

GHOSTS OF ETHNICITY

Rethinking Art Discourses of the 1940s and 1980s

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[Eastern European jews] have been and still are the most particularist people on earth; yet they have been accused of making it their particular mission to destroy particularity, to internationalize, to create the brotherhood of man.

—Clement Greenberg, "The Jewish Dickens: Review of the *World of Sholom Aleichem* by Maurice Samuel"

The epigraph, from the late New York art critic Clement Greenberg, emphasizes the contradictions and paradoxes of a certain U.S. modernist jewish dilemma as it was understood in the 1940s.¹ Taking the perspective of the informed jewish insider, Greenberg praises the Eastern and Central European jew's predilection for a contradictory set of local and global attachments, as well as a discomfort with the national, particularly the historical European nationalism that assumes only a superficial recognition of jews as authentic citizens of the nation. To circumvent the national, Greenberg celebrates a discourse of universal humanism that "produce[s] the supreme example of the gratuitous and disinterested man."² He is referring to the lack of self-interest on the part of jews who advocated a discourse of universal humanism that worked for the erasure of all differences rather than just their own.

Greenberg's interest in the contradictions of a certain jewish subjectivity appears within the larger context of his critique of the (anti-Semitic) outsider view that jews have a hidden language and manner of thinking that make them "devious."³ One of the ways in which Greenberg tackles this stereotype is by delineating the complexity of the idea of the jew and the jewish response to this projection of difference:

The last thing the Jew is, is tricky, and the last thing he thinks of is his front to the world. The ostentatious Jew—that myth of the Anglo-Saxon world—is ostentatious only about his wealth, and unlike maharajas and Vanderbilts, makes no other claim by his ostentation than that of his wealth. And when he loses it he does not bother to keep the lace curtains hanging in the front parlor.⁴

Greenberg's emphasis on the Eastern European jews' abhorrence of hypocrisy and their impatience with etiquette and decorum, present in this passage, is also important in understanding the epigraph. Just as he suggests that as a people Eastern European jews do not bother to keep up appearances, he also notes that when jews are threatened with marginalization or exclusion from nationally imagined communities, they will not abide by nationalist sentiments for the sake of propriety.

The paradox of Greenberg's dualistic thinking, in which he sets particularism against internationalism as a way to transcend the national, has quite a powerful legacy in the present. However, I would argue that his ideas, though they might have enabled a certain way of thinking that was effective at the time they were written, no longer provide us with an accurate map of social relations in the 1990s. The discourse of the devious jew is no longer as widespread as it was during World War II, nor is the pure internalization of a negative image of "jewishness" as prevalent for my generation as it was for Greenberg's. (I will address this later when I analyze Greenberg's own admission in 1955 of being "a self-hating jew.") Another major change that has taken place is that an earlier generation's predilection for the universal is now being replaced by a more contemporary notion of the global and the transnational. The latter is not as tied in with a discourse of imperialism as the forms of "globalism" and "universalism" championed in the 1940s. In addition, new conceptions of locality and connectedness are also emerging, which are not so bound up with a discourse that sees ethnicity as distinct from a spectrum of other identities and differences. Contradictory and constantly shifting relations can now define a given community; as Ella Shohat writes, "The intersection of ethnicity with race, class, and gender discourses involves a shifting, relational social and discursive positioning, whereby one group can simultaneously constitute 'norm' and 'periphery.'"⁵

I conceived this essay as a way to rethink Greenberg's early binarisms for the purpose of dealing with the multicultural, feminist, and queer debates of the present. It is worth noting that these newer ways of imagining identities provided an impetus for me to connect in a more engaged way my own Ashkenazi jewish identity to my cultural politics of race and gender. This perspective is only beginning to be addressed in contemporary art history, since jewish ethnicity as a positionality in these debates has been absent until recently.⁶ Strong opposition from conservative critics to expanding the traditional art historical curriculum beyond the binaristic hierarchy of high/low art world as well as a culturally conservative political climate in general—marked in part by the rise of the Christian Right, the attempt to close the National Endowment for the Arts, and the return of a subtle anti-Semitism that still permeates U.S. culture—have shut down a complicated discussion of jewish identities in relation to other political issues, including feminism and colonial discourse. By making connections between various debates in this essay, however, I am not intending to privilege such a perspective but, rather, to suggest that it has informed my presence and point of view in what follows.

This essay rethinks the relationship between art discourses of the 1940s and 1980s to imagine a more complicated relation between the discourses of modernism, nationalism, cosmopolitanism, masculinities, and jewish identities in the 1940s. The second half of the chapter deals with the legacy of a U.S.-based modernist art criticism established in the forties and the way it continues to reassert itself today in altered form in the critical art

discourses of the 1980s and early 1990s. The quotation I began with deals specifically with the paradoxes of jewish identities in the forties. The idea of universalism it articulates is relevant to the changing debates in the arts in the United States, especially since the notion of universality on which aesthetic judgments depended was itself constructed out of discussions in which racial and ethnic differences were central issues.

The first section focuses on the writings of Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, Meyer Schapiro, and some of the abstract expressionist painters of the 1940s. In the second section I examine the reception of a shift in art criticism that took place in the 1980s and 1990s around the work of two late contemporary artists of some renown, Robert Mapplethorpe, an openly gay white photographer, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, an artist of Puerto Rican and Cuban descent. This section focuses on the different terms by which each of these artists has been accepted into the canon of "great" universal art. In particular, it considers how an older modernist discourse treats the discourses of ethnicity, gender, and homosexuality differently from that of race.

My rationale for making some connection between the 1940s and 1980s is not to overdraw the similarities between them, since there are important and obvious distinctions between the forms of globalism, cosmopolitanism, and universalism championed in 1940s and 1980s art discourses, respectively, but to map the ways that cultural and political dialogues in the arts have taken place across different immigrant art communities in New York at specific historical moments. To examine in further depth the politics of location of a history of art, the cultural identities of artists and art critics need to be taken into account, especially when analyzing in retrospect a discourse of modernism, which was conceived by its proponents to dislodge the notion of identities altogether.

NEW YORK ART DISCOURSES AND UNIVERSALISM: 1930S AND 1940S

In the growing field of visual cultural studies, there has been interest in inflecting a discourse of contemporary art history with a much more self-conscious and critical analysis of how power relations work—most notably those of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and nationalism—as opposed to what one finds within the discourse of market institutions of New York art galleries, museums, and magazines of the 1980s and 1990s. One of the ways this is currently being done is by deconstructing the notion of the New York art world as monolithic and unchanging. Critics, such as Irit Rogoff, working in the area of visual culture explain how the New York art world is "a world unto itself, with a distinct cultural and linguistic tradition and a vehement sense of territoriality."⁷ Rogoff proceeds to formulate this particular art world much the way that historian Benedict Anderson theorizes the nation as "an imagined community" or as a performative space where roles and relationships of both belonging and foreignness are acted out. In some key ways, the New York art world and the nation in Anderson's sense operate analogously. Both are mythic yet very powerful and effective communities that are built on shared fictional narratives. Both have key performers (artists, critics, curators, art dealers in the case of the art world) who have the discursive power to define how they situate themselves as well as Others within this community that they interpret and control, and both arouse in Anderson's words "deep attachments" of belonging and "command profound emotional legitimacy."⁸

Despite the similarities between the two terms I have outlined, what is paradoxical about the concept of the New York art world is its simultaneous attachment and detachment from the U.S. nation, and how this ambivalent connection to the United States actually authorizes its universalizing image of itself. It is fitting that the genealogy of the term *New York art world* and its cosmopolitan aspirations can be traced to the beginnings of the Cold War and the development of a New York art market. As Serge Guilbaut argues in his intellectual history of the period titled *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, this also was a moment when New York began to have dreams of replacing Paris as the presumed imperial cultural center of the so-called West.⁹ Like the formulation "New York art world," abstract expressionist painting that characterized this period was embraced by New York intellectuals not merely as a New York school of painting or as American painting, but as a universalist cultural style that transcended the geographically specific. In 1943, the *New York Times* art page launched this art movement with the headline "'Globalism' Pops into View."¹⁰ This media recognition coincided also with the way that New York Jewish artists Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko defined themselves that year, writing as members of the cultural committee of the Federation of American Painters and Sculptors:

The current 3rd annual exhibition of the Federation . . . prompts us to state again our position on art, and the new spirit demanded of artists and the public today. At our inception we stated "We condemn artistic nationalism which negates the world tradition of art at the base of modern art movements." . . . As a nation we are being forced to outgrow our narrow political isolationism. Now that America is recognized as the center where art and artists of all the world must meet, it is time for us to accept cultural values on a truly global plane.¹¹

The insistent globalism that defined the terms by which these painters authorized themselves reappears in the writings of both Jewish and non-Jewish art critics of the time, although for the purposes of this essay I will concentrate on the writings of Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, who were key to constructing an identity for the New York group.¹² One way in which Greenberg could convince outsiders of the international significance of these mostly New York painters was to explain how a real culture, an avant-garde, was possible in a nation imagined as a cultural vacuum. Greenberg accomplished this by discursively transforming the abiding limitation of American culture—its putative isolation—into an asset:

Isolation is, so to speak, the natural condition of high art in America. Yet it is precisely our more intimate and habitual acquaintance with *isolation that gives us our advantage* at this moment. Isolation, or rather the alienation that is its cause, is the truth—isolation, alienation, naked and revealed unto itself, is the condition under which the true reality of our age is experienced. And the experience of this true reality is indispensable to any ambitious age.¹³

In Greenberg's formulation, modernity, alienation, and what it means to be American went hand in hand. Greenberg turned a previously unacceptable way of being in the United States (alienation) into cultural capital. Ironically, he used America's greatest weaknesses—its geographical isolation, its so-called lack of culture, and its alienation—and turned them into an advantage.

