

A reply to New York Times op-ed author Myles E. Johnson on racialism and “critical thinking”

David Walsh
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In response to an op-ed piece in the New York Times (“What Beyoncé Won Was Bigger Than a Grammy,” February 14, 2017) by Myles E. Johnson, we posted a comment on the WSWS by David Walsh rejecting the author’s racist approach.

A WSWS reader subsequently sent the article to Johnson, who replied on Twitter. The reader combined the tweets and entered them in the “Comments” section beneath the WSWS article. We are posting Johnson’s comments and Walsh’s reply.

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Myles E. Johnson:

I was actually reading the article and laughing at the ridiculousness right before I received the flowers Beyoncé sent. This is why I name race because this dissent against my piece *is* racialized. Let’s take this section of his “socialist” article:

“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 spectacle, both of which are pretty bland, but by her fame and money.”

Do you see how he snatches away my intellectual agency with “whether he realizes or not.” How this white man infantilizes me. The gag is muva [Johnson refers to himself] is a critical thinker and has been a critical thinker. I’ve critiqued Beyoncé’s relationship with capitalism. The white man who wrote this, however, was a) too lazy to research who they’re talking about [and] b) couldn’t fathom transcending a binary. He couldn’t fathom that I could love Beyoncé and still have critiques and questions around her art and how she functions in the culture.

And why is that... hmmm? Why did he assume that? Why was he so lazy? Because my name starts with a M? Or some other reason. Exactly. It was because I was a negro and he assumed he knew my limits from one article, but if I was a “neutral” white man, he would’ve researched. That’s racial. That’s about race. I don’t racialize everything. Domination

racializes everything. I just don’t have the privilege to ignore.

David Walsh replies:

Myles Johnson’s reply on Twitter more than confirms the points made in the original comment.

Mr. Johnson argues that I “snatch away” his “intellectual agency” by suggesting he must be more impressed by the singer Beyoncé’s wealth and fame than her music. I make this “lazy” claim because I haven’t bothered to research his work and find more “critical” articles on Beyoncé’s “relationship with capitalism.” I treated his article carelessly because he is black, whereas I would have treated a white writer’s work more seriously. And this justifies his own “racialized” response.

These arguments are absurd and insulting, and easily disposed of.

Mr. Johnson may well have laughed at the ridiculousness of my comment, but he was not apparently enjoying it so much that he actually read it all the way to the end. He suggests that I was lazy and did no research on him. On the contrary, I read a number of Mr. Johnson’s comments, film reviews and essays, and, indeed, I cited a paragraph from one toward the conclusion.

The passage I quoted is from an essay headlined “White ‘Allies’ And The American Tradition Of Consuming Black Grief.” Another phrase of his I cited, “the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” comes from “Disengaging Dystopia: Critically Engaging Beyoncé, Your Heartbeat, & Other Things We Cherish.”

In the latter piece, Mr. Johnson writes, “Although, Beyoncé has hardly ever been seen in the past as a decolonized artist wholly, she is symbolic for a type of power and success that is possible for marginalized people, even inside the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. In many ways, Beyoncé is a symbol for the most oppressed in America.”

I don’t know if this is what he has in mind by a critique of

“Beyoncé’s relationship with capitalism,” but it sounds to me nearly as reverential as his recent piece in the *New York Times*.

If I did not quote more extensively from his various political commentaries, it was out of the need to keep the article relatively brief and also, frankly, because to read (or cite) one of Mr. Johnson’s pieces is to read (or cite) all of them. Each of the articles of his I read was characterized by what I described as frenzied racialism, occasionally peppered with meaningless “left” phraseology.

Mr. Johnson contends that I “infantilized” him by suggesting that, “whether he realizes it or not,” he was awed, above all, by Beyoncé’s fame and money.

In making this argument, I was working backward from the egomaniacal character of Beyoncé’s performance at the Grammys, in which she allowed herself to be treated as a goddess, and the overall impersonality and emptiness of her music. Like Adele, only in a more self-aggrandizing manner, Beyoncé is a talented individual who generally performs banal material, songs that are not challenging musically or socially.

I was charging Mr. Johnson with being infatuated by fame and wealth because there seemed little likelihood the Grammy performance could have sent him into such ecstasy. Perhaps I was wrong. I was trying to give him the benefit of the artistic doubt. However, when he cannot help himself from revealing that he was reading my article “right before I received the flowers Beyoncé sent,” I am driven back in the direction of my original diagnosis of toadyism.

The most important issue here, I think, is Mr. Johnson’s claim to be “a critical thinker.” (Of course, it is revealing that he suggests if I had only done research on him I would have found proof of that *elsewhere*. He thereby all but acknowledges that the *Times* piece was “uncritical” and worshipful, but he would have us take it on faith that on other occasions he has been more “critical.”)

Mr. Johnson is the opposite of a critical thinker. Everything he writes bears the stamp of the rancid combination of identity/racial politics and postmodernist subjectivism that exerts a death grip on certain layers of the middle class “left.” Phrases such as “intellectual agency” and “infantilization,” and from his original article, “transgressive,” “othered,” “black narratives,” “the gaze of a white consumer,” and so forth are part of the standardized jargon. Mr. Johnson is part of that sociopolitical universe and writes to win its approval. This is an industry today and lucrative careers are made within it.

Genuinely critical thinking would involve, first of all, an awareness and conscious working over of the categories—and their internal contradictions—with which one works. Mr. Johnson works with the categories of race, blood, ethnicity,

that is, the most superficial and accidental features of life, and treats them as crucial, decisive factors. In this manner he works within an utterly conventional and, in fact, a deeply reactionary and irrationalist framework, which he accepts without question.

That Mr. Johnson intersperses his abject racialism with occasional demagogic references to “capitalism” and “imperialism” does not make it any more progressive. It should be remembered that a combination of rigid, history-determining racialism, “zoologic materialism” (Trotsky) and “anti-capitalism” was the hallmark of another political movement with horrifying consequences—Nazism.

One of the many things that never seems to have occurred to the critically thinking Mr. Johnson is what led the *New York Times* to devote prominent and valuable column space to his comment. It is not, to borrow one of his words, a “neutral” venue.

The *Times* is one of the leading organs of American capitalism. It has lied and propagandized for wars and invasions in the Middle East that have resulted in mass death, destruction and misery. Through a variety of reporters and columnists, the newspaper functions more or less as a daily mouthpiece of the CIA. The *Times* is currently campaigning ferociously for a confrontation with Russia, which carries with it the danger of war between nuclear powers and the incineration of hundreds of millions of people.

Why does the *Times* publish comments like that of Mr. Johnson’s? Because the promotion of racial and gender politics, which consumes portions of the upper-middle class and which directs attention away from war, poverty and social inequality, is central to the strategy of the Democratic Party wing of US imperialism. Our op-ed author is merely one of the many enthusiastic facilitators of the “divide and conquer” strategy of the American ruling class.

Finally, Mr. Johnson’s references to “this white man” and “the white man who wrote this” expose him unmistakably as a political reactionary. To repeat, this is the type of language—changing what must be changed—used by Gobineau, Chamberlain, the Nazis, white supremacists and the like. The American and international working class will unite and defeat its enemies only by inoculating itself against nationalist and chauvinist poison of every kind.



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