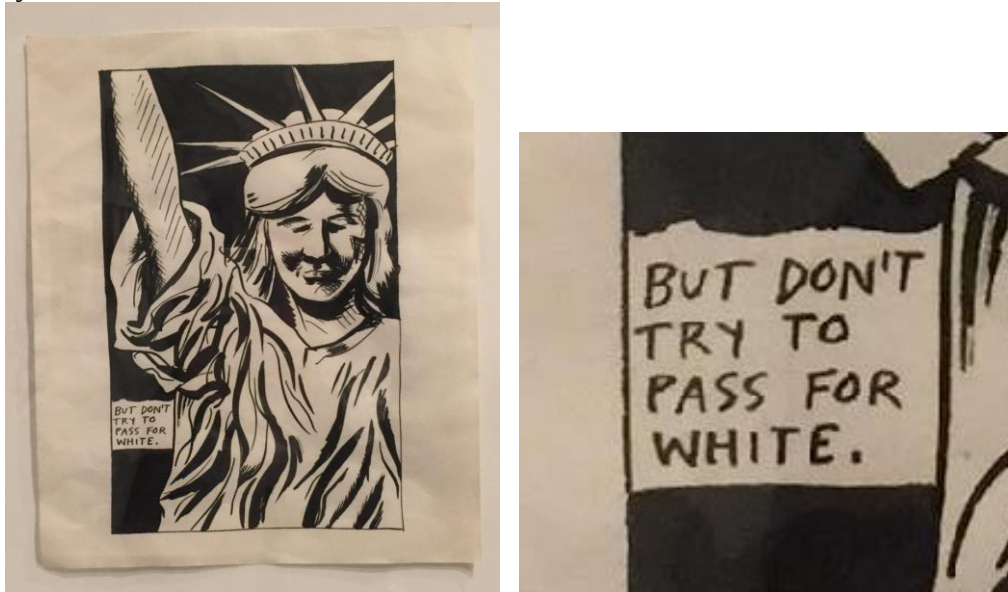


Figure 5&6. *No Title*. Ink on Paper. New Museum, New York. 2017

7.2 Black Lives Matter

The issue of racial supremacy can raise many questions; one being what were and still are the stereotypes placed upon men of color throughout the late twentieth century that also carry into the twenty-first century. Recent events, including the increase of African American male homicides by police force around the United States, has led to an uproar for the fight of racial equality. In 2012, after the death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teen, a social movement by the name of “Black Lives Matter” was born. Unlike past civil rights movements led by human rights activists such as Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Black Lives Matter movement is led by the masses as opposed to a specific leader, increasing the unity of America. Black Lives Matter is a movement that was organized and uplifted by three black queer women, two identifications that are marginalized in American society: Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opal Tometi.³⁷ Writer Wil Gafney makes a harsh, but true remark, that after the turning point of Martin’s death, they realized that, “black folk are not regarded as fully- if even at all- human.”³⁸ Due to this, the movement calls for an extreme rise in social justice and racial equality for the African American community as well as raises awareness about-police brutality towards the community. The movement flooded the United States bringing thousands of Americans together in unity to put a stop towards this tragic social issue.

The concern of racial inequality has also began to find itself within safe zones for example college campuses. An article pertaining to the murder of Martin allowed writer Michelle Rowley to reflect on an interview between Northwestern University graduate Dwayne Nash and interviewer Stacy Porter. In the interview Nash states that eighty-five percent of black and

Hispanic men are automatically seen as being a threat by mainstream society and are being stopped and searched or interrogated by police within New York City.³⁹ Rowley not only mentions the racial profiling of black and Hispanic men in street attire, specifically a hooded sweatshirt and sneakers, but also ties in that due to the combination of clothing choice and skin color the association of danger is supposedly given, therefore leading society to naturally want to put black men, “back into place,” meaning there would be a renewed perception that men of color need to be controlled once again.

8. Conclusion

By examining the experiences and art of the life of Jean-Michel Basquiat, we as his audience can conclude that despite his wary actions of becoming involved with social causes, he made it clear that his paintings would express his views of injustice and wrongful suffering by people of color during and after his lifetime. The paintings he created were consumed with representations of himself and his view on society as a black man inside and out of the art culture. He dared to question the sensibility of blackness within America during his time. His work could easily be misunderstood to those that do not struggle the everyday strife of being a person of color within a racially unjust based society. By placing the blame on highly populated minority communities, police are allowed to continue racial profiling with the support of stop-and-frisk laws.

Defacement, as discussed by LaBouvier, Sirmans and Saggese, supports symbolism behind the central by suggesting minimal efforts could relate to larger themes. In fact Basquiat “amassed words, symbols and figures that were commonly associated with the American mainstream’s conceptions of blackness.”⁴⁰ *Irony of a Negro Policeman* is evidence that Basquiat negatively exoticized influential roles held by people of color in order to criticize such a self-proclaimed positive and accepting society; And by this his paintings to become relatable to youth of today’s generation. Although there are many artists that are similar in style, the content and directness made by specific artists stand out. The work of Raymond Pettibon remains relevant because of the similarity of content within his art work. There is a chance that due to the braveness of Basquiat’s work, Pettibon was able to consciously make the decision to call attention to political and racial conflict. Trayvon Martin could have been Michael Stewart, in fact he was. Black Lives Matter follows the same lines of inspiration made by the young artist. Reiterating a quote made previously in this paper, “black folk are not regarded as fully-if at all-human,” and with the help of this international movement society can reign together to end the question if American society as a whole views black lives to be devoid of value?

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11. Endnotes

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