

Time magazine and Ibram X. Kendi promote a race-obsessed, money-hungry “Black Renaissance”

Niles Niemuth
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The latest edition of *Time* magazine asserts that the United States is witnessing a “Black Renaissance” in the arts. The front cover carries a photo of Amanda Gorman, the 22-year-old African-American Harvard graduate and former National Youth Poet Laureate who delivered her poem “The Hill We Climb” at the inauguration of President Joe Biden on January 20.

The “renaissance” celebrated here is largely an unappetizing media concoction, aimed at increasing the cash flow and elevating the profiles of a number of figures whose work has little to do with shedding light on our life and times. No important cultural development could come out of such a foul celebration of race and money. One of the first premises of a cultural rebirth in the US, or anywhere else, would be the conscious rejection of self-centered identity politics and a turn toward the lives and problems of wide layers of the population across all ethnic and gender boundaries.

The appearance of Gorman on *Time*’s front cover provides a measure of the manufactured character of the magazine’s presentation. On the basis of reciting a poor poem, little more than a string of banalities, the young woman has been catapulted into the stratosphere (or what passes for the stratosphere in contemporary America). Following the Biden inauguration appearance, Gorman signed a modeling contract with IMG Models, was invited by the National Football League to read a poem during the Super Bowl broadcast and saw her books shoot to the top of Amazon’s bestsellers.

Astonishingly, the relevant material in the February 15/22 *Time* double issue contains only one fleeting reference to the COVID-19 pandemic, an ongoing disaster that has claimed the lives of nearly 500,000 Americans and infected tens of millions. Nothing is said about the impact of the far-right, anti-working-class policies pursued by former President Donald Trump and his attempted fascist coup on January 6. The impact of wealth inequality, a great stain on American society that has grown to astronomical heights during the pandemic, likewise, is of no concern. Instead, a great deal of space is devoted to explaining how the conditions are now ripe for leveraging black identity to make an already wealthy layer even wealthier.

People who think this way simply cannot produce serious artistic work.

In the magazine’s main essay racialist historian Prof. Ibram X. Kendi, the pseudo-intellectual author of *How to Be an Anti-Racist* and *Stamped from the Beginning*, proclaims a “third great cultural revival of Black Americans” that has developed over the last six years. This revival, according to Kendi, follows in the footsteps of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Kendi declares that the “Black Renaissance” is defined by “Black creators” breaking free from the “white gaze” to express their true selves. “We are not bound by anyone or anything or any gaze,” Kendi concludes.

“Our imaginations are not bound by racism. The Black Renaissance cannot be bound. The Black Renaissance is fighting for the freedom of being. The Black Renaissance is the freedom of being. We are free.”

This warrants some attention. In the first place, no *serious* artist or artistic school in history has written or composed primarily to gain the approval of another individual or group. One might argue that this constitutes one of the definitions of enduring art. Kendi’s implication that the “imaginings” of major black artists in the past were “bound by racism” is untrue and revealing. Artistic figures such as Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson and Richard Wright (in his best years) set about their painstaking work, whatever the cost, of translating their experience and understanding of the world into images, sounds or words. That is what the artist does, no matter how oppressive or intolerable the conditions.

The “white gaze” here, to a certain extent, is itself a red herring. It becomes clear in the context—the tributes to imperialist politician Barack Obama, billionaire media mogul Oprah Winfrey and vapid pop star Beyoncé—that Kendi has in mind the rejection of any “gaze,” i.e., any social responsibility whatsoever. “We are not bound by anyone or anything or any gaze,” he boasts. This is the declaration of an anarcho-libertarian egoist who wants no restraints placed on his ability to shift positions and allegiances in the pursuit of career and wealth. He more or less tells us so, writing that “my scholarship flows from research and evidence, *which can lead me anywhere* [emphasis added].” We have been duly warned. This is an unprincipled charlatan capable of anything.

Unlike the Harlem Renaissance, this “Black Renaissance,” organized by the Democratic Party, funded by corporate America, endorsed by *Time* (whose founder and longtime owner Henry Luce, eventually one of the wealthiest men in America, was particularly close to the CIA), the *New York Times* and the entire establishment media, is pro-capitalist, pro-imperialist and ethno-communalist. (The radical Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and ’70s was heavily influenced by black nationalist and “Third World liberation” ideologies, but it would certainly not have behaved with such obsequiousness toward authority and wealth, white, black or otherwise.)