Harold Rosenberg's discursive strategy was similar to Greenberg's.¹⁴ He also saw the proverbial alienation that artists experienced in America as beneficial:

Attached neither to a community nor to one another, *these painters experience a unique loneliness of a depth that is reached perhaps nowhere in the world.* From the four corners of their vast land they have come to plunge themselves into the anonymity of New York, *annihilation of their past being not the least compelling project of these aesthetic Legionnaires.* . . . The very extremity of their *isolation forces upon them a kind of optimism*, an impulse to believe in their ability to dissociate some personal essence of their experience and rescue it as the beginning of a new world.¹⁵

For Rosenberg, it was precisely because American artists were alienated that they were antiprovincial, and thus he saw them capable of imagining the creation of a "new world," a world without alienation. However, the two critics disagreed sharply about how this would come about. Writing in 1947, Greenberg states:

In the face of current events painting feels, apparently, that it must be epic poetry, it must be theater, it must be an atomic bomb, it must be the rights of Man. But the greatest painter of our time, Matisse, preeminently demonstrated the sincerity and penetration that go with the kind of greatness particular to twentieth century painting by saying that he wanted his art to be an armchair for the tired business man.¹⁶

For Greenberg, this new world could not be obtained unless artists returned to purely visual formal values. In his desire to preserve high culture by cutting it off altogether from the social, Greenberg wanted art to be an "armchair" for the exhausted capitalist, whereas critics like Rosenberg disagreed with this art-for-art's-sake prescription. In his famous manifesto of abstract expressionism titled "The American Action Painters" (1952), Rosenberg saw that abstract expressionist art embodied this formalist ideal by bringing art and life closer together. This collapsing of life into art was seen as an absolute heroic task compared to which any other form of engagement would pale by comparison: "The lone artist did not want the world to be different, he wanted his canvas to be a world."¹⁷

Despite the disagreements between the two critics, what linked their work was the way each made the claim that great aesthetic experiences occur most profoundly in a cultural vacuum. Such an argument, perhaps, was effective in giving a new cosmopolitan prestige to American art that it previously lacked in the 1940s and 1950s. But, as I will later suggest, it also set the stage for the continuing belief in the dissident artist as an alienated modernist, unable to engage in any form of political art not based on the notion of the outsider. Furthermore, the notion of the alienated and autonomous artist/intellectual as it emerged in the 1940s and 1950s has a complex relationship to notions of masculinities, Jewish identities, socialism, and the political climate between 1936 and 1945.

The pre-World War II generation of New York intellectuals and artists saw themselves as much more autonomous from an American business culture than the generation that followed them. They directed their energies not toward promoting an aggressive international art market in which modern art played a leading role, but toward a more populist agenda, politically creating a local culture in which the working class could represent

themselves as participants in power.¹⁸ This socialist project that involved a number of writers as well as other artists in the United States also valorized a cosmopolitan ideal, but one that was linked to social revolution in Russia and the Marxist notion of a revolutionary international class struggle. This political project was eventually challenged and, in some cases, redefined when Soviet policy itself moved away from its original purpose. This shift began in July 1935 when the Seventh World Congress set a new Soviet policy of the Popular Front, which was an attempt to unite a broad group of intellectuals in a common campaign against fascism. Similarly, in the United States, in discussions held in 1936 by the First American Artists' Congress, artists and intellectuals joined forces also to fight fascism and tried to widen their political base by recruiting nonaligned Marxists and liberals so as to play a more significant role in a more broadly based American cultural politics. Worried that fascism could spread to the United States, the Artists' Congress saw a parallel between the new emphasis on nationalism in the arts in the United States and the way that the Nazis and Italian fascists were using the arts as a means to build group identities centered on the myths of nationalism and racial superiority. These fears were especially pronounced among Jewish critics, who brought to their work a strong sense of coming from elsewhere, of standing outside the white American mainstream at a time when there was general uneasiness about artists and critics of Jewish descent. As Lynd Ward and Meyer Schapiro suggest in a speech given at the congress in 1936 titled "Race, Nationality, and Art":

We have many appeals for an "American Art" in which the concept of America is very vague, usually defined as a "genuine American expression" or "explicitly native art" and sometimes includes a separation of American painters into desirable and undesirable on the basis of Anglo-Saxon surnames . . . finally the word "American" used in that way has no real meaning. It suspends a veil of fictitious unity and blinds our eyes to the fact that there can be no art in common between the Americans who own Rockefeller Center, the Americans in the Legion in Terre Haute, and the Americans in, as a symbol, Commonwealth College in Arkansas.¹⁹

Harsh words were directed toward an ideology of a national "American art," since it assumed only a perfunctory recognition of ethnic and racial differences in favor of a common culture that Ward and Schapiro evidently felt ambivalent about. The limitations of the cultural pluralist agenda were evident to Schapiro and Ward, who might be perceived as "undesirable" themselves, given their Jewish surnames. It is worth noting that although they were uneasy about the idea of a "genuine American expression," both were also equally skeptical about an essentializing notion of a Jewish cultural expression:

But even if there is no ground for a structure of racial differences in Europe, the theorists of blood chemistry will still point to the Jewish race as evidence of the persistence of unique qualities that can be traced to blood alone. They hold it to be self-evident that the Jewish race has definite physical characteristics and equally characteristic cultural qualities, and the one stems from the other. . . . In our time we have the same lack of evidence as regards a common blood and culture. Rothenstein is English; Pissarro, French; Soutine, Russian; Pechstein, German; Modigliani, Italian. Who can point to anything in the work of these men that can be said to be common to all of them, . . . and therefore a Jewish characteristic? (116-17)

Any mapping of art by Jewish artists according to racialized categories was obviously suspect, since the last thing Jewish critics wanted was for Jewish American artists to be reduced to their very "un-American" religious background. According to Ward and Schapiro,

the import of this has a direct bearing on our problems as American artists, for if there is not one iota of evidence acceptable to scientists that will support a claim of uniqueness in the Jewish blood stream, then we must read out of court all propositions based on it, such as the condemnation of Alfred Stieglitz's place in American art because he is a Hoboken Jew. (117)

This was a moment when individual artists such as Stieglitz had to live with the threat that they might be called to account not for their art or their writing, but for their Jewishness, and it was necessary for critics not to tie these identities together. Anti-Semitism was on the rise in the United States prior to America's entry into the war, and in this climate an attempt was made to discredit Stieglitz's authenticity as an American artist solely on the basis of his ethnicity. In 1934, Thomas Craven, a conservative U.S. art critic, wrote:

Stieglitz, a Hoboken Jew without knowledge of, or interest in, the historical American background, was—quite apart from the doses of purified art he had swallowed—hardly equipped for the leadership of a genuine American expression; and it is a matter of record that none of the artists whose names and work he has exploited has been noticeably American in flavor.²⁰

Stieglitz's Jewishness made him a so-called inauthentic American, according to Craven, and thus disqualified him from a leadership position in constituting a "genuine" American art.²¹ While individual artists might have been targeted in the United States because of their Jewishness, modern art in general was rarely made synonymous with Jewishness to the extent it was in Hitler's Germany. The 1937 Degenerate Art exhibition in particular functioned as a broad condemnation of all modern art, which was seen by Nazis as "Jewish."²²

After the war, when the full dimensions of the European Holocaust became known, there was a move on the part of Jewish writers and art critics to assert their ethnic identity as evidenced by the following pronouncement in 1944 made by the organizers of the Under Forty symposium, which was printed in the *Contemporary Jewish Record*: "American Jews have reached the stage of integration with the native environment. They are spectators no longer but full participants in the cultural life of the country."²³ Despite the celebratory rhetoric of the *Contemporary Jewish Record*, the ability of U.S. Jews to pass as fully white was nowhere a foregone conclusion, especially since the ethnic category white constantly shifts at different historical moments in U.S. culture. As Donna Haraway explains:

The point makes it easier to remember how the Irish moved from being perceived as colored in the early nineteenth century in the United States to quite white in Boston's school busing struggles in the 1970s, or how U.S. Jews have been ascribed white status more or less stably after W.W. II, while Arabs continue to be written as colored in the daily news.²⁴

