

Columnist Myles E. Johnson on Beyoncé at the Grammys

The New York Times opens its pages to frenzied racialism

David Walsh
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“Far away in Asia, behind the great mountain fastnesses of India, in times so remote that even tradition and fable are silent about them, there dwelt a race of white men. They were herdsmen, shepherds, tillers of the soil, poets and thinkers. They were called Aryas—noblemen or householders—and from them are descended the dominant caste of India, the Persians, and the great nations of Europe. The history of the Aryan migrations, their dates, their causes, is lost in the clouds of a mysterious past.” — Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1899)

The *New York Times* continues, relentlessly, to open its columns to rabid, deeply reactionary racialism. The op-ed piece by Myles E. Johnson (“What Beyoncé Won Was Bigger Than a Grammy,” February 14) devoted to the recent Grammy awards ceremony is an especially repugnant example.

The column is essentially an embittered response to the fact that the Grammy for album of the year went to Adele, the white British singer, and not Beyoncé, an African American singer. Both performers are extremely successful and wealthy. In the US, Beyoncé has sold more than 17 million albums as a solo artist and another 17 million albums as a member of Destiny’s Child, while Adele has sold some 23 million albums.

Myles Johnson’s theme in the *Times* is that Beyoncé should have won the album of the year award, but lost out because the music industry “is largely run by white men, and they are the ones who decide which artists, genres and topics should be validated and funded, and which should be erased or othered.”

It doesn’t seem likely that Beyoncé, her husband Jay

Z, Kanye West and other big-time black performers are about to be “erased” or “othered” any time soon. They seem pretty well capable of looking after themselves, financially and in other ways.

What prevails in Johnson’s column is a racial obsession and abusiveness that would not be out of place, changing what needs to be changed, in a white supremacist rag or a German Nazi publication, or in the vile writings of Comte de Gobineau or Houston Stewart Chamberlain (cited above), two of the pioneers of modern racist ideology.

As far as the *Times*’ piece accurately reflects his outlook, Johnson views the world entirely within the framework of race. In the space of ten paragraphs, the guest columnist uses the words “white,” “whiter” or “whiteness” 15 times and “black” 18 times.

We are told, among other things, that “Black people have great imaginations, not just in the arts but in everyday life,” that “Historically, whiteness does not reward black defiance” and that “American culture has long punished black people who make work that explores black narratives without considering the gaze of a white consumer.”

Of Beyoncé’s overblown, self-important routine at the Grammys, in which she distastefully allowed herself to be worshipped like a goddess, Johnson writes that the singer “showcased her imagination” by appropriating “European images of the Madonna” and conjuring “other images of African Orishas like Oshun. She celebrated her pregnancy and gathered countless black women on stage as words by the poet Warsan Shire filled the air. The performance concluded with many black hands greeting Beyoncé as she smiled into the camera like a black Mona Lisa. It was not just the

smile of a satisfied performer, but the smile of someone who knew she had just won.”

Johnson reveals his own utterly conventional, conformist self through his adoration of Beyoncé’s success. He is awed, whether he realizes it or not, not by her music or her spectacle, both of which are pretty bland, but by her fame and money.

The reader is then subjected to this kind of nonsense: “And I suspect we know that a radical black person will never be rewarded if there is safer, whiter, more apolitical choices. Beyoncé did not lose; she was punished for a radical black feminist imagination that was more than white people in the music industry could handle, or were interested in consuming. She was not going to get an award for an album that white Grammy voters could not sing along to.” Beyoncé a radical? Permit us to utter a guffaw.

The singer and her husband are collectively worth nearly three-quarters of a billion dollars, and that figure rises all the time. They hobnobbed with the most recent president of the United States, Obama, an individual responsible for war crimes in numerous countries and who oversaw the growth of unprecedented social inequality. They are as “radical” as an offshore bank account.

Johnson concludes in the *Times* by making the empty-headed assertion that by not making “herself more palatable to white viewers” and by letting “her imagination serve her goals, her child and her community ... she changed the lives of countless black viewers, and subverted a tradition too long dominated by white executives and white taste.” Beyoncé changed nothing and subverted nothing at the Grammys. She put on a silly, pretentious show and then went home. The world was otherwise unaffected.

Johnson uses overheated “left” language from time to time. He is wont, in the *Times* and elsewhere, to refer to the “white supremacist capitalist culture,” or, to go one better, the “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.” All this verbiage means exactly nothing—or worse than nothing. Capitalism is a system of class oppression, not racial oppression. The working class of every ethnicity under the sun is oppressed by members of the capitalist class of every skin color. The powers that be deliberately stoke up racism and nationalism to divide the oppressed, a process Johnson enthusiastically facilitates. *This is why, incidentally, he finds himself*

published in the New York Times, one of the principal voices of the American “imperialist ... capitalist” establishment.

Elsewhere Johnson has written: “All White people are privileged by White supremacy, but not loved by White supremacy—simply favorably used to perpetuate its evil. White people under its thumb never get to create or be a whole person; their whole existence, instead, is about perpetuating Whiteness—through art, politics, daily habits and preferences. Such White people are but tools of Whiteness, deprived of experiencing humanity in its wholeness.”

There is something unhinged here—the ideas are both foul and entirely out of touch with social reality. In any event, anyone who only concerns himself and grieves over the suffering of his own ethnicity or nationality, like Johnson, is capable of being manipulated along the most sinister political lines.

This poison is what the *Times*, fearful of a mass popular explosion in the US, is pushing on almost a daily basis.



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