The mass, multi-racial demonstrations last summer against police violence and, more generally, the growing anti-capitalist radicalization of wide layers of the population have alarmed and frightened the racial chauvinists along with every other section of the establishment. The latest issue of *Time* is a political and corporate campaign in support of racialism and separatism, aimed at sowing confusion and divisions in the working class at a time of immense crisis for the global profit system.

Absurdly, Kendi argues that Obama, the first black president, like the Great Migration of the 1920s and the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968, has been the fuel for the latest resurgence in great black art. The president of unending and expanded imperialist wars in the Middle East, drone

assassinations, including of American citizens, of the auto bailout which slashed workers' wages in half, the "Deporter-in-chief," who told the residents of Flint to drink the lead-tainted water, who oversaw the greatest transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top in American history. This is the inspiration for a historic artistic movement?

In fact, the Obamas are the ultimate symbol of success for aspiring black entrepreneurs. Barack and Michelle's combined net worth is estimated at \$70 million and will only continue to rise, making them the wealthiest former president and first lady from the Democratic Party. They inked a post-White House book deal for \$65 million and have signed production deals with Spotify and Netflix for undisclosed millions more. They have purchased an \$8.1 million residence in Washington D.C. and a \$14.9 million property on Martha's Vineyard island, off the coast of Massachusetts.

Among the other cultural figureheads of the "Black Renaissance" identified by Kendi, as noted above, is singer and actress Beyoncé, who has combined with her husband, rapper and record executive Jay-Z, to enter the rarefied world of the billionaires.

A separate article in the *Time* special edition lists a series of seminal works that have ushered in the renaissance. They include some genuinely deplorable efforts (along with several valuable, mediocre or problematic ones), among them, Ta Nehisi Coates' racist diatribe *Between the World and Me*; Ryan Coogler's pro-CIA, black separatist superhero blockbuster *Black Panther*; Jordan Peele's *Get Out*; Amy Sberald and Kehinde Wiley's official portraits of Barack and Michelle Obama; Kara Walker's "A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby"; Beyoncé's *Lemonade*; Solange's *A Seat at the Table*; and Telfar Clemens' Shopping Bag (yes, a shopping bag).

Many of these works are defined by their obsession with race, or simply self. It is preposterous to suggest that a significant cultural revival could lean on such a slender reed. To be frank, a number of these pieces reveal more than anything else the decay and disintegration of cultural life in the US.

What is it about the last six years, coinciding with the last years of Obama's presidency and the entirety of the Trump era, that sparked this "Black Renaissance"? What have been the major economic and political trends over these half-dozen years? The stock market has boomed like never before, minting new billionaires and multi-millionaires and marking the arrival of the centi-billionaires whose wealth is not tied to what their companies produce, but to how well their stock portfolio performs. The ranks of the black billionaires have grown from one in 2014 to eight in 2020.

A small layer of the black upper-middle class beneath these black billionaires has also grown extremely wealthy. While they are not yet the very, very rich, they aspire to be and seek to use race as a lever to reach the top. Meanwhile, conditions for black workers and the poor have only gotten worse and worse as the processes of deindustrialization and financialization continue to wreak havoc on the United States.

Wealth inequality has grown generally within American society, but it is widest among African Americans. An analysis by the People's Policy Project found that the black upper class controlled 1,328 times the wealth of the black poor, compared to a racial wealth gap of 15.7 between the black and white median. It is not surprising, under these conditions of astronomical wealth concentration, that there was a significant shift in the votes of African Americans for Donald Trump in 2020 from 2016.

Kendi and the money-obsessed artists and journalists he has identified as part of the "Black Renaissance"—whose political touchstones are the war criminals and corporate raiders in the Democratic Party—have nothing in common with the democratic and egalitarian strivings of the best elements of the Harlem Renaissance. That artistic and cultural movement was profoundly influenced by the 1917 Russian Revolution led by the Bolsheviks, the workers state they built in the Soviet Union and the

political activity of Communist and socialist thinkers in the United States.

The Harlem Renaissance was racially and culturally mixed, involving white and black, American, Caribbean and French influence. The artists, writers, poets and political activists were a mix of Garveyite black nationalists, Communists and socialists. Above all they sought to use their art to break down racial barriers and stereotypes and fight against the racism of Jim Crow segregation and the terror of lynching. Many joined the Communist Party or affiliated organizations inspired by the example of the October Revolution, only to become disillusioned and driven away from revolutionary politics by the bitter experience of Stalinism and the anti-Communist witch hunts.