Haraway's point is important to take into account, even if she herself is not attentive enough to the diversity of the Jewish diasporic community in the United States, especially

the marked differences between German and Eastern European jews (many of whom did not speak English in the mid-1940s). Nor does she note the complicated status of, for example, a jewish Iraqi in the United States today. Indeed, it is the heterogeneity of identities among jews that made the shift toward jewish assimilation in postwar America anything but uniform. For instance, various religious sects are operative within Judaism and make for large differences in what it means to be a jewish man or jewish woman. Nevertheless, given the supposed historical shift in jewish ethnic identity in the postwar United States, it seems important to question how the significant art criticism of this period, written mostly by jewish men (Greenberg, Schapiro, and Rosenberg), emerges through and against historical discourses of ethnicity, race, nationalism, as well as gender. Despite the inordinate amount of writing on Greenberg within the past two decades, by post-modernists (Victor Burgin) and by Marxists (Griselda Pollock, Serge Guilbaut, Michael Fried, T. J. Clark) among others, the relative silence on this issue was not broken until the mid-1970s by Max Kozloff. ²⁵ Writing a review in 1976 in *Artforum* on the Jewish Museum exhibit curated by Avram Kampf titled "Jewish Experience in the Art of the Twentieth Century," Kozloff explains the enormous influence of jewish art criticism: "From that old-time jewish sect called American art criticism, many unsuspecting Gentiles picked up their broadest, most governing ideas of modern art."²⁶ Despite Kozloff's important article, the issue was dropped and not taken up again until the multicultural debates of the late 1980s and early 1990s by art historians such as Matthew Baigell, Catherine Soussloff, Kenneth E. Silver, Milton Brown, Norman L. Kleeblatt, Susan Chevlowe, Bradford R. Collins, and Susan Noyes Platt, as well as by intellectual historians writing more generally on the New York intellectuals involved in the journal *Partisan Review*. Of the few articles on this topic, Collins's "Political Pessimism, Jewish 'Self-Hatred' and the 'Dreams of Universalism': The Origins of Greenberg's Purist Aesthetics, c. 1930-1940" is the most relevant for this essay because it provides a systematic and detailed analysis of the impact of ethnicity and race on Greenberg's early ideas on art.²⁷ However, although I found Collins's piece immensely valuable in the inclusion of ethnicity in its biographical approach to Greenberg, my perspective is somewhat different from that of Collins. Drawing from Michel Foucault's analysis of historical writing, discursive formations, and their practical institutionalization, I am more concerned with the "discourse" of his writing and its powerful legacy than with evaluating what Collins refers to as the "personal care and concerns" of Greenberg the person.²⁸

CLEMENT GREENBERG AND JEWISH HEGEMONY: LEGITIMIZING A FORM OF DECULTURATION IN THE ARTS

In 1955, Greenberg scripts himself in terms of his ethnic identity in the following biographical entry that appeared in *Twentieth Century Authors*:

I was born in the Bronx, in New York City, the oldest of three sons. My father and my mother had come, in their separate ways, from the Lithuanian Jewish cultural enclave in northeastern Poland, and I spoke Yiddish as soon as I did English. When I was five we moved to Norfolk, Va., but moved back to New York—Brooklyn this time—when I was eleven. My father had by that time made enough money to change over from storekeeper (clothing) to

manufacturer (metal goods). However, I can't remember there ever having been any worrying about money in our family, or any one in it lacking for anything. Which is not to say that we were rich.

I attended public school in Norfolk and Brooklyn, took the last year of high school at the Marquand School, and went to Syracuse University for an A.B. (1930). For two and a half years after college I sat home in what looked like idleness, but did during that time learn German and Italian in addition to French and Latin. The following two years I worked in St. Louis, Cleveland, San Francisco and Los Angeles in an abortive left-handed venture of my father's into the wholesale drygoods business; but I discovered that my appetite for business did not amount to the same thing as an inclination. During the next year I supported myself by translating. . . . At the beginning of 1930 I went to work for the federal government, first in the New York office of the Civil Service Commission, then in the Veterans Administration, and finally (in 1937) in the Appraiser's Division of the Customs Service in the Port of New York. Until then I had been making desultory efforts to write, but now I began in earnest, in my office-time leisure—of which I had plenty—and fairly soon I began to get printed.²⁹

This rather lengthy biographical statement in which he makes his jewish origins part of his persona suggests among other things that he is somewhat at ease with his jewish background. This entry thus offers a very different self-presentation from the one he earlier scripted in 1950 in which he casts himself in the role of "a self-hating jew." The article "Self-Hatred and Jewish Chauvinism: Some Reflections on 'Positive Jewishness'" starts out as a bitter and acrimonious indictment of his own inability to deal with his self-criticism:

The Jewish self-hatred in myself, . . . its subtlety and the devious ways in which it conceals itself, from me as well as from the world outside, explains many things that used to puzzle me in the behavior of my fellow Jews. It is only reluctantly that I have become persuaded that self-hatred in one form or another is almost universal among Jews—or at least much more prevalent than is commonly thought or admitted—and that it is not confined on the whole to Jews like myself.³⁰

Greenberg's confession casts his successful career and secure reputation in a different light and as such is a significant piece of writing in Greenberg's oeuvre. Despite the gesture to universalize his personal experience and connect it to that of all American jews, it is noteworthy in its frank interrogation of his own ethnic anxiety and his willingness to narrate the unspeakable about himself.

This 1950 article also inscribes him in a more complex relationship to his jewishness than his 1944 comments for the Under Forty symposium suggest. In this earlier piece he presents himself as caught within the restrictive injunctions his parents have internalized, including the way that they downplayed their ethnicity in public in favor of an identification with socialist politics:

This writer has no more of a conscious position toward his Jewish heritage than the average American Jew—which is to say, hardly any. His father and mother repudiated a good deal of the Jewish heritage for him in advance by becoming free-thinking socialists who maintained only their Yiddish, certain vestiges of folk life in the Pale, and an insistence upon specifying themselves as Jews.³¹

This inscription of himself within a familial narrative in private nevertheless permits him to reject a self-conscious quality of Jewishness in public, but to acknowledge at the same time some aspect of his ethnic identity that he associates with "heredity": "I believe that a quality of Jewishness is present in every word I write. . . . It may be said that this quality . . . is very informal, being transmitted mostly through mother's milk and the habits and talk of the family" (177). What comes through most clearly in this short essay is not only his sense of familial loyalties in private but his allegiance to an elitist-tinged socialism and to cosmopolitan values over and above his ethnicity, equating the latter with conventional notions of identity and narrow bourgeois values:

Jewish life has become, for reasons of security, so solidly, so rigidly, restrictedly and suffocatingly middle-class. . . . No people on earth are more correct, more staid, more provincial, more commonplace, more inexperienced; none observe more strictly the letter of every code that is respectable; no people do so completely and habitually what is expected of them. (178-79)

Greenberg's act of writing frees him from a "suffocatingly middle-class" Jewish identity and enables him to become a member of the cosmopolitan cultural elite. Still, what he most wants to escape is not his ethnicity, but the constraints of a certain U.S. ethnic particularism:

Flight—as well as its converse, pursuit—is of course a great American theme, but the Jewish writer sets himself off by the more concerned and more immediately and materially personal way he treats it. His writing becomes essentially a career which provides him with the means of flight. This writing is my wings away. (178)

In the international world of letters and art criticism, of Anglophone high culture, Greenberg finds a space of flight that is seemingly neutral. What is ironic, though, is that writing and the history of Jewish culture have always been intertwined—most specifically, rabbinic, Eastern European culture, for instance, as well as early-twentieth-century Viennese culture, in which Jews had a strong presence in publishing. While Greenberg doesn't acknowledge the connection between writing and Jewish culture, he does work to salvage the modernist notion of the Jew as outsider and Other. He emphasizes "the Jew's chronic conception of himself as a wanderer even when he has lived in the same place all his life. . . . Centuries of existence as an insecure minority make people conceive of themselves as always coming into the world from outside it" (177). Most significantly, he values what he takes as the Jewish ability to theorize and analyze. Greenberg's valorization of abstraction can also be seen in his 1943 book review of Maurice Samuel's *The World of Sholom Aleichem*, in which he suggests that the tendency to conceptualize, to think abstractly, was a mode of self-protection for the Jew from the excruciating realities of the ghetto. Interestingly, in his 1944 essay, in which he asserts himself in the privileged role of the writer and cosmopolitan firmly removed from life in the ghetto, he sees himself also energized by the powers of abstraction, which he essentializes as a Jewish quality:

There is a Jewish bias towards the abstract, the tendency to conceptualize as much as possible, and there is a certain *Schwärmerei*, a state of perpetual and exalted surprise—sometimes disgust—at the sensuous and sentimental data of existence which others take for granted. (177)

