

## [Onwuzuruoha on English and Barat, 'Among Others: Blackness at MoMA'](#)

Review published on Monday, February 22, 2021

**Darby English, Charlotte Barat, eds.** *Among Others: Blackness at MoMA*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2019. Illustrations. 488 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), [ISBN 978-1-63345-034-9](#). 

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**Commissioned by** David D. Hurlbut (Independent Scholar)

**Printable Version:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=55564>

*Among Others: Blackness at MoMA* is a weighty collection: the compilation offers a history of black art currently or once housed at one of America's most prestigious museums so far-reaching that it is nearly impossible to hold with one hand. Vibrant images are beautifully placed throughout, including well-known works by Jacob Lawrence, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Kara Walker, which many would travel long distances to experience in person. Released in 2019, only months before unprecedented racial unrest, *Among Others* imparts those engaged in anti-racism a means to educate themselves on the history of black erasure in white-dominant, elite spaces, such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). The anthology could easily exist as a coffee-table read for art lovers and art history neophytes who are first moved by images before written text, but it proves to be much more than that.

Readers discover a nuanced formulation on blackness at MoