

Downtown/Uptown
Esteban Jefferson

Jean lived downtown. No, that's too passive. Jean chose to live downtown. Jean chose to live downtown, homeless, when he had a home he could go to in Brooklyn.

Jean was Haitian and Puerto Rican. Jean was black. Jean was not African-American. Jean was black.

Jean could have lived uptown. Jean chose to live downtown. Jean chose to be black downtown, when he could have been black uptown, or in Brooklyn.

Leroi Jones lived downtown, in Greenwich Village. Amiri Baraka lived uptown, in Harlem. Leroi Jones made a choice to move to uptown, to become Amiri Baraka, to be black in a way he felt he couldn't be downtown¹.

"By the time this book appears, I will be even blacker²."
Leroi Jones, 1966

Kellie Jones: Do you think everyday people have a greater grasp of what you're doing than—

David Hammons: Than I do.

Kellie Jones: —than you do or than other people who are politically astute, or versed in art?

David Hammons: They're the number one, because they're already at that place I'm trying to get to. Sometimes I carry a whole arch of wine bottles around in the neighborhood. I walk from 125th up to 145th street and people follow me, ask me questions, give me answers, tell me what I can do.³

I really love to watch the way Black people make things, houses, or magazine stands in Harlem, for instance. Just the way we use carpentry. Nothing fits, but everything works. The door closes, it keeps things from coming through. But it doesn't have that neatness about it, the way white people put things together; everything is a 32nd of an inch off.⁴

Jean never stopped being black, even though he lived downtown. Jean lived downtown and painted on doors he would find on the street – that's black carpentry. Jean lived downtown and made *Irony of the Negro Policeman*. Negro policemen are as ironic downtown as they are uptown, but Jean made that statement. To say that a Negro policeman is ironic uptown is like speaking to the choir. To say that a Negro policeman is ironic downtown is to say that blackness doesn't stop at 110th Street on the West Side, or 96th on the East Side.

¹ Campbell, James. "A Life in Writing: Amiri Baraka." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 3 Aug. 2007,

www.theguardian.com/books/2007/aug/04/featuresreviews.guardianreview12.

² Baraka, Amiri. *Home Social Essays*. Mac Gibbon and Kee, 1968.

³ Katzeff, Miriam, et al. *Real Life Magazine: Selected Writings and Projects 1979-1994*, page 241. Primary Information, 2013.

⁴ Katzeff, Miriam, et al. *Real Life Magazine: Selected Writings and Projects 1979-1994*, page 242. Primary Information, 2013.

My uncle was a Negro policeman. Played MLB baseball, got injured. Lost his career, became a cop. First responder, 9/11. Picked up debris and bodies for days. He kept serving for another few years after, and ended up making detective. This was around the time Bloomberg and the NYPD were heavy into stop-and-frisk. “*The possibility of being stopped acts as a vital deterrent*¹.” I can’t say for sure, but my uncle probably did some stop-and-frisks. I mean, he was a cop, and they had quotas⁵. Picking up bodies, but in this case, only black and brown bodies.

My uncle stopped being able to leave his apartment. It’s called agoraphobia, and in his case it was a type of PTSD. He stopped being able to serve. Lost his career again. He was scarred from picking up bodies, and drank a lot.

If you develop PTSD because of something that happened while you were on-duty, while you were serving, the NYPD entitles you to extra compensation. You’ll stop serving the force, but instead of a G-and-change per month compensation, you’ll get more like 4 G’s a month. But they wouldn’t give it to my uncle. They fought him in court. This was around the same time they were fighting stop-and-frisk in court⁶. Ironic.

*Pushing back against critics of stop-and-frisk policing, Mayor Bloomberg Friday said it could be argued that the Police Department stops white people too many times and non-whites too little. “In that case, incidentally, I think, we disproportionately stop whites too much and minorities too little,” the mayor said. “It’s exactly the reverse of what they’re saying. I don’t know where they went to school, but they certainly didn’t take a math course, or a logic course*⁷. ”

*The statistics are overwhelming. An independent study of the city’s stop-and-frisk program found that 87 percent of the 685,724 stops in 2011 – a record high – were of Blacks and Latinos. Young black men between the ages of 14 and 24 were stopped 106% of the time – as in, there were more stops of young black men than the entire population of young black men*⁸.

⁵ But who knows? He ended up in Internal Affairs, but I don’t know why.

⁶ “Mayor Bloomberg to Appeal 'Stop and Frisk' Ruling.” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 12 Aug. 2013, www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-newyork-police-bloomberg/mayor-bloomberg-to-appeal-stop-and-frisk-ruling-idUSBRE97B0OF20130812.

⁷ Fermino, Jennifer. “Mayor Bloomberg on Stop-and-Frisk: 'We Disproportionately Stop Whites Too Much. And Minorities Too Little'.” *NY Daily News*, NEW YORK DAILY NEWS, 28 June 2013, www.nydailynews.com/new-york/mayor-bloomberg-stop-and-frisk-disproportionately-stop-whites-minorities-article-1.1385410.

⁸ “Mayor Bloomberg: NYPD 'Stops Whites Too Much And Minorities Too Little'.” *ThinkProgress*, thinkprogress.org/mayor-bloomberg-nypd-stops-whites-too-much-and-minorities-too-little-7977f5c3436a/.

Alvin: *Why you – c'mon – why you touching me for?*
First Officer: *You wanna go to jail?*
Alvin: *For what–*
Second Officer: *Shut your fucking mouth kid.*
Alvin: *For what? Why I'm gonna get arrested for?*
Second Officer: *Shut your mouth!*
Alvin: *What am I getting arrested for?*
Second Officer: *For being a fucking mutt⁹.*



⁹ Tuttle, Ross, and Erin Schneider. "Stopped-and-Frisked: 'For Being a F**King Mutt' [VIDEO]." *The Nation*, 29 June 2015, www.thenation.com/article/stopped-and-frisked-being-fking-mutt-video/.

Jean was ambitious. In this way, Jean wasn't a black artist, Jean was simply an artist. He wanted to be known and seen, and he made it happen, by any means necessary. Jean turned his blackness into an advantage. There were black artists uptown; there weren't so many downtown. Jean went where people like him weren't meant to be seen, and grew out the blackest haircut anyone had ever seen.

I was surprised to see a black artist and particularly one that was –you know – with the hair. I was taken back by it, and kind of put off¹⁰.

Larry Gagosian

Blame the hair. The idea for “Blink” came after Gladwell abandoned his side-parting and let nature take over. Soon he was getting pulled out of airport security lines and given speeding tickets. One day, walking down 14th Street in Manhattan, he was jumped by three policemen. After 20 minutes' interrogation, they decided he wasn't the rapist they were looking for. Their first impressions – based on hair alone – had been enough to blind them to the facts that in build, height and age, Gladwell was nothing like their man¹¹.

Malcolm Gladwell: A Good Hair Day (2006)

When I see Malcolm Gladwell all I can think about is his bad hair. I know he's come up with thought provoking concepts. But all those go out the window in a haze of hair.

Lose the Hair.

All of it. Shave it all off. You have lovely eyes. Show them off. A little goatee might be nice to give some angularity to your face. You might think the long hair is rad, but it doesn't suit you. Face it, you're a good boy. It's not for you. Let your brilliance shine through those eyes. And perk up a bit, would you¹²?

Malcolm Gladwell: Tipped: Bad Hair, Bad Branding (2006)

¹⁰ amer4127. “Jean-Michel Basquiat and ‘The Art of (Dis)Empowerment’ (2000).” *AMERICAN SUBURB X*, 19 Dec. 2017, www.americansuburbx.com/2013/10/jean-michel-basquiat-art-disempowerment-2000.html.

¹¹ “Malcolm Gladwell: A Good Hair Day.” *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 19 Mar. 2006, www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/malcolm-gladwell-a-good-hair-day-470479.html.

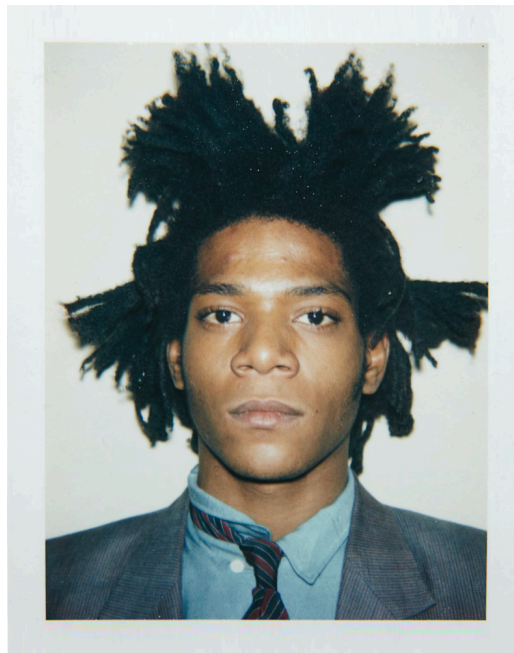
¹² “Media Make-over #1 Malcolm Gladwell: Tipped: Bad Hair, Bad Branding.” *Sell Yourself Without Selling Your Soul*, 3 Jan. 2006, prsecrets.com/media-make-over-1-malcolm-gladwell-tipped-bad-hair-bad-branding/.

*In fact, you know what, my mother is half white. A lot of people don't know that. (An audience member yells, "Woo!") All right, you a little too excited, but okay. A lot of people don't believe me when I say that, but it's true. You can't tell looking at me, but if I grew my hair out, you would think you was at a fucking Katt Williams concert. My shit is beautiful*¹³.

Dave Chappelle: Equanimity (2018)

Like Dave, I cut my hair off. Some of us grow the hair out to show we have blackness in us, like Malcolm¹⁴; some of us keep it short, like me and Dave, cause we feel blacker that way. My aunts wish I would grow it back out: "you have such nice hair!" *Pelo bueno*. I usually get a 1, maybe even a half. Shape it up, skin fade on the sides, once a week, maybe once every week and a half. The barbershop is downtown, run by Dominicans, all of them black except for one. Last time they were watching cockfights on the TV while they cut hair. There's something I love about that, about the recklessness of it. Black Dominicans, being themselves in downtown Manhattan, without a thought or care given to the standards of the white world outside.

Jean's hair was Jean's hair. Black as hell, but he was the only one with it cut exactly like *that*. You see Basquiat haircuts every once in a while walking around downtown Manhattan. Who owns the skin fade? Who owns the afro? Who owns dreads? But when you see that cut, Jean's cut, even on someone who isn't Jean, you know it's his.



¹³ Chappelle, Dave. *Equanimity*. Netflix, Jan. 2018.

¹⁴ Haber, Matt. "Resolved: Malcolm Gladwell Has Interesting Hair." *Observer*, Observer, 17 Nov. 2008, observer.com/2008/11/resolved-malcolm-gladwell-has-interesting-hair/.

I live in Chinatown. I could live in Harlem, but I live in Chinatown. I guess Harlem doesn't exist anymore, not like it did then, so maybe I don't have to make the choice the way Jean did. Jean chose to be black not-uptown.

I guess I say all of this to say that being in a white system, being around white people, doesn't make you less black. It doesn't make you more black either. You're black either way.

Where you are might highlight, or obscure, how black you are, or what black means (if it really means anything at all), and how you style yourself might do the same; but that's just context. In America, if you're black, you're black. That doesn't mean we all think the same, feel the same, act the same; black people are very diverse. We look different, talk different, come from different countries and like different things. But whether you're uptown, or downtown, you're still black.

Maybe Jean made it easier for artists after him to be black downtown, to feel that it's okay to be a black artist downtown. It couldn't have been easy at the time, to be a black artist downtown, when it seemed like black artists were supposed to be uptown.

What I love about Jean is the way he handled it. He never seemed to be performing blackness, but he wasn't hiding it either. Jean really seems like he was just being himself. Of course, "himself" was created – we all choose to look a certain way, and the way he looked is part of his myth. But it doesn't feel forced. We feel obliged to say it's calculated, so we can prove that we understand the game he was playing, that he wasn't fooling us into thinking the myth was true. But the reason we have to say that is because he made the myth so believable, and so loveable.

