

“The Family” and their Colored Auxiliary

Elizabeth Mendez Berry and Chi-hui Yang make some good points in their *New York Times* essay, “The Dominance of the White Male Critic.” The gist of the article was that white male critics tote racist assumptions when viewing art by blacks.

The problem is not that these critics lack some essential connection with the work of artists of color,” the art critic Aruna D’Souza said in an interview. “It’s that many of them simply are not familiar with the intellectual, conceptual and artistic ideas that underlie the work.”

“To be sure, people of color did review the [2019 Whitney Biennial] show. But their work was much less visible than that of the white reviewers, a dynamic shaped by the perception that the opinions of people of color are not universal.”

Depends upon which people of color you’re referring to. My play, *The Haunting of Lin Manuel Miranda*, which challenges some of the nation’s creation myths, was greeted enthusiastically by the black media, with raves in *The New York Amsterdam News* and black radio including the popular Jeanne Parnell Show. There were favorable reviews by whites, both men and women. Even on the daytime TV show, “The View,” but put downs appeared in *The Times* review by Sopan Deb. An ignorant review by Nawal Arjini appeared in *The Nation*. In comparison to *The Nation* review, Deb was mild. He merely

noted that I hadn't seen the play. My answer was that I had read Miranda's "Hamilton" book and even quoted from it. The lines where Miranda has Hamilton objecting to slaves being treated as private property, which contradicted the historical record on Hamilton's attitude toward blacks. He ranked slaves along with horses and cows and constantly referred to blacks as property to be owned. I finally saw a production of *Hamilton* and my criticism became even more cutting.

Ms. Nawal Arjini, a Harvard graduate and obviously a student of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., which is why she spent as much time on my novel, *Mumbo Jumbo*, as on the play. I think that he still teaches the book. Her line "And yet the intervening years seem to have given Reed more factual ammunition than artistic inspiration," is the line from the Skip Machine, which she mimics, slavishly. She's saying that I haven't done anything "artistic" since the publication of *Mumbo Jumbo* in 1972. She nor Gates couldn't possibly have read all of my plays, novels, poetry and song lyrics, as some are presently in production for upcoming publication, and so she's relying on her *Nation* editors knowing little about black literature. A literary con game, which she learned from the master con artist. Of course, this Gate's line doesn't explain how I have managed to earn two awards for theater from people who know more about the subject than Ms. Arjini or Gates. They don't have the intellectual chops to comprehend why I was awarded an international prize for poetry in Venice by people who know more about poetry than Ms. Arjini or her mentor or why one of

my poems as selected for inclusion in *The Best American Poetry 2019* by a judge who knows more about poetry than she or Gates. Think that Cassandra Wilson, Taj Mahal, Macy Gray, would have chosen to record my songs had they all been about “facts?”

She ends her review by using the old literary Pat Juber, pitting one black writer against another for the entertainment of *The Nation's* readership, where a black critic was put up to asserting that I was done in the 1980s, during a drive-by attempted literary assassination. She implies that Amiri Baraka could have written a better play. She's not aware that I admired Amiri's writing so much that I published two of his books. “The Family,” named for the Manhattan elite that has been pushing tokens upon the black literary scene for 100 years, and who hated Amiri Baraka when he was alive are now recommending his books for Christmas shopping. Claude McKay was among the first tokens selected, but broke with “The Family,” over the issue of race vs. class.

Sopan Deb, Nawal Arjini and Pankaj Mishra are among critics of South Asian ancestry who've been recruited by the white literature establishment to channel its attitude toward black writers. They've been recruited to monitor the literary expressions of traditional black Americans in order to win brownie points from their employers by putting us down. Also why is my work called “manic,” “madcap” or in a *The New Yorker* review by Hua Hsu called “perverse” when I'm using techniques that white artists have employed at least since the

1920s. What on earth is “justified paranoia,” or “a hollow catharsis?” I’m crazy? Why would the Chinese government pay for the study of my novel, *Japanese by Spring*, a novel that puzzled these narrow assed eurocentrics and their colored auxiliary. Eurocentric with a lowercase “e” because they don’t even get Europe right.

The harshest review came from *The Times* critic Elisabeth Vincentelli. She was smug and sarcastic about my indictment of the Founding Fathers. Her odd theory of theater is that it must have a dialectic. She’s French. She came to the United States in the 1980s and so she might have a different take on American history than me. My great great grandmother was a slave and wore the signs of beatings on her back. My grandfather and his sister were murdered by racists and the murderers went free. She said that the play was not “engaging.” Another critic found the reading “boring.” Other reviewers note the enthusiastic, packed sold-out houses for both the reading of the play and full production.

These critics have to ask themselves, why the publications that employ them have overlooked black critics who have devoted their lives to the study of black literature? They feel that black critics are not to be trusted? That they will lean over backwards to compliment a black writer, which is what they do for white writers. Only in the United States would pinch-headed bigots like Tom Wolfe, Saul Bellow and Philip Roth be considered great writers.

The Nation editors asked me to write a letter pointing out the errors in her piece. No, I have my own magazine. I don't have to beg nobody to publish my stuff. I don't have to beg Hollywood to do my films. We publish writers whom we don't tone down or workshop so that their works won't offend people with money.

In this issue you will find some. Julian Marzan, Rishi Nath, Chris Stroffolino Jeffrey Renard Allen, C. Liegh McInnis and Speranza. Evany Zirul says all we wish to say about the current president. Another winning issue organized by Tennessee Reed.

Editor
