

The Codex of Basquiat *Equals Pi*

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Equals π

1:

The three of us paddle in our kayaks to Pungume Island. Before the third morning, the future separates into sea and sky. In the fractured extension of broken time, everything depends on how you interpret it, just as a prayer is more than the order of its words. Take that corner of the sky —

notice how the brightness of a gleaming sun retreats from the world? The journey picks us up in Stone Town where all our food and drinks are catered. A lone fisherman beckons us to the far side of the beach. In the brief history of his silence, we set up camp for the night as the fisherman

tends to a fire under the baobab trees. I fall asleep to the flame. What if the spaces we use for testimony are equal to π ? Here is a burning bush. Moses was a fugitive who saw the whole of Egypt's harvest destroyed. He stood against a troop of magicians and had to believe that the God

2:

who called to him from the flames of a burning thicket would terraform his reality. In the brief history of this other silence, he was talking to God, in the same way I'm talking to you. What theatre, to catch God mid-sentence. I wonder if he stresses his Ts? I wonder if when Kanye burns

his childhood home to rubble on stage if he is really drawing a line, a parallel to a burnt city which equals π . What if the burning bush was God's cover blown? Or what if the flames were God's primer and the flames' crackle a soundscape he embodied while he awaits another voice? The kind

of voice you might hear coming out of the drum kit of Max Roach while recording *Money Jungle* in the now. By now I mean, today is equal to π . The pistol of a dead man is equal to π . The year 1976 is equal to π . Entebbe airport with its floor on fire is equal to π .

3:

The opening scene of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* will, if you allow it, have you standing on the sofa's edge for ninety minutes. The dance your heart makes in the closing credits is equal to π . So are the number of times you watch it again as if for the first time.

The world trying to reset itself is equal to π . As is the burden that arouses men to labour. That too is equal to π . Do you notice a pattern? Ok! Don't focus on the spine but on what it holds up. The Future is an eroding witness, and she will tell you that war is not

about protecting the border but about how much blood was spilt within it. Tragedy belongs to such whispers. The bodies of your friends in a morgue are equal to π and whatever flame is burning. Fame in a world like this is worthless — that too equals π .

*My country is a woman in heat,
a bridge of lusts. Mercenaries cross her,
applauded by the massing sands.*

— Adonis

The Codex of Basquiat: *Equals Pi*.

The secret ambition of all lyric poetry is to stop time.

Charles Simic, *The World Doesn't End*

In this chapter, I look at my poem *Equals Pi* (page 4) alongside Basquiat's corresponding painting of the same name and how they both use time and temporality. This universal constant acts as an important sinew that runs through the collection. Time shapes our lives and the way Basquiat constructs his canvases with symbols and iconography. Professor of Philosophy Richard McKeon states;

Time and temporality "is a formula to designate time in its circumstances, substantive and cognitive, and it may be used as a device by which to develop and examine the variety of circumstances in which "time" acquires its variety of meanings in the context of a variety of problems, philosophical in nature but with consequences detectable and traceable in history, science, art, and social and cultural structures. It is a device which the ancients called a "commonplace" or "topic" and used to discover arguments and relations among ideas and arguments. (McKeon, "Time and Temporality," 123.)

The iconography of Basquiat's life started at only age seventeen when he and his friend Al Diaz created the fictional character, SAMO© (Same Old Shit) to tag the streets of downtown New York. Despite Basquiat's acclaim, America still has no public monument to him or institution in his name. None of his SAMO© graffiti has been preserved. Black cultures suffer from what Orlando Patterson called "an absence of ruins" (Dawson 60). Basquiat's painting *Equals Pi* is an attempt to find symbols of consistency, ranging from mathematical equations, to money markets or the Amorite people (a semitic-speaking people of highland mountaineers of great stature from Levant and founders of the fourteenth-century dynasty of Egypt). This also includes Basquiat's **three-point crown** as a way to depict important Black people he admired as kings. Some examples of peerage are **Duke Ellington**, **Count Basie**, **Nat King Cole**, **Lady Day aka Billie Holliday** and **Miles Davis** aka the Prince of Darkness (see Saggese, *Reading* 55). It also spoke to his ambition to master his craft. It was also a call to arms for artists to perceive themselves as kings. Notice how in *Equals Pi* (1982) the equation containing *pi* sits under a dunce cap and takes one-third of the canvas (figure 1). The knowledge of a cone is about the dissemination of knowledge. The acquiring of more knowledge in history, myth and art provides stability. In my poem "Equals *pi*" (page 4), time is elastic and the poet moves fluidly through it. This effect conflates the narratology for the readers. Within the poem I give varied examples of Black emotional experience and use *pi* as a throughline of consistency. This consistency in the canvas is conveyed by the use of Tiffany Blue.