His emphasis on the abstract is significant. It authorizes his assignment of a negative valence to the sensuous and the everyday, and it sets the terms of his construction of oppositions between the categories of the general and the particular, the abstract and the detail.³² Greenberg's hostility toward the incursions into high art of the detail is most fully articulated in his famous 1939 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in which he places the blame on

that thing to which the Germans give the wonderful name of *Kitsch*: popular, commercial art and literature with their chromotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc. etc.³³

Whereas to Greenberg, kitsch seems tied to the constraints of ethnic particularism and the everyday, high art by contrast does not have any identifiable referent, and is thus "valid solely on its own terms" (8). Even though Greenberg's theories of abstract art—in which the decorative or the illustrative have no place—seem on the surface to have nothing to do with the question of cultural identity and sexual, ethnic, and racial difference, their privileging of the abstract as the only authentically avant-garde art worked to ensure the reading of art so it consistently favored the assimilation and integration of mostly New York white male artists such as Jackson Pollock (of Scotch-Irish descent) as well as artists of Eastern European and European Jewish origins (Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko) over and above those nonwhite artists and women artists who did not feel drawn to nonrepresentational art. Thus, implicit in his theory was a certain selective privileging of a particular ethnicity and gender stated in new terms that valorized a nonethnic cosmopolitanism. This position can be seen in his reviews of artwork by nonwhite artists. Writing in 1942, Greenberg claims that Wilfredo Lam's Afro-Cuban work suffers from "a straining after bravura effects, by showy motions, . . . obsessive rhythms, and the inability to be more than decorative."³⁴ On the prints of the Mexican artist José Guadalupe Posada, he concludes: "Posada's art was after all limited in its range. The same points are made again and again. The patterns in which the picture rectangle is organized are unerring yet repetitious."³⁵ And finally, Rufino Tamayo's "error," according to Greenberg, "consists in pursuing expressiveness and emotional emphasis beyond the coherence of style. It has led Tamayo . . . into an academic trap: emotion is not only expressed, it is *illustrated*."³⁶

In some ways his art criticism stands in contrast to his theory that despite its underlying positivism abstract art can be presumed to be egalitarian in the sense that nowhere in his writings does he explicitly condemn women, for instance, as unable to produce anything but inferior works of art because of their gender. Nor does he consider nonwhite artists as incapable of producing "great" art. For Greenberg, just as he was able to escape his "suffocatingly middle-class Jewish identity" by writing art criticism, any artist regardless of ethnicity, gender, and race can aspire to greatness as long as he or she admits to the superiority of abstract art. Greenberg's dogmatism regarding abstract purism is likened to another romantic myth, that of romantic love, in a rather ironic collage made in 1946 by Ad Reinhardt (fig. 1). In this image a young girl helplessly standing on the railroad tracks is equated with "art" and is rescued just in time from "sin, money-grubbing, corruption, inferiority complexes, drink, linguistic stereotypes, prejudice, and banality" by her male suitor and hero who is likened to "abstract art."



Figure 1. Ad Reinhardt, "The Rescue of Art," collage drawing published in *Newsweek*, August 12, 1946. Copyright 1998 Estate of Ad Reinhardt/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

In Greenberg's art critical practice, abstract expressionism becomes a white, ethnic, masculinist aesthetic designed to check the rise of a literal emotionalism or a decorative-ness. Greenberg's emphasis on abstract purity, the sublime, and a timeless and placeless definition of art, at the expense of the illustrative and the everyday, worked to include certain Jewish and Irish male artists, at least in a reshaped intellectual art culture, and left out many others/Others who did not share these aesthetic priorities. It could be argued that the emphasis of modernist art theory on the abstract, despite its claims of neutrality, reasserted the priority of one axis of identity over another, as the very gendered terms of Reinhardt's rescue image suggests. In 1944 if a discourse of modernism provided protection against the charges of being different, the acceptable modernist aesthetic criteria were too prescriptive, rigid, and even alienating to those who were not of European descent, or who could not pass as white or as men. The embrace of high culture in the discourse of universalism by Jewish art and literary critics such as Greenberg can be seen as a critique of narrow nationalist and chauvinist agendas and the conservative traditional bonds of a provincial realist American art and literature. Today, in very changed historical circumstances, many now reject European universalism, since its schema, despite its purported inclusiveness, now seems too parochial.

In the 1970s and 1980s a number of important critiques of modernism appeared by such art critics as Eva Cockcroft, Serge Guilbaut, Max Kozloff, Fred Orton, Griselda Pollock, and David and Cecile Schapiro, among others.³⁷ They took issue with canonical accounts of American art, particularly the understanding of abstract expressionism as epitomizing "alienation," "individualism," and revolutionary avant-gardism. These writers opened up questions that were neglected by an earlier generation of art historians and critics. They examined among other issues the ways that Greenberg, and other intellectuals of his generation, moved from leftist positions associated with Trotskyism in the late 1930s and early 1940s to anti-Communism during the 1950s and after (Guilbaut); the similarities between "American cold war rhetoric" and the way that many abstract expressionists articulated their "individualist" existential experiences (Kozloff); how Greenbergian modernism became institutionalized at the Museum of Modern Art and turned into modernist ideology and dogma (Cockcroft); and the political implications resulting from the transformation of aesthetic modernism from a mere style to a Cold War weapon (Cockcroft).

The work done by Guilbaut, Cockcroft, and others mapped out a critical history of modernism and opened a debate that was instrumental in unraveling a certain Cold War consensus on the arts. In an important way, these critical writings made it no longer acceptable to look at modern art as autonomous or disengaged from the work's conditions of production and reception. As a result of these critics' resistance to modernist dogma, and despite ongoing attempts by neoconservatives to maintain a commitment to a tradition of high art and a purist notion of Western culture, a younger generation of curators, art critics, and historians are not speaking so smugly or unconsciously about an insulated and value-free tradition of "quality art." Although these revisionist critics of the 1970s and 1980s did not concern themselves with questions of multiculturalism, postmodernism, feminism, or queer theory, they nevertheless did help displace the idea of a perfect norm or correct visual standard, and in this way they set the stage for a critical art discourse that

has become more multiple, more complex, and more paradoxical. Since the late 1970s, the detail and the emphasis on the everyday have received a new cultural currency in the arts. I would argue that as a result the range of "imagined communities" in the arts has tremendously expanded. This has not happened by virtue of some essentialist artistic style that particular distinct identities are to embody or emulate, but as a result of the proliferation of critical dialogues across political communities and constituencies. However, this process has not happened smoothly or effortlessly; the complex field of antagonisms brought into play by the multiple discourses of multiculturalism, queer theory, feminist theory, and postmodernism in the arts is indicative of the tensions that have been set in motion.

Despite these changes, some basic assumptions of Greenberg's art criticism continue to reassert themselves today in altered form. This raises questions about why, despite this new range of imagined communities in the arts, there is a perpetuation of an older discourse of modernism that still remains hostile to an art that doesn't meet the required modernist aesthetic norms.³⁸ This older modernist discourse can be seen in the defense's legal strategy behind the obscenity charges brought against Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs exhibited in 1990 at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati. The testimony by curators and art historians in support of Mapplethorpe invoked a traditional system of beliefs and values of older modernist art history and art criticism to defend a so-called radical artist. Though this could be regarded simply as a savvy strategy to win a legal case, the testimony of the defense deserves attention because it demonstrates a popularly held view of contemporary art. Much has been written about the Mapplethorpe case, but surprisingly little has been written about the compromised terms of this supposed "victory."³⁸

Janet Kardon, the organizer of the Mapplethorpe show when she was the director at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia and the defense's first witness, focused her testimony solely on defending the quality of Mapplethorpe's work, stating that it was "good" art with aesthetic value that addresses a universal art audience. For example, in her formalist description of the artist's self-portrait with a bullwhip she recalls the rescue scenario played out in the 1946 Reinhardt collage in her emphasis solely on the abstract quality of the photograph. The twist is that this time it is a female critic and curator saving a male artist:

The human figure is centered. The horizon line is two-thirds of the way up, almost the classical two-thirds to one-third proportions. The way the light is cast so there's light all around the figure. It's very symmetrical which is very characteristic of his flowers."³⁹

Her use of binary logic enables her to push the terms of a formalist analysis to extremes. This same binary thinking is evident in her emphasis on the importance of the liberal aesthetic experience, which she opposes to a "closed" reading of Mapplethorpe's work that would be exclusively content driven. This either-or construction also informs her bizarre formalist analysis of the "action" in Mapplethorpe's photograph *Man in a Polyester Suit*, which she oddly likens to a tennis match: "The action cannot be perceived unless the eye constantly darts in opposite directions as in a tennis match, or, in this instance, between the mundane polyester suit and what outrageously protrudes from its trousers."⁴⁰

Whereas Kardon's construction of Mapplethorpe's photographs sets up an arbitrary schism between so-called content and so-called form, between a multiplicity of readings

and a single correct reading, Robert Sobieszek, then senior curator of the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography, evokes other aspects of Greenbergian modernism. He emphasizes Mapplethorpe's "alienation" and his special access to transcendence and creative subjectivity:

I would say they [the homoerotic photographs] are works of art, knowing they are by Robert Mapplethorpe, knowing his intentions. They reveal in very strong, forceful ways a major concern of a creative artist . . . a troubled portion of his life that he was trying to come to grips with. It's that search for meaning, not unlike Van Gogh's.⁴¹

Through emphasis on Mapplethorpe's "troubled" life, Sobieszek constructs him as the paradigm of the suffering modern artist-genius. However, here the retrieval of Van Gogh in relation to Mapplethorpe and the implication of both genius and madness serve to secure that subjectivity as the revealed meaning of the work of art. At the same time, this reading effectively masks the specificity of that subjectivity (Mapplethorpe's homosexuality) while still alluding to it as pathological or as a mental disorder. Sobieszek, in his attempt to help the defense by countering the charge of "obscenity" with "art," deploys the trope of the artist-genius, close to the way in which Greenberg did almost fifty years earlier. Greenberg had revived the trope of the romantic alienated artist in order to give a new cosmopolitan prestige to American art.

