

Chapter 3

Jean–Michel Basquiat and Black Value

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how Western knowledge systems justify the devaluation of Blackness and Black art, particularly in relation to Black modern aesthetics. Jean-Michel Basquiat becomes relevant here as his work offers a decolonial critique of this devaluation. Basquiat's art shows that value is not meaningless but is instead a crucial part of Black life. This chapter addresses questions such as: What does it mean for those who are devalued to value themselves? How do they create value through their art despite being devalued? Basquiat's work presents a paradox of value, and this chapter encourages reflection on how his critique and creation of value represent a new beginning for Black value.

INTRODUCTION TO BLACK VALUE

The question of value needs a serious form of thought. Value is not something that is given out there. It is something that is created. There are different conceptions of value, but from where I come from, I will not be looking at value as a commodified fashion. I am also not invested in valuing it as a Westernised European invention that is only valuable to itself. I am not interested in defining this value that devalues other values either. What I am preoccupied with within this chapter is the question of value in the zone of non-being as a theoretical treatment of value in blackness. Black value. The value of blackness. The value in blackness. Where thinking about black value while located in the position of non-value is a scandalous thing that needs some serious meditation, not so much on its illegality and impossibility but also on its meaning. The meaning of the absent value is being created. *What is value if it has to be thought of at the level of the skin colour, or better yet, on the level of the colour line?* That it has something to do with the colour line because it must define

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existence (subjectivity, being, knowledge, the creativity of black people) must be understood. *What about those below the colour line who, by being black, do not possess value?* In a sense, the construction of this value that defines the colour line is founded upon the absence of their value. This question presents a paradox because *How does something come out of nothing?* This question is indeed scandalous if one thinks about those in blackness as non-humans because the colour line devalues their existence. If a value has to do with the definition, recognition, and relations of the human subject, it must be held accountable and scrutinised. Value on its own is not a given. What is at stake is scrutinising the meaning of value concerning the ontological position and being of the black colonised subject. Value is colonial.

The coloniality of value is the outcome of this ontological absurdity the black subject is born into, and more specifically in the sexist/racist modern/colonial anti-black world of the empire – with its post-colonial frameworks not decolonising it. This logic is foregrounded upon the dehumanisation of non-Europeans – the blackened people across the globalising world suffering due to whiteness. Blackness is not a zone of suffering on its own; it is at the benefit of whiteness. Whiteness has a value at the cost of blackness. Thus, the politics of whiteness and value embodies the logic of devaluing; hence, they cannot be understood alone. Whiteness is value, a value about the values of other things in the global modern/colonial world, and the value that grants value is value in its sake and for its own sake. Value, therefore, is human because to be white is to be human. This is because the white value defines itself from the limits of blackness, continuing to do this through coloniality of knowledge, coloniality of being, and coloniality of power.

Without value, the black subject becomes flesh. It keeps the biological appearance but loses ontological appearance. The flesh then becomes only flesh. Flesh that possesses no right to own or do anything valuable. The flesh of the black subject precedes its being and its biological attributes. Its body collapses. The collapse of the body becomes the ontological devaluing of the black subject and its ways of thinking, doing, and living to the point of constituting the category of the poor. The poor are those who do not have. They do not have many things that the privileged have. This does not imply that the poor are normally referred to in opposition to the wealthy. That would be simple. However, in politicised and weaponised English, this poor is the one that is used with privilege. Privilege because in the modern/colonial anti-black world, all human beings are equal, biologically equal. They eat, drink, sleep, cry, laugh, and play. They all enjoy life. Or, at least, all human beings are supposed to enjoy life. In a precolonial world, value meant a different thing than the conception of value in the modern/colonial world. If to be a black subject is to lack value as the embodiment of flesh, this is also to signify the body positioned outside the Euro-North-American logic, sensibilities of aesthetics, economy, language at best and at worst outside the world. The anti-black world. The black subject has

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