Basquiat chose symbols to be part of his oeuvre that are able to grab our attention, ones that can simplify complex ideas quickly. They are open to interpretation and can transcend language and cultural barriers; most importantly, they transcend time. Basquiat explored both content

and form but was not perceived as an intellectual or conceptual artist despite his ability to assemble and disassemble language to reveal new meaning and simultaneously fusing this new language with gesture. Academic Jordana Moore Saggese identified that we must avoid positioning Basquiat within a historical tradition of either European, American, or African American art, but consider his negotiation of these cultural perspectives simultaneously. Critic Thomas McEvilley claims that “Basquiat collapsed the distance between the colonizer and the colonized, embodying both at once. ‘He walks with two worlds inside him.’ Basquiat is a documentarian” (Saggese, *Basquiat Reader* 173). In the words of activist Bell Hooks, “to see and understand these paintings, one must be willing to accept the tragic dimensions of Black life”. As Michael Holman, Basquiat’s Gray band member and friend informs us, “Basquiat wanted to – fuck with people’s perception of what he is doing [...] as a Black artist” (Saggese, *Reading* 150).

Basquiat was most useful to me, as he uses different modalities of time not only within a single canvas but also across canvasses in diptychs, triptychs and whole bodies of work. His works are always in conversation with each other and with the audience. Time, unlike history, cannot be altered or erased. Basquiat used time to explain the continual sequence of existence and events that occur in a Black life. Basquiat came from everywhere at once as a Black-Hispanic, Puerto Rican, and Haitian American who entered the creative field as a poet. As a self-taught artist who drew upon a wide range of influences – established painters, eclectic cultural references, music and literature – he synthesized ideas onto his canvases to form “brilliantly controlled pseudogibberish” (Mayer 53). Keith Haring a contemporary of Basquiat’s used the term “pseudogibberish” in an interview for the January 1983 issue of *Artforum*. In the interview, he discussed his art and the ways he communicated through it, sometimes using this term to describe his unique visual language. Haring’s work often featured enigmatic symbols and figures, creating a sense of universal communication through seemingly nonsensical yet impactful imagery.

This pseudogibberish was a metamorphosis of Basquiat’s earlier SAMO@ street poetry and an active ingredient of the exploded collage. It provides his pictures with an added emotional charge. With his seemingly nonsensical use of language, symbols, numbers and images were in fact a code for those willing to engage. Basquiat rejected a singular Eurocentric view of history to engage instead with Africa, a place he had only ever been once. In 1988, months before he died, he held an exhibition in the **Ivory Coast**. Basquiat adopted a cultural memory because to Basquiat European and African art histories held equal importance. Cultural memory is a trait of diasporic communities associated with the sense of double consciousness that Du Bois speaks of when he referred to a source of inward “twoness” putatively experienced by African Americans. Though Basquiat is catalogued as a Neo-Expressionist or Expressionist artist, he was spurned early on by art critics such as Douglas Crimp, who dismissed Expressionism in favour of Conceptual art.

Critics wrongly pigeonholed his work as graffiti instead of public poetry, philosophy and a manifesto offered in opposition to the views of the elite art establishment. Keith Haring said Basquiat, “used words like paint” (234). To Basquiat words and paint were interchangeable and served as vehicles of knowledge transfer. Paint has four major ingredients, pigment, binder, solvent, and additives. The ratio of these ingredients determines the desired physical characteristics the paint will display and offers the painter a myriad of ways to disclose the image to the viewer. He often used the painting technique of sgraffito scratching through a layer of paint to expose the undercoat to superimpose signs, xerox photocopies or phrases.

Basquiat’s curiosity with language never abated till his death. His combining, erasing and cutting poetic language made him an alchemist, much like the griot EXU, also known as the orisha deity Esù-Elégbára. This messenger trickster god stands at all intersections/liminal spaces to mediate between humans and gods. **Basquiat’s** final painting *Exu* (1988) was a proxy for Basquiat a man at the crossroads or intersection of several worlds. In this final self-portrait Basquiat styled himself as a gatekeeper at the crossroads of life and death, the physical and metaphysical. Both Exu and Basquiat share the traits of being tricksters, playful, childish-natured, multidimensional, and multi-conscious. For the griot Basquiat, the canvas was his crossroads where the ancient and modern were a spectrum that could be creolized, appropriated and reinterpreted. Being at the crossroads of several cultures simultaneously allowed him to complicate and move beyond the Western visual tradition by embracing language, painting, music etc. He reframes art history to construct his own self and, most importantly, to traverse time and space.