The mythic notion of the artist-genius is a flexible trope. Whereas it enabled Greenberg and Rosenberg as critic-geniuses to sidestep the issue of how it was possible to produce culture in a "cultural vacuum" in the 1940s, here it allows Sobieszek to strategically avoid altogether the more controversial issue of sexuality in relation to Mapplethorpe's work and substitute the more familiar, abstract notion of alienation in its place. In choosing this strategy, Sobieszek ensures that Mapplethorpe's homoeroticism becomes authorized as solely the expression of the creative personality of the artist. Doubtless, had he not been considered a "great" male modernist artist, his homoeroticism would not have been acceptable.

Arguments made by Kardon and Sobieszek enabled the defense to win under the conditions set by the obscenity ruling in *Miller v. California*, since the Mapplethorpe verdict hinged on whether or not his photographs should be considered works of art. Yet despite the contribution of such arguments to the defense's victory, it is important to point out the contradictions and the limitations of a position that salvages Mapplethorpe within the terms of a traditional modernist art history. For, to put emphasis solely on Mapplethorpe as a worthy artist who demonstrates exceptional special individuality also authorizes a homophobia-based view that legitimates homosexuality only for great artists. This is why the power of Jesse Helms's more accessible populist argument against Mapplethorpe, dealing directly with his homosexuality, needs to be reexamined, not only in relation to its obvious puritanism and homophobia, but also for the way it calls into question the elitism of an older discourse of art history. Such a reexamination could provide the beginnings of an effective strategy to counter the force of a Jesse Helms-style antielitism. Andrew Ross's work in *No Respect* and Linda Williams's book on pornography, *Hard Core*, have paved the way with their insistence on the importance of having frank public discussions on many forms of sexuality in culture, including, for Williams,

conversations “beyond the question of whether these texts should exist to a discussion of what it means that they do.”⁴²

The court case around censorship and Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs couches a debate about sexuality and contemporary art in a discourse on modernist aesthetics and the trope of the artist-genius, which vehemently opposes the turns toward disruptive content, especially homosexual content, and toward detail. The art discourse around the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat and his rise as an ’80s “minority” art star is different, since the racial content of his work is only assimilated as “great” art on the basis of its “primitivism,” not on its formal qualities alone. Though Basquiat was accepted within the parameters of modernism, somehow the rules changed; his ethnic and racial identity were *always* structured into the very reception of his art in spite of his presumably abstract idiom. What is new and somewhat awkward in the discourses on Basquiat and Mapplethorpe is the way that certain liberal art curators and critics are following in the footsteps of neoconservatives such as Greenberg in making arguments about aesthetic quality, artistic genius, and the importance of “authentic” cultural styles to defend new artists whose work doesn’t quite fit these older terms.

Aspects of this new alliance can be seen in the early critical art discourse on Basquiat in that he is denied the ability to create truly symbolic art that is not literally about his own life on the streets. Such a notion of abstraction, using terms set by the abstract expressionists, placed Basquiat in an inferior position to white artists (fig. 2). For an artist is not supposed to descend to the level of everyday life and reproduce the filth of life on the streets; as Barnett Newman explains in 1940 in the introduction to the catalog of a show held by Polish artist Teresa Zarnover:

Art must say something. . . . It is this concern with abstract subject matter rather than abstract disciplines that gives her work its strength and its dignity. The truth here is mutually inclusive, for the defense of human dignity is the ultimate subject matter of art. And it is only in its defense that any of us will ever find strength.⁴³

According to Newman, art must convey an abstract thought as its subject matter and narrate something about the dignity, not the debasement, of universal man/woman. The horror of the modern condition could not be described graphically, since that would be too close to not transcending it. In this context one needs to understand why Basquiat would not be considered an acceptable artist, given that the abstract aspect of his work was seen as not removed enough from his own personal circumstances. This lack of critical distance, while intolerable for a white artist, was evidently understood by these critics as the best a black artist could be expected to achieve. It is not surprising that when curators such as Richard Marshall later decided to upgrade Basquiat’s status from a *street artist* to a *great modernist* they used the terms set by the abstract expressionists. This shift in his position entailed segregating him from the host of other black graffiti artists and placing him instead next to Cy Twombly, Jean Dubuffet, Robert Rauschenberg, Jackson Pollock, Pablo Picasso, and African high art and culture.⁴⁴

Despite attempts by Marshall and others, Basquiat’s paintings were mostly seen by art critics and art dealers as about being a poor American minority living on the streets. This is in part why there was such a condescending fascination with his life as a street artist

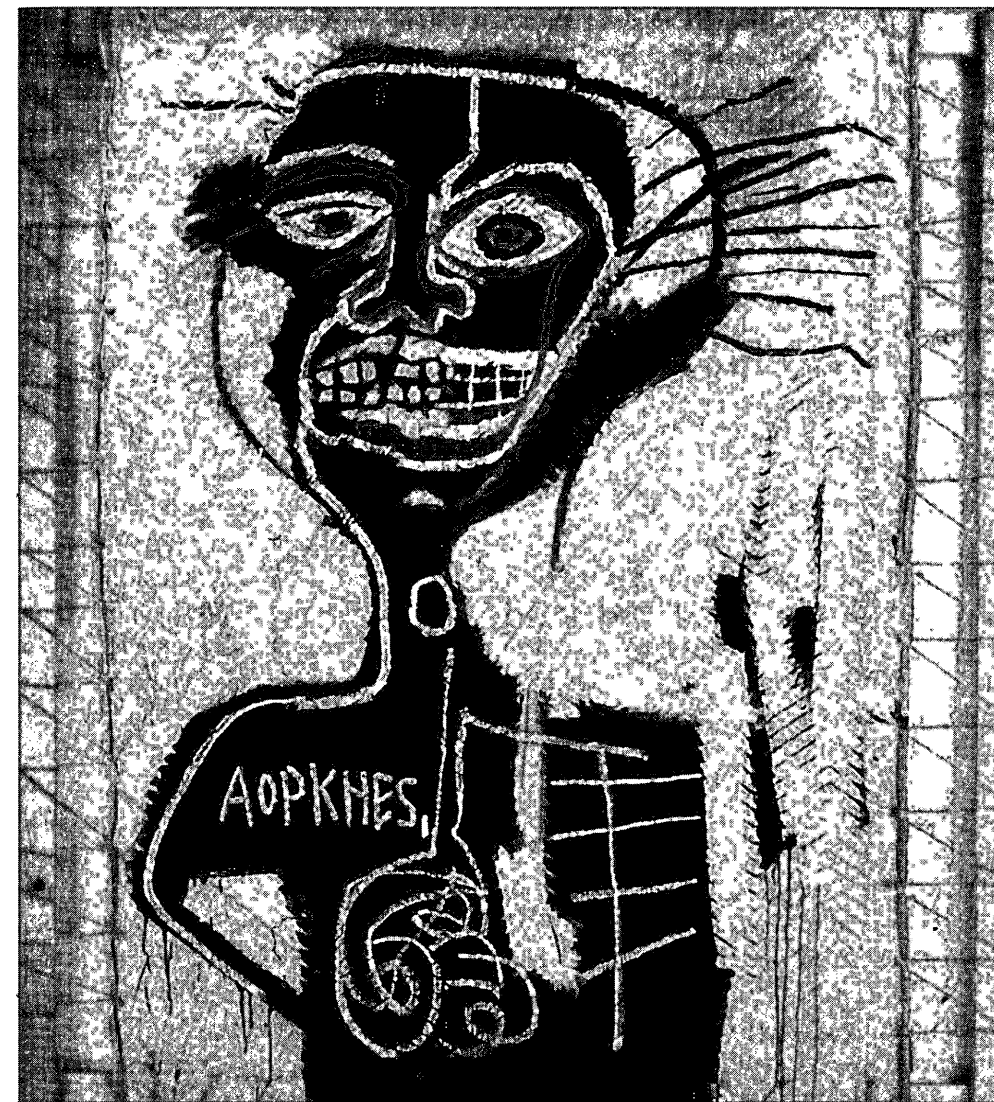


Figure 2. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Cabeza* (1982). Reprinted with permission of the Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York. Copyright 1998 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

making graffiti, presumably outside the realm of “civilized” sensibilities, as, for example, in Rene Ricard’s 1981 essay titled “The Radiant Child.”⁴⁵ This fixation on Basquiat’s street authenticity served to mark him as unmistakably different from white artists. Unlike their treatment of white graffiti artist Keith Haring, critics fabricated a myth about Basquiat’s street origins that ranged from fanciful statements by Rene Ricard, such as, “If Cy Twombly and Jean Dubuffet had a baby and gave it up for adoption, it would be Jean-Michel” to other racist allusions that constructed him as a foundling, such as the comment by Jeffrey Deitch that Basquiat was “the wild boy raised by wolves” and “a freak of nature.”⁴⁶