The list of enduring black artists, writers and journalists from this period is long: Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Nella Larsen, Lorraine Hansberry, Hubert Harrison, Scott Joplin, W.E.B. Dubois, Josephine Baker, Leontyne Price, Shirley Verrett, Paul Robeson, William Grant Still, Duke Ellington, Marian Anderson, James Weldon Johnson, Lena Horne, Sidney Poitier, Cab Calloway, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Louis Armstrong, Thelonious Monk, Oscar Peterson, Charlie Parker, Sidney Bechet, Chandler Owen, A. Phillip Randolph and on and on and on. Who among the current crop of racist celebrities hailed by Kendi and *Time* compares to any of these figures?

Wright, the author of *Native Son* (1940), began attending meetings of the John Reed Club, a Communist Party-sponsored literary group, in 1934 and married Communist Party organizer Ellen Poplar in 1941. He explained later in life: "The revolutionary words leaped from the page and struck me with tremendous force. My attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole. It seemed to me that here at last, in the realm of revolutionary expression, Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role."

Hughes, poet and playwright, was also involved in the John Reed Club and was active in other Communist Party sponsored initiatives, including the defense of the Scottsboro Boys. He explained under the needling of Joseph McCarthy's Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations in 1953, "My feeling, sir, is that I have believed in the entire philosophies of the left at one period in my life, including socialism, communism, Trotskyism."

McKay, co-executive editor of *The Liberator* alongside socialist Max Eastman, traveled to the Soviet Union, attending the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in 1922. He declared in 1919: "Every Negro who lays claim to leadership should make a study of Bolshevism and explain its meaning to the coloured masses. It is the greatest and most scientific idea afloat in the world today."

While many figures in the Harlem Renaissance eventually moved to the right, along with the intelligentsia generally in the postwar period, socialist ideas and consciousness of the class struggle left a mark in their best works. Their understanding of the reality that there was, is and could be a class struggle, in which the working class, led by a politically conscious revolutionary leadership, united across racial, linguistic and national lines, can free itself from the bonds of capitalism and take control of society for itself is completely devoid from the works of those identified as the leading lights of the "Black Renaissance" today.

Racialism in film and art is a trend which is not new but has certainly been developed to fresh depths in recent years. Nothing good has come of it. As we noted in 2017, "These works tend to treat black working class life in particular as though it had a separate, independent evolution and could be made sense of apart from the general problems of American society and the great questions facing the entire working class at each stage of development. The result is something one-sided and insular."

Pointing to the class basis of identity politics, we explained, "A portion of the middle class, as bitter historical experiences demonstrates, is

objectively drawn to racial (and gender) theory as an explanation of the social process. These layers cannot give an accurate and progressive view of history because history goes against them. No social class has ever accepted its decline and demise willingly. As Marx and Engels suggested 170 years ago about layers of the petty bourgeoisie, ‘They are therefore not revolutionary, but conservative. Nay more, they are reactionary, for they try to roll back the wheel of history.’”

The historical conditions in which artists work today are quite different than those in the aftermath of 1917. It is now three decades since the Stalinist bureaucracy liquidated the Soviet Union and restored capitalism in Russia and Eastern Europe, the trade unions in the United States and everywhere else operate as an arm of management—suppressing strikes, isolating workers wherever opposition does emerge and imposing deep concessions.

However, the supposed triumph of capitalism and proclamations of the “end of history” have been thoroughly exposed by three decades of unending war, an eruption in inequality and the destruction in the living standards and life expectancy of the working class. With the murderous response of the capitalist elites to the pandemic resulting in the deaths of half a million Americans and more than 2.4 million globally so far, while they hand themselves trillions of dollars in bailouts, the conditions are ripe for the eruption of revolutionary struggles in the US and internationally.

Those who seek to create meaningful art will not make headway by turning inward into myopic self-absorption, but by turning outward to the working class and seeking to comprehend the turbulence of social life generally. Art is not about the elevation of the self, but the cognition of life. The best art will be made by those who orient themselves to understanding and exposing the fundamental contradictions of life under capitalism while striving for a society which is organized to meet human need and not to boost the profits and stock portfolios of a privileged few.



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