I agree with curator Dieter Buchhart’s (Saggese, *The Jean-Michel Basquiat Reader* 175). view that Basquiat was neither a Neo-Expressionist nor an Expressionist artist but rather a conceptual intellectual who in his paintings uses time as the tenor to deliver his Afrosurrealist experience and communicate his ideas. They work like Einstein’s field equations on general relativity, from which our understanding of time and causality, black holes and the accelerated expansion of the universe come. It combines space and time into a single entity, “spacetime”, to provide an accurate description of the causal structure of the universe. This complex equation of general relativity is, with only five symbols, deceptively simple. Basquiat also has only a few key symbols that act as the vehicle to the tenor of time in his work, which include masks, the copyright symbol, **SAMO©**, Ishtar, **skulls**, **the dinosaur Pez dispenser**, **the warrior**, **the griot**, the **three-point crown**, three vertical lines, and, of course, **text**. These symbols act as time signatures that I have coined as ‘Basquiat time’. Basquiat uses time because it can measure change be it a change of season, cyclical movements, a star’s alignment, or a change of thought. Time is present in everything; it weaves into our lives and allows us to do what Basquiat is best at: telling stories.

Basquiat’s layering of time is similar to the late hip-hop DJ and producer J Dilla’s “Dilla Time” (a method he used to avoid making the samples too metrical and robotic sounding). Basquiat similarly destabilizes the viewer’s expectations. On his canvases, nothing is where we expect it to be. In his painting *Moses and the Egyptians* (1982), which depicts the stone tablets handed to Moses in striking pink paint. At the centre there is the side profile of a head (a reflection of Moses bouncing off the shiny tablets).

Basquiat wants you-the-viewer on Mount Sinai (geological time places us in nature), not as a voyeur but as the embodiment of Moses seeing your reflection on the stone tablets. He also wants you to be aware of Egypt in the background – a place of great wealth and beauty that has been your home but has had you in bondage (historical time is a factual event experienced by people, e.g. the Israelites). Basquiat connects America to ancient Egypt through the all-seeing eye (mythical time is a witnessing of fantastical elements). Both nations try to imitate the true eye of God. This unquantized canvas moves us effortlessly across time while we as viewers are in real time (our presence in front of the painting).

I used my ekphrastic response to Basquiat's painting *Equals Pi* (originally titled *Knowledge of a Cone* when it appeared in the March 1983 issue of *GQ* magazine) and the mathematical equation as a way to mark time in an unquantized manner. The painting has many of Basquiat's motifs (or, as I see them, time signatures), including several crown motifs, a head, coded text (AMORITE, TEN YEN and DUNCE) and an equation featuring pi to the right of the painting. It is accented by an egg-blue background. I fused the hijacking (Entebbe time) with the contemporary relationship of myself the poet with Black Icarus and a resurrected Basquiat (mythical time). The Greek letter *pi* also expresses a ratio between a circle's diameter and its circumference. I wanted to explore the equation of my life in historical time, mythical time and spiritual time in the hope of placing my myth into modern society. Myths in the past were used to explain the world when we did not have scientific explanations for the phenomena around us. Myth in that sense was the forerunner of science. I, however, wanted to run myth and science in parallel within the context of Ugandan history.

Just as I was reading Basquiat's work, he read other artists such as Leonardo da Vinci. In Leonardo da Vinci's *Greatest Hits* (1982), Basquiat drew from da Vinci's 1506 drawings *Studies of Human Leg* and the *Bone of the Leg in Man and Dog*. In it, he imitated da Vinci's mirror writing. Basquiat availed himself of knowledge from a range of sources, including art, philosophy, faith, science, music, myth, poetry, history and personal memory. They were the palette for his fantastical interrogation. These revelations he wrote in notebooks in much the same way that Leonardo da Vinci collated his accumulated insights in notebooks. Da Vinci's notebooks were for personal use and are generally known today as the *Codex*. Basquiat's codex, or notebook, was the wall – or indeed whatever he decided to make a canvas.