It is also telling that Basquiat's reputation among white critics suffered when the mystique of his exoticism evaporated. This happened in the mid-1980s when people learned that he was not a poor black ghetto kid but an upper-middle-class, private-school boy of Haitian and Puerto Rican parentage. Though the prices of his paintings dropped, the voyeurism never completely died out. Instead, the interest in his mythical street origins shifted to his paintings. Those works with original graffiti tags, cartoon crowns, and notary seals remained highly desirable collector's items.⁴⁷ So did those in which the methods and materials used reflected the street and its debris, such as Basquiat's paintings on discarded doors or canvases in which the wood support is revealed. Anxieties about Basquiat's loss of authenticity were evident everywhere, but perhaps most acute among his dealers. So concerned was Bruno Bischofberger in 1984 with Basquiat's authenticity that he worried that the artist's use of visual technologies, such as xerography, would in Bischofberger's words "ruin his 'intuitive primitivism.'" ⁴⁸

Even some of the recent writings on Basquiat by the critic Adam Gopnik perpetuate in a somewhat altered form assumptions about the relationship between modernism and the tradition of so-called Others that one can find in the writings of Greenberg from the late 1930s. For example, the presumption of Gopnik's 1992 piece on Basquiat, fittingly titled "Madison Avenue Primitive," is that Basquiat is not an authentic enough black; he doesn't conform to Greenberg's notion that true blacks adore kitsch, as stated in his famous 1938 essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in which he writes that an epidemic of kitsch is responsible for "crowding out and defacing native cultures in one colonial country after another, so that it is now by way of becoming a universal culture."⁴⁹ According to Diana Trilling, in the initial draft of the essay Greenberg wrote: "Unable to resist the oncoming tide of kitsch the first thing these marvelous native tribesmen in Africa and Australia, who do such wonderful abstract work, demand of the explorer is not the works of Picasso but picture postcards, gaudy, horrible."⁵⁰ But the twist here is that Basquiat asks for Picasso *and* picture postcards and doesn't play by the modernist Greenbergian script. So Basquiat "failed" not because he liked kitsch but because he liked modern art over folk art; he is faulted for not conforming to the most available stereotypes concerning blacks. For Gopnik, Basquiat's work is not "an authentic vernacular folk expression" but "ersatz primitivism"—a calculated stylization. He was not "native" enough and therefore couldn't produce what Gopnik wanted: "a genuinely original 'wildstyle.'" ⁵¹

THE FACT AND EFFECT OF AFRICAN AMERICANNES

The more recent writings on Basquiat by Greg Tate and bell hooks present a counter to these earlier discourses. One of the ways this has been done is through the production of a new genre of multicultural art criticism in which contemporary narratives of blacks are now funneled through a newer discourse of the artistic genius. But this approach differs from an earlier one in the sense that it doesn't privilege an older diasporic discourse of the alienated and autonomous artist-intellectual as outsider to the United States in the same way as Greenberg's criticism. The concept of the artist-genius has been an issue long debated by feminist art historians. For example, in her article "Here Today, Gone Tomorrow? Some Plots for a Dismantling," Eunice Lipton observes that "one of the most powerful

ways that art history produces insiders and outsiders is through its notion of 'artist-geniuses.'" ⁵² African American art critics, such as Michele Wallace, frame the discourse of the artist-genius in a way that is both strategic and more institutionally grounded than Greenberg's or Gopnik's by tying the "problem of a white-dominated art world that does not usually conceptualize blacks as visual producers" to the question "Why are there no great black artists?" (a reframing of Linda Nochlin's famous 1971 essay "Why Are There No Great Women Artists?"). ⁵³ This approach represents a significant departure from earlier writing on the arts and is strategic in Gayatri Spivak's sense of "a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest."⁵⁴ The concept of "strategic essentialism" suggests that it is possible to use an older and more conservative discourse of art history, such as a discourse of the artist-genius, in order for black artists to be accepted into the canon of "great art."

Another essentialist strategy is to address how race provides the very conditions that enable and shape creative work. This tactic allows critics such as Wallace, hooks, and Tate to both contest the racism of the New York art world as well as disrupt the way that certain white art gets elevated alone to the realm of "good taste." For Wallace, however, the simple fact of being a person of color isn't in itself definitive, especially if a critic's writing or an artist's work performs the privileges and entitlements afforded by affluent backgrounds and educations at elite universities in Great Britain or the United States. In her eyes such writing or artwork runs the risk of erasing the specificity of blacks' experience in the United States in favor of an abstract postmodern or postcolonial subjectivity:

And yet finally there is only an implied entry way here for the artist or the critic of color who is not a member of a postcolonial intellectual elite, because we who are subject to internal colonization, we who are called "minorities" suffer the problem of the modern and of cultural identity perhaps more than anyone, and the unified, unmarked subject of this and so far most other analyses of the Postmodern, never mind the Modern, continues to render us "invisible" and silent.⁵⁵

Referring to the "new" mutual influence and transformation of Europe and non-European cultures by each other in the New World (America), Wallace concludes: "While the most concrete sign of that something new is generally referred to as Postmodernism, unfortunately this move usually carries along with it the reinscription of Modernism's apartheid."⁵⁶ According to Wallace, the so-called postcolonial elites' distance from or unfamiliarity with U.S. blacks makes them perpetuate a Eurocentric discourse of modernism, a cultural form and category that she sees as aesthetically and materially at odds with U.S. culture, which she in turn sees as rooted in a discourse of black popular culture.

Greg Tate's position further enriches Wallace's, but referring specifically to Basquiat he finds significance in Basquiat's mixture of high and low aesthetic references in his paintings and the important influence of U.S. hip-hop culture (street talk, rap, etc.) in his article "Nobody Loves a Genius Child: Jean-Michel Basquiat, Flyboy in the Buttermilk":

Though we can certainly point to racism for the refusal in certain quarters to consider Basquiat a serious painter, we shouldn't overlook the fact that Basquiat, like Rauschenberg and Warhol, his brothers in canvas-bound iconoclasm, *made paintings that are unrepentantly*

about American culture. There is a strain of Europhilia among our art historians and critics that is as uncomfortable with American artists looking to this culture for subject matter and vernacular as they are with artists holding the celebrity of household names. Looking to the uncertainty and reticence that abounded—and still abounds. . . . it seems that the surest way to be consigned dilettante-hick status, ruining your chances for fawning art historical hagiography, is to act as if you thought the United States was spilling over with the stuff of Art.⁵⁷

Tate's parallel references to Rauschenberg and Warhol, two white artists who fascinated Europeans, suggests that like these artists Basquiat, too, is doing something specifically about American culture, rather than subsuming American materials into European forms, which is what U.S. art criticism has written out of Basquiat's oeuvre. Thus, Tate's observation that some critics' "Europhilia" is to blame for the refusal to consider Basquiat a serious painter is an important insight if one thinks of Gopnik's article and the way he refuses to acknowledge Basquiat's work except as a sign of his failure to be a "real primitive," as evidenced by the title "Madison Avenue Primitive." However, Tate's other assertion that only an insider like himself could understand Basquiat's particular references to black American experience perhaps is not the last word on this question: "If you're Black and historically informed there's no way you can look at Basquiat's work and not get beat up by his obsession with the Black male body's history as property, pulverized meat, and popular entertainment" (238). Here Tate marks a crucial difference—the fact of Basquiat's African Americanness and his use of popular culture—but the way he does it also perhaps runs the risk of overstating the case by simplifying Basquiat's complex identities and his intellectual influences.

For other writers such as bell hooks with other strategies in mind, Basquiat's mixed cultural background may lead to other tactical considerations:

Basquiat's work holds no warm welcome for those who approach it with a narrow Eurocentric gaze. . . . That gaze which can value him only if he can be seen as part of a continuum of contemporary American art with a genealogy traced through white males. . . . Even when Basquiat can be placed stylistically in the exclusive, white male art club that denies entry to most black artists, his subject matter—his content—always separates him once again, and defamiliarizes him. . . .

