

# Racialism and money-grubbing: The New York Times explains why “more critics of color” are needed

By David Walsh and Fred Mazelis  
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In the interests of honesty, “Race-fixated upper middle class continues its campaign for positions and money” ought to have been the headline of an opinion piece published July 5 by the *New York Times*. Instead, the article—by Elizabeth Méndez Berry and Chi-hui Yang—was entitled, “The Dominance of the White Male Critic.”

The phenomenon that immediately drove Méndez Berry and Yang into print was the apparent dissatisfaction of various African American artists featured at this year’s Whitney Biennial in New York City with their reception at the hands of a number of prominent critics. The Biennial is a prestigious exhibition of contemporary art, often featuring younger or lesser known artists, held at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

The July 5 column complains that while the “curators were a black woman and a white woman, and a majority of the artists they featured were people of color,” with half of them women and many young, “in major media outlets, white critics wrote the reviews that defined the conversation about the country’s pre-eminent contemporary art show.”

In effect then, a type of quota system has already been imposed by institutions such as the Whitney for artists and curators and that now needs to be extended into art criticism.

The offending critics are taken to task by the *Times* co-authors, ironically, for their general perception that the Biennial artwork “wasn’t ‘radical’ enough.” One work was accused of making use of “a tired academic slogan.”

The artists responded, according to Méndez Berry and Yang, by suggesting that white critics were simply incapable of understanding their efforts. For example, Simone Leigh, featured in the Biennial, argued on Instagram that the critics lacked “the knowledge to recognize the radical gestures in my work. And that is why, instead of mentioning these things, I have politely said black women are my primary audience.” Critic Aruna D’Souza, cited by Méndez Berry and Yang, contended that many of the white critics were “not familiar with the intellectual, conceptual and artistic ideas that underlie the work.”

Another artist, although not present in the Biennial, New York-based Xaviera Simmons, headlined a comment in *The Art Newspaper*, “Whiteness must undo itself to make way for the truly radical turn in contemporary culture.” She writes: “We desire writing by white critics that consistently implicates whiteness and its tentacles as the dominating force that requires systemic change on all fronts. Understand the historical American narrative and see yourselves within that framework; do the cultural autopsy, name what whiteness

is and the centuries of harm it has done; show yourselves to each other and wrestle with the implications of whiteness on canvas, in performance, in front of the camera and definitely in writing; and, most importantly, stop oppressing us through dismissive and condescending words and deeds.” This is an aspiring, petty bourgeois layer that cannot see anything beyond race and issues commands and ultimatums rooted in its preoccupations.

It is certainly not our responsibility to defend the art critical establishment. But one of its principal sins over recent decades has been an excessive and unconscionable *accommodation* to racial and gender politics. The various journalists have not been nearly “critical” enough of the self-involved and self-pitying work that dominates the contemporary art world. The Whitney Biennial is something of a Frankenstein monster the art critics have helped to construct.

The assertion that white critics can’t possibly comprehend “artists of color” leads logically to the most appalling segregation and tribalism. After all, for that matter, how could the African American critic relate to African or Caribbean art? The final result would be an endless assortment of critics assigned to his or her “own” special allotment of artists based on ethnic or blood ties. The emphasis on race stands in the tradition of and encourages the extreme right. It gives off a foul odor.

Méndez Berry and Yang argue that having “critics of color” matters “because culture is a battleground where some narratives win and others lose. ... At a time when inequality and white supremacy are soaring, collective opinion is born at monuments, museums, screens and stages—well before it’s confirmed at the ballot box.”

First of all, the violently reactionary policies of the Trump administration, which are deeply unpopular, are conflated here with a supposed “soaring” of white supremacy. The notion that “some narratives win and others lose” cynically separates art from its task of establishing objective truth. The art world becomes an arena of each against all, “your truth [or myth] against mine,” a constant, debilitating combat that inevitably feeds into the whipping up of nationalism, chauvinism and war preparations everywhere.

Enduring art has an objective, universal character. Such work is utterly antithetical to art accessible only to one gender or ethnicity. Again, it is not an uncritical defense of the prominent art journalists to suggest their skepticism about the Whitney Biennial is well-founded, and ought, in fact, to go far deeper. Race- and gender-obsessed art, some of which passes for “radicalism” and even “leftism” at the moment, has an ideological and political significance and impact, but it is largely worthless from the point of view of shedding genuine

light on the conditions of life in our time.

A ferocious struggle is going on within the affluent petty bourgeoisie over income, privileges, positions. The almost deranged character of the *Times* piece, and the reaction of a section of the artists, can't be grasped apart from that social fact.