For example, in Basquiat's painting *Beef Ribs Longhorn*, which hangs in the Broad Museum, there is a red-eyed longhorn black bull set in front of a white canvas filled with Basquiat's hieroglyphic coded language. Among this code are the words EBB, layered amongst other codes. In my debut collection *Kingdom of Gravity* (Makoha, 9,20,34,48,60,71.) I divided the collection with six lyric poems titled after IATA codes. They were points of liminal pressure that I used to express my exile and migration. My reading of Basquiat's work is a sort of divination akin to Da Vinci's note IX/508 where in his practice of painting he is developing a praxis to arouse the mind to various inventions. Two primary meditative encounters happened to me first at the Rothko Chapel where Rothko's paintings revealed to me the template of the poetry collection and secondly at the *Boom For Real* retrospective where I first shed tears in front of Basquiat's work. Those tears started me on a quest to seek creative and academic knowledge from Basquiat's paintings.

I must point out that Basquiat's layered texts are intentionally ambiguous to counter any formulaic categorisation. However, the IATA code for Entebbe airport is EBB and this is where the 1976 hijacking and rescue took place. This is my personal response to Basquiat's codes and I have yet to confirm if Basquiat scholars support this interpretation of Entebbe as an airport code here but nevertheless this moment of serendipity felt significant. Ebb also describes the movement of the tide out to the sea and away from the land as well as a way to describe the decreasing of an emotion. Also, we must consider "ebb" as to "fade", to become invisible — a kind of erasure? *Beef Ribs Longhorn* is Basquiat's commentary on today's society. I'm surprised he includes EBB, a proxy for Uganda, a country that has little or no say in the contemporary world's decisions. But his ability to notice the unnoticed made me feel seen.

What is apparent in both Basquiat's and Da Vinci's codices are the skills of attention and observation. There is a need for second looking, a process I adopted to view Basquiat's paintings. In the first looking my emotions were given permission to occur. In the second looking I observed the art as a codex filled with information that I would extract with my eyes. Sometimes I would draw a sketch and make notes so that the eyes were not the only instrument in my body taking it in. I resisted writing poems in front of the work as originally planned, as it generated a contrived logic. I was able to read Basquiat's paintings as a poetical codex, while simultaneously allowing my feelings or gestures to be expressed. The overlapping thoughts with sketches helped me abandon narrative structure.

As a Black artist of the diaspora Basquiat lived in a confluence of cultures (Haitian, Puerto Rican, Mainland Black). The danger, American anthropologist Jacqueline Nassy Brown warns, is that this "can actually render certain kinds of Black subjects, experiences, histories, and identities invisible" (201). To people of the African diaspora, the original Africa they left behind no longer exists. In the words of Stuart Hall, Basquiat was performing an identity not "grounded in the archaeology, but in the retelling of the past" ("Cultural Identity" 131–8). His aesthetic moves in Creole time, the temporality created blending and simplifying of different cultures. He takes Creole time and fuses it with his intellect and consciousness to create what I have coined Basquiat time.

Consider this question: what does a black body entering England represent? My creative text *The New Carthaginians* seeks to detach itself from a Eurocentric frame that believes it is part of "Western Civilisation as a golden thread, leading through the centuries from classical antiquity to the countries of the modern West — a cultural genealogy that connects Plato to NATO. It is an idea often invoked in the speeches of politicians and the rhetoric of journalists, and which remains deeply embedded in popular culture" (Sweeney 2). This factually incorrect narrative obscures diversity and is often used as an argument to justify colonialism, imperialism and racism. The title *New Carthaginians* is a metonym for Africans and is a creative attempt to include the African narratives while also reclaiming Virgil's Carthage as part of an African tradition. I use Basquiat's paintings to represent the Entebbe hijacking and key moments in my life to gain agency and to both adopt and loosen authorial control. Basquiat's painting allows me to access what William James expressed as "a voice inside which speaks and says, 'This is the real me!'", a consciousness inner identity that encompasses the intimacies of the intellect, spirit and restores ethnic survival. This artistic creation rejects hegemony and offers an inner emancipation from a more dominant social identity. Stereotypical identities have been forced on Black artists for generations.