Basquiat was in no way secretive about the fact that he was influenced and inspired by the work of white artists. It is the multiple other sources of inspiration and influence that are submerged, lost, when critics are obsessed with seeing him as solely connected to a white Western artistic continuum.⁵⁸

Hooks grapples with the homogeneous representations of the black male body in the United States, the black body that is commodified and appropriated. The colonization and anguish of such a body and mind are understandably anything but exotic to hooks. Yet how close did Basquiat adhere to either Tate's or hooks's conception of him and his work? In accepting the terms—form is "European and white" (high art) and content is "American and black" (popular culture)—both of these critics inadvertently perhaps overlook the diversity of the black diasporic community in the United States out of which

Basquiat came. For example, to what degree could Basquiat be considered a Caribbean or even a Latino artist? What would happen to our understanding of Basquiat's work if it were read in terms of the diversity of these communities rather simply in terms of a putative blackness? I'm not arguing for either position but, rather, for the fact that any racial category will be marked by diversity and overlap with other categories because race, like ethnicity, is a multiple construct and a social product. This is why earlier I put the ethnic designation *jewish* in lowercase throughout to signal a shifting set of historically diverse experiences rather than a unified and monolithic notion of Jewishness.

It is significant, then, that my discussion here has begun with a critique of Clement Greenberg as a way to historicize the emergence of the New York School's critical hegemony and its transnational Jewish history in order to highlight how the most well-known formalist aesthetic positions themselves are inescapably imbricated by a complex politics of identity. I then argue how the aura of high art and the myth of the artist-genius remain in certain circles and are used to posit either a development that erases one's cultural past (Greenberg) or one's sexual persuasion (Mapplethorpe), but never seemingly one's race (Basquiat). In a similar way to how conservatives make blacks, Latinos, women, and so forth prisoners of their race, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality, a U.S. discourse of formalist art criticism makes race and Americanness the most limiting of subject positions to occupy, in contrast to what Tate, hooks, and Wallace would argue.

At the same time that I argue how the fact and effect of race and ethnicity have been at the heart of U.S. modernism all along, I also take issue with ways of seeing black and Jewish identities that underestimate the differences and hybridities among these groups. A rethinking of the tropes of art history and criticism is indeed long overdue. Yet it is also important that such new writing—in its attempt to diversify its practices by including a more heterogeneous group of artists—also deals more openly with the differences of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and nation rather than presuming "natural" similarities in order to ensure that the essentialisms we seek to disempower in the dominant discourse of art history will not be reproduced in its critique. In the late 1990s, despite the numerous conservative backlashes in the arts, it is important to acknowledge the ways that cultural and political dialogues in the arts are taking place across different immigrant art communities, in the ongoing work to transform the way the discipline of art history is taught.

NOTES

An earlier version of this article was published in *Socialist Review* 94, nos. 1–2 (1995): 129–64, a special double issue titled "Arranging Identities." Note that the conclusion has been substantially altered from the earlier published version thanks to the perceptive criticism I received from an anonymous reader of this anthology's manuscript. I am greatly indebted to Stanford University's Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship Program and Brown University's Pembroke Center for Women for providing me with the space and time to formulate my ideas on this topic. I especially want to thank Linda Brodkey, David Halperin, Francette Pacteau, Lydia Matthews, Alex Nemerov, Robert Jensen, Dan Selden, and David Trend for pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of my argument; Max Kozloff and Peter Selz for allowing me to interview them, and for sharing some of their insights on this topic; my graduate students in my fall 1993 visual culture seminar at Stanford, especially Evelyn Hankins; and Bradford Collins for

sending me the English translation of his article "Le pessimisme politique et 'la haine de soi' Juive: Les origines de l'esthétique puriste de Greenberg" (Political pessimism, Jewish "self-hatred" and the "dreams of universalism": The origins of Greenberg's purist aesthetics, c. 1930-1940), which appeared in *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne* (Fall/Winter 1993): 61-83. Finally, I owe special thanks to Roddey Reid and Elissa Weintraub for reading the manuscript several times and giving me thoughtful and thorough advice, criticism, and editorial assistance.

This article is part of a larger book project that I am currently working on titled *Ghosts of Ethnicity: Rethinking Ethnicity and Feminist Art Practices in the United States*, which considers my thesis in relation to other historical periods besides the '40s and '80s as well as gives more detail to my arguments on the periods discussed. In my book I further investigate how terms such as *internationalism*, *universalism*, and *globalism* evolved in a U.S. context. I discuss the different applications of these terms in relation to Jewish and non-Jewish identities and how they were attached to both high and so-called low art forms as disparate as abstract expressionist painting, photojournalism, and feminist installation art, among other cultural forms. Sections from the book soon to be available in published form include "Ethnic Notions and Feminist Strategies of the 1970s: Some Work by Judy Chicago and Eleanor Antin," in *Jewish Identity in Art History: Ethnicity and Discourse*, ed. Catherine Soussloff (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999); "Contests for Meaning in Body Politics and Feminist Art Discourses of the 1970s: The Work of Eleanor Antin," in *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*, ed. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (London: Routledge, 1999); and Lisa E. Bloom, "Rewriting the Script: Eleanor Antin's Feminist Art," in *Eleanor Antin*, ed. Howard Fox (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum, 1999).

1. I have put the ethnic designation *Jewish* in lowercase throughout to emphasize that *Jewishness* can also stand for a cultural identity rather than only a strictly defined religious one, and to signal a shifting set of historically diverse experiences rather than a unified and monolithic notion of Jewishness.

2. Clement Greenberg, "The Jewish Dickens: Review of *The World of Sholom Aleichem* by Maurice Samuel," *Nation*, October 16, 1943. Reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 158 (hereafter abbreviated as *Collected Essays*).

3. For more on the stereotype of Jewish deviousness, see Sander Gilman, "The Jewish Voice: Chicken Soup or the Penalties of Sounding Too Jewish," in *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 10-37.

4. Greenberg, "The Jewish Dickens," 156.

5. Ella Shohat, "Ethnicities in Relation: Toward a Multicultural Reading of American Cinema," in *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, ed. Lester D. Friedman (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 216.

6. For other recent examples of this new scholarship that became available after this article was published in *Socialist Review*, see Linda Nochlin and Tamar Garb, eds., *The Jew in the Text: Modernity and the Construction of Identity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995); and Margaret Olin, "[C]lement [Greenberg] and Company: Formal Criticism and Jewish Identity," in *Too Jewish: Challenging Traditional Identities*, ed. Norman Kleeblatt (New York: Jewish Museum and Rutgers University Press, 1996), 39-59.

7. Irit Rogoff, "The Empire of Art: Ana Mendieta," unpublished paper, 1992, 1.

8. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 16, 14.

9. Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 1.

10. Edward Alden Jewell, "'Globalism' Pops into View," *New York Times*, June 13, 1943, 9.

11. Guilbaut, *How New York Stole*, 222 n. 81 (my emphasis). According to Guilbaut, this quotation originally appeared in a letter sent to the papers by the federation on the occasion of another show at the Wildenstein Gallery, June 2-26, 1943.

12. Greenberg started by valorizing the work of single artists beginning with Jackson Pollock in 1943,

whom he wrote about six times through 1948. He followed with David Smith, Willem de Kooning, Hans Hofmann, Robert Motherwell, William Bazotes, Adolph Gottlieb, Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman.

13. Clement Greenberg, "The Situation at the Moment," *Partisan Review* 5 (January 1948). Reprinted in *Collected Essays*, vol. 2, 193 (my emphasis).

14. For an extended discussion of the connection between Rosenberg and existentialist thought, see Erica Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 378-87.

15. Harold Rosenberg, Maeght show catalog, cited in *Possibilities* 1 (Winter 1947-48): 75. Reprinted in Guilbaut, *How New York Stole*, 159 (my emphasis).

16. Reprinted in *Collected Essays*, vol. 2, 133-34. Originally appeared as "Review of Exhibitions of the Jane Street Group and Rufino Tamayo," *Nation*, March 8, 1947.

17. Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *Art News* (December 1952): 23.

18. The study of worker narratives of a native U.S. culture was taken on by Farm Security Administration photographers James Agee and Walker Evans in their *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White's *You Have Seen Their Faces: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (New York: Modern Age Books, 1937), and Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* (New York: Viking, 1941), among others.

19. Meyer Schapiro is acknowledged by Lynd Ward as contributing part of the material contained in the paper. Lynd Ward, "Race, Nationality, and Art," *Art Front* 2 (March 1936). Reprinted in *Artists against War and Fascism: Papers of the First American Artists' Congress*, ed. Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press), 119-20. For further historical information regarding this period see Matthew Baigell's chronology of the lives and careers of Jewish American artists in New York City in his essay "From Hester Street to Fifty-Seventh Street: Jewish American Artists in New York," in *Painting a Place in America: Jewish Artists in New York 1900-1945*, ed. Norman L. Kleeblatt and Susan Chevlowe (New York: Jewish Museum, 1991), 28-88. For an extended discussion on Meyer and Schapiro and the Popular Front, see Patricia Hill, "1936: Meyer Schapiro, *Art Front*, and the Popular Front," *Oxford Art Journal* 17, no. 1 (1994): 30-41.

