

# The New York Times on race and art

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A review published in the April 3 *New York Times Book Review* is yet another contribution to the racist view of art and culture that has become one of the *Times*' stocks in trade. In his review of *Kill'Em and Leave: Searching for James Brown and the American Soul* by James McBride, critic and novelist Rick Moody (*The Ice Storm*, 1994) advances a perspective with thoroughly reactionary implications.

Moody launches right in, "You know what? It's an undeniable truth that when African-American writers write about African-American musicians, there are penetrating insights and varieties of context that are otherwise lost to the nonblack music aficionados of the world, no matter how broad the appeal of the musician under scrutiny."

He continues by praising the writing of Stanley Crouch and Nelson George, two African-American music critics. Moody suggests, for example, that George's columns in the *Village Voice* "ruminated on and elevated black music—funk, soul and hip-hop—in ways that were inaccessible to white writers, no matter how much those writers appreciated the tunes. This contemporary tendency in which black writers lay claim to the discourse of black music—this increasing tendency—is a much needed development for anyone who cares about modern music."

This is, in the first place, an insult to the writers of whom Moody speaks. He attributes the strengths in the work of these critics to their ethnic identities, not to their abilities or the intellectual methods they employ.

For Moody, and the milieu for which he speaks, there is an unbridgeable gap separating blacks and whites. White critics and audiences may appreciate the music of James Brown or other black performers *to a degree*, but they will never be able to fully grasp its essential content. "Black music" is for black people and speaks to them in a way only they recognize and fully comprehend.

The essentially racist character of such views becomes all the more clear when one considers the arguments that logically flow from them. If white critics and audiences are cut off from so-called black music by their "whiteness," then black audiences must also suffer similar limitations associated with their own racial background.

How might the *Times* editors respond to Moody's argument if it were put this way: "It's an undeniable truth that when white writers write about white musicians, there are penetrating

insights and varieties of context that are otherwise lost to the nonwhite music aficionados of the world, no matter how broad the appeal of the musician under scrutiny." A white supremacist would heartily agree with this!

If, for example, McBride were writing not about James Brown, but about a performer such as Elvis Presley, would he then lose his special insight? Would we be better off reading the work of a white critic, say Greil Marcus, on that subject? Then again, while McBride's father was African American, his mother was a Polish Jew. Does he, then, have license to write about more than just so-called black music? Such are the repugnant issues that inevitably arise when one commits oneself to a racist viewpoint on society and culture.

Near the end of his review, Moody comes close to apologizing for even holding an opinion about Brown or his biographer: "As I am a white writer, writing about a black writer, writing about a black musician, there is ample reason to wonder if the requisite nuance is available to me, the guy writing the review." This miserable, conformist comment, which Moody attempts to pass off as something "progressive," makes one's skin crawl.

Moody's arguments are remarkably similar to those advanced in the 1960s by black nationalist author Amiri Baraka. In his 1960 essay "Jazz and the White Critic," Baraka wrote that white critics missed the essential content of blues and jazz because of their racial identity and because they had been corrupted by the aesthetic baggage of "white" Western music. They were "white middlebrows" enforcing "white middlebrow standards of excellence." At the same time, he argued that black musicians were only worth anything to the extent that they were conscious of and expressing their identities as black people: "The Negroes who were responsible for the best of the music were always aware of their identities as black Americans and really did not, themselves, desire to become vague, featureless, Americans."

Such views have done enormous damage to art and culture. Not a single substantial work of art has been made on the basis of such a foul, segregationist worldview. Great works of art do not limit themselves to such restrictions. They explore social life in all its complexities and convey something objectively truthful about it—not only to blacks or to whites, but to everyone.

To suggest that an artist, committed to the truth, cannot

movingly and convincingly tell the story or communicate the situation of someone from a significantly different background than his or her own makes a mockery of the history of art. Lifting up one's head and looking around intently at the rest of the world is one of the most basic requirements for the creation of meaningful works.

It has often been the case that artists have crossed beyond the supposed limitations of their backgrounds to contribute greatly to art forms not associated with their personal social, ethnic or national experience. In the 1950s and 1960s, young white musicians in the US and Britain reinvigorated American blues music and were accepted by the African American veterans of the genre as entirely legitimate students of the art form.

Great African American singers such as Marian Anderson, Leontyne Price, Shirley Verrett and Grace Bumbry and others made lasting contributions to classical vocal music. Is their music "black" or "white"? It is, of course, neither. One is grateful they did not accept the argument that performing such works meant they had succumbed to an oppressive white Western aesthetic.

A closeness to the subject at hand, which might have a national or ethnic component, may offer certain insights to a writer. So we are told, "Write about what you know." But this commonplace is only true in a limited sense. If the artist or critic remains at that threshold, his or her work will never attain the greatest universality. This is especially the case in music, in which the cognition of nature, of its sound and rhythms, as Trotsky notes, "is so deeply concealed, and the results of nature's inspirations so greatly refracted through the nerves of man," that it "acts as a self-sufficient 'revelation.'"

If jazz were simply "black music," then how is its vast, global appeal to be explained? No doubt it speaks in its origins to a specific historical response to life, but jazz flourished as an art form to the extent that it went far beyond the immediate conditions of its birth and, indeed, transcended those conditions.

According to Moody's logic, composer Richard Wagner was quite correct in "Judaism in Music" (1850) when he asserted that because "the Jew talks the modern European languages merely as learnt, and not as mother tongues," this must necessarily "debar him from all capability of therein expressing himself idiomatically, independently, and conformably to his nature." Wagner, speaking in terms our current identity politics crowd would understand, went on to assert that a language is the work "of an historical community: only he who has unconsciously grown up within the bond of this community, takes also any share in its creations." Therefore, the Jews were "incapable of giving artistic enunciation" to their feelings through talk or song in any European language.

Of course, this is filthy nonsense from every point of view. In fact, the distance created by outsider status or "otherness" may bestow a definite advantage on an artist under certain circumstances. The Jewish George Gershwin created the

greatest opera so far written about African American life, *Porgy and Bess*. And there is the small matter of men writing about women and women writing about men! Someone should have knocked the pen out of Flaubert's hand when he sat down to write *Madame Bovary* (about whose title character the author is supposed to have declared, "*Madame Bovary, c'est moi*" ["*Madame Bovary is me*"])).

Racist views, given a "left" coloration by Baraka and Moody, belong historically to the extreme right. The Nazis advanced a racial theory of society which not only presented baseless arguments about the biological differences between Aryans and Jews, but declared that different races possessed entirely separate internal lives, capacities for understanding and differing abilities for the creation and appreciation of art. Not for nothing did Trotsky refer to the Nazis' "zoological materialism."

The attempt to divide society along racial lines serves definite purposes. A narrow layer of the African American petty bourgeoisie wants greater access to corporate board rooms, department chairs and political office. It is prepared to employ the methods of the far right, witch-hunts and intimidation, to advance itself

At the same time, apologists for racism at the *Times* and elsewhere make use of such poison to demoralize and confuse the population, convince it that the "racial gap" is insurmountable and weaken the only social force capable of dealing with the capitalist system: the working class.

In reality, black and white workers who stand side-by-side on the assembly line, who ring up and bag groceries together, or who make up the nursing staff of a hospital, have far more in common with one another than they do with the wealthy middle-class layers promoting the racist politics that seek to divide them.



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