Kara Walker's *Fons Americanus* (2019) — a functioning 13-metre-tall sculpture of a fountain that stood in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern — enquires into how Black bodies utilize history, especially when they are perceived as the unreliable narrator. It was an allegory of the Black Atlantic adorned with figures that depict scenes from the transatlantic slave trade. The pinnacle figure was a Black woman that stood at the top of the fountain with her hands raised and breasts and throat slashed. The fountain's waters originated from the woman's breast and throat to show how global waters disastrously connect Africa to America and Europe and their consequent economic prosperity. The sculpture acted as a counter-narrative to Sir Thomas Brock's *Victoria Memorial* outside Buckingham Palace — a monument to Queen Victoria. Walker says that her statue functions as a one-person version of the 1851 Great Exhibition that exploited the wealth and bounty of colonized subjects.

In an interview with Zadie Smith (2020), American painter Kara Walker poses these questions about her artistic praxis as she seeks to discover the history and mythologies, power struggles and the way we humans perceive ourselves and others. Walker seeks to answer how we might gather our ruins when she says

I might want history to convince me that although some identities are chosen, many others are forced. Or that no identities are chosen. Or that all identities are chosen. That I feed history. That history feeds me. That we starve each other. All of these things. None of them. All of them in an unholy mix of the true and the false...

What is the correct response to a ruinous history?

What, if anything, is the artist's "duty" here?

Should ruins always and everywhere be "reclaimed"?

Should ruins be consciously rebuilt into something "positive"?

If not the representation of ruins, then what? (Smith, "History")

Like Basquiat, I have infused ambiguous codices into my poetry manuscript *The New Carthaginians* as a Metic/Afro-Surrealist exercise in an attempt to lift African creativity from the footnote of Western history and resist the normal tendency to pit Africa against modernity (see Whitehead). Therefore, Carthage, with its at once pivotal and marginal role in Virgil's *Aeneid*, can be reclaimed as part of the African tradition. I must, as Nigerian academic F. Abiola Irele suggests, adopt through my literature an "African Imagination" to excavate and introduce an erased history.

I define his collage technique which Cortez calls the exploded collage, as Basquiat's way to counter the burden of Du Boisian "double consciousness" (Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk 2*) in his paintings by offering multiple levels of reference and meaning. Sieglinde Lemke (Diaspora Aesthetics 2008) argues diasporic communities in "the symbolic acts of rebellion" multilayer images, language and texts to juxtapose points of home/host land and passage to "capture the entanglements and intersectionality that are constitutive of diasporic life." Basquiat's *Untitled* 1983 (History of Black People) invites the diasporic gaze with its multiple references because it accommodates the future, past and present.

Art historian Henry Drewal calls this “multiconsciousness”, “the capacity to negotiate multiple evolving personas in social terrains where others attempt to impose identities in struggles of self-assertion” (263). Basquiat complicates the boundary between text and image. In the words of Henry Geldzahler, “Jean-Michel Basquiat the artist and Jean-Michel Basquiat the poet are one and in perfect harmony” (“Introduction” 8). In paintings like *Pegasus 1987*, we see that Basquiat is both expressive and critical of himself. The work reads as a codex where graphite words and symbols predominately from Henry Dreyfuss’s *Symbol Sourcebook* (1972) replace image and colour. Basquiat’s layering of language interchangeably with images forms part of his oeuvre. He rejects linear connections between signifier and signified in favour of what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari dubbed their “rhizome model” (it presents history and culture as a map array of multiple, non-hierarchical influences with no specific origin or genesis; Deleuze and Guattari elaborate this (Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus* 91) as way of understanding a non-centred semiotic that is not composed of units structured within rule (i.e. structuralism). The model discourages hierarchical and linear thinking in favour of the non-linear.

It is in an act of self-creolisation that Basquiat takes elements of his different cultures and blends them together to create a new culture of his own. With “creole time” you have a tool for rhythmizing phonetic writing, literary allusion, and chromatic structure all at once. Here “creole” means a concrete visual tradition emerging from three or more sources. This can include the vectors of paint-language, print-language and diagram-language, coded for deliberate creolized confusion. Basquiat amalgamates various formal languages and iconographies (English, Christianity, Vodun, Santeria, Candomblé, NSibidi, Spanish and Afro-American along with Beat poetry, hip-hop, opera, bebop and Latin) that serve as a beat, in the sense of a visual metronome, to keep these various tendencies going all at once. It allows him to inject a different history and philosophy at will. Basquiat appropriated Beat poetry and bebop as a mechanism to revise the narrative of Western modernism and its conventional mode of thinking that often renders Black subjects invisible. Both artforms showed Basquiat ways to be simultaneously expressive and conceptual.

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