20. Thomas Craven, *Modern Art* (Garden City, N.Y.: Halcyon House, 1934), 312.

21. I am currently working on a chapter for my forthcoming book *Ghosts of Ethnicity* that further examines the complex stakes in the shift to modern art in the 1940s. I focus on how this change had a tantalizing relationship with right-wing U.S. cultural nationalism, anti-Semitism, and a form of virile white masculinity of the 1930s, as it was expressed in the writings of Craven and the work of the artist most promoted by Craven, Thomas Benton.

22. Stephanie Barron, ed., *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (New York: Abrams, 1991). Modern art was not directly equated with Jewishness, but this was implied when it was connected with Bolshevism in 1921. When the Metropolitan Museum reluctantly recognized modern art, a group of anonymous supporters of the museum issued "A Protest against the Present Exhibition of Degenerate 'Modernistic' Works in the Metropolitan Museum." See Edward Abrams, *The Lyrical Left: Randolph Bourne, Alfred Stieglitz and the Origins of Cultural Radicalism in America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1986), 169.

23. Adolph S. Oko, ed., "Under Forty: A Symposium on American Literature and the Younger Generation of American Jews," *Contemporary Jewish Record* 7, no. 1 (February 1944): 3.

24. Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 401-2.

25. Victor Burgin, "Modernism in the Work of Art," *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Post-modernity* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1986), 1-28. See the following articles in Francis Frascina, ed., *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985); Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, "Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed," 167-84; Serge Guilbaut, "The

New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America," 153-66; T. J. Clark, "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art," 47-64; Michael Fried, "How Modernism Works: A Response to T. J. Clark," 65-80; Max Kozloff, "American Painting during the Cold War," 107-24; Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War," 125-34; David and Cecile Schapiro, "Abstract Expressionism: The Politics of Apolitical Painting," 135-52. See also Barbara M. Reise, "Greenberg and the Group: A Retrospective View" (originally published in *Studio International* 175, no. 901 [May 1968]: 254-57 [part 1] and 175, no. 902 [June 1968]: 314-16 [part 2]; reprinted *Art in Modern Culture*, ed. Francis Frascina and Jonathon Harris [New York: HarperCollins, 1992], 252-63); Kay Larson, "The Dictatorship of Clement Greenberg," *Artforum* 25 (Summer 1987): 75-79; Saul Ostrow, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch, Fifty Years Later: A Conversation with Clement Greenberg," *Arts Magazine* (December 1989): 56-64.

26. Max Kozloff, "Jewish Art and the Modernist Jeopardy," *Artforum* 14, no. 8 (April 1976): 44. Thanks to Max Kozloff for giving me the reference to this intriguing article.

27. Kleeblatt and Chevlowe's *Painting a Place in America* includes the following articles: Baigell, "From Hester Street to Fifty-Seventh Street," 28-88; Milton Brown, "An Explosion of Creativity: Jews and American Art in the Twentieth Century," 22-27; Norman L. Kleeblatt and Susan Chevlowe, "Painting a Place in America," 89-149. See also Sidney Tillim, "Criticism and Culture: Greenberg's Doubt," *Art in America* (May 1987): 122-27, 201. Kenneth E. Silver and Romy Golan, *The Circle of Montparnasse: Jewish Artists in Paris 1905-1945* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1985) includes the following articles: Kenneth E. Silver, "The Circle of Montparnasse: Jewish Artists in Paris 1905-1945," 12-59; and Romy Golan, "The *Ecole Française* vs. the *Ecole de Paris*: The Debate about the Status of Jewish Artists in Paris between the Wars," 80-87. See also Susan Noyes Platt, "Clement Greenberg in the 1930s: A New Perspective on His Criticism," *Art Criticism* 5, no. 3 (1991): 47-64; Bradford Collins, "Le Pessimisme Politique et 'La Haine de soi' Juive: Les origines de l'esthétique puriste de Greenberg" (Political pessimism, Jewish "self-hatred" and the "Dreams of Universalism": The Origins of Greenberg's Purist Aesthetics, c. 1930-1940), *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne* (Fall/Winter 1993): 61-83. I am grateful to Bradford Collins for sending me a copy of the English translation. His excellent article gave me the foundational history that I needed to build my own argument. For discussion of the *Partisan Review*, see Terry A. Cooney, *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals: Partisan Review and Its Circle, 1934-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 229-45; Alan M. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 27-50.

28. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Joseph V. Harari (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), 27-50.

29. Reprinted in John O'Brian, "Introduction," in *Collected Essays*, vol. 1, xix-xx.

30. Clement Greenberg, "Self-Hatred and Jewish Chauvinism: Some Reflections on 'Positive Jewishness,'" *Commentary* (November 1950). Reprinted in *Collected Essays*, vol. 3, 45.

31. *Collected Essays*, vol. 3, 176.

32. Robert Jensen has rightly pointed out to me how derivative Greenberg's ideas were concerning his critique of the illustration and the detail. However, since I am not concerned in this essay with authorship but discourse analysis, Greenberg's lack of originality doesn't weaken my argument critiquing his social and cultural assumptions.

33. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* (Fall 1939). Reprinted in *Collected Essays*, vol. 1, 11.

34. Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions of Corot, Cézanne, Eilshemius, and Wilfredo Lam," *Nation* 12 (December 1942). Reprinted in *Collected Essays*, vol. 1, 131.

35. Greenberg, "Review of an Exhibition of José Guadalupe Posada," *Nation* 30 (September 1944). Reprinted in *Collected Essays*, vol. 1, 232.

36. Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions of the Jane Street Group and Rufino Tamayo," *Nation* 8 (March 1947). Reprinted in *Collected Essays*, vol. 2, 133.

37. See the following articles: Max Kozloff, "American Painting during the Cold War"; Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism, Weapon of the Cold War"; David and Cecile Shapiro, "Abstract Expressionism: The Politics of Apolitical Painting"; Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, "Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed"; Serge Guilbaut, "The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America." All appear in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Frascina (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 107-84.

38. The exceptions include Douglas Crimp, "Introduction: Photographs at the End of Modernism," in *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 2-31; Peggy Phelan, "Censorship," talk delivered to University of California, Davis, art department, Spring 1994.

39. Quoted in Jayne Merkel, "Art on Trial: Report from Cincinnati," *Art in America* (December 1990): 47.

40. Janet Kardon, "The Perfect Moment," in *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment*, ed. Janet Kardon (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1988), 11. Though I do not address the complex question of Mapplethorpe's images of the black male nude as a racialized object of desire, this has been an important part of the discussion around his work, including the following: Kobena Mercer, "Imaging the Black Man's Sex," in *Photography/Politics: Two*, ed. Pat Holland, Jo Spence, and Simon Watney (London: Comedia Publications Group, 1986); Kobena Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary," in *How Do I Look: Queer Film and Video* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 168-222; and Jane Gaines, "Competing Glances: Who Is Reading Robert Mapplethorpe's *Black Book*?" *New Formations* 16 (Spring 1992): 24-39.

41. Quoted in Markel, "Art on Trial," 47.

42. Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 8.

43. John P. O'Neill, ed., *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 105.

44. Richard Marshall, "Repelling Ghosts," in *Jean-Michel Basquiat* (New York: Whitney Museum, 1993), 15-27. Thanks to Robert Jensen for remarking on this important distinction.

45. Rene Ricard, "The Radiant Child," *Artforum* 20 (December 1981): 35-43.

46. *Ibid.*, 35; Jeffrey Deitch, *Flash Art* 16 (May 1982): 50.

47. David D'Arcy, "Basquiat Case," *Vanity Fair*, November 1992, 124-46.

48. Quoted in *The Andy Warhol Diaries*, ed. Pat Hackett (New York: Warner Books, 1989).

49. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 13-14.

50. Diana Trilling, "Interview with Dwight Macdonald," *Partisan Review* (1985): 806.

51. Adam Gopnik, "Madison Avenue Primitive," *New Yorker*, November 9, 1992, 38.

52. Eunice Lipton, "Here Today, Gone Tomorrow? Some Plots for a Dismantling," in *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, 1990).

53. Michele Wallace, "Afterword: Why Are There No Great Black Artists? The Problem of Visuality in African-American Culture," in *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992). Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 145-78.

54. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *Other Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 205.

55. Michele Wallace, "Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 48.

56. *Ibid.*, 49.

57. Greg Tate, "Nobody Loves a Genius Child: Jean-Michel Basquiat, Flyboy in the Buttermilk," in his *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 241 (emphasis mine).

58. bell hooks, "Altars of Sacrifice: Re-membering Basquiat," *Art in America*, June 1993, 70.