Méndez Berry and Yang are not merely interested, much less innocent bystanders. They are heavily and professionally invested in the business of reorganizing the art world, principally replacing white figures with those who are “people of color.”

Méndez Berry is director of Voice, Creativity and Culture at the Nathan Cummings Foundation, endowed by and named for the founder of Consolidated Foods, later Sara Lee, who died in 1985 leaving an estate of some \$200 million. Yang is a Program Officer in the Ford Foundation's Creativity and Free Expression/JustFilms division. The Ford Foundation is one of the most powerful private foundations in the world. With close ties to US military and intelligence agencies, the organization disburses hundreds of millions of dollars annually (\$526 million in 2018) in grants in defense of the profit system.

The co-authors explain, “In 2017, we began an initiative called Critical Minded to help amplify the work of critics of color and knock down the barriers they face. ... We've helped people of color who run independent outlets hire editors. We have supported freelancers so that they could cover influential film festivals and biennials, and funded research on the demographics of criticism and how it shapes analysis.”

There isn't any evidence that replacing upper middle class, self-absorbed white critics by upper middle class, self-absorbed black or Latino critics would improve matters by one iota. As though determined to prove the point, in a May 3, 2018, article on *Hyperallergic* devoted to the “Critical Minded” project, Méndez Berry astonishingly placed *Black Panther* (2018, Ryan Coogler) at the center of her argument for more black critics, maintaining that the debate about the superhero film was “one of the most meaningful cultural moments in recent memory.”

Speaking of this crass, money-making kitsch, she observed that when “an important work is met with thoughtful, engaged criticism, it gains depth and traction. And when each potent piece of writing reverberates as never before—shared, liked, and debated on social media—the critic has new opportunities to shape our increasingly toxic cultural discourse. ... The *Black Panther* conversation is an example of what pop culture critics of color can do with resources and real estate.”

Méndez Berry's misplaced praise of *Black Panther* last year takes on added meaning in the light of the fact that she and Yang go out of their way in the *Times* to express strong disapproval of Peter Farrelly's *Green Book* (2018). They characterize the latter film, based on the relationship that developed during a tour of the South between black pianist Don Shirley (Mahershala Ali) and driver/bodyguard Italian-American Frank “Tony Lip” Vivaldi (Viggo Mortensen), as “another trite example of the country's insatiable appetite for white-savior narratives” and one of the “superficially benevolent stories [that] can actually reinforce the racial hierarchies this country is built on.”

*Green Book* has its limitations, but its endearing argument in favor of the ability of members of different races to get along and even care for one another lifts it into a different artistic and moral universe from the vapid, nationalistic *Black Panther*.

The recent *Times* article by Méndez Berry and Yang is a blunt

appeal to the media establishment to see to it that more of its plentiful cash flow into the pockets of “non-white” critics and others.

So the authors write: “Outlets led by people of color should get the venture capital and philanthropic support they have always deserved but rarely received. ...”

And: “Twitter and Instagram don't pay their users. In a clickbait attention economy where more than half of visual arts critics make on average less than \$20,000 per year from arts writing, the voices that are most needed are the least likely to emerge. ...”

Finally, and most brazenly: “Old-school white critics ought to step aside and make room for the emerging and the fully emerged writers of color who have been holding court in small publications and online for years ... We need mainstream newspapers and their culture departments to hire people of color as assigning editors and critics.”

The Méndez Berry-Yang opinion piece reflects the thinking of an already prosperous social layer, engaged in cutthroat competition for jobs, money, influence and so forth. Méndez Berry let the cat out of the bag in her *Hyperallergic* article when she pointed out that as “newspapers around the country gut their arts sections and alternative weeklies ... shrivel, fewer emerging artists of color will be discovered or properly covered. The discourse is increasingly dominated by the few writers lucky enough to secure the rare media job, or who have academic perches, or who can afford to write for less.”

Vile, racist articles such as the July 5 column, however, are also promoted by the *Times* and outfits like the Ford and Nathan Cummings foundations for definite political reasons. To whatever extent possible, they are aimed at disorienting and distracting those artists, intellectuals and young people who consider themselves “dissidents” and “oppositional,” but who can still be manipulated at this point because they have little or no historical framework with which to work and very limited understanding of the class issues involved. The goal is to drive every possible wedge between white and black artists, youth and workers.

Half a century ago this kind of cultural nationalism, including demands for separatism and reparations, was put forward by a relatively small fringe of radical black nationalists, most of whom cloaked their program in “anti-imperialist” rhetoric. Today these appeals are put forward in openly pro-imperialist, pro-capitalist language, advertising the usefulness of these elements to the ruling class as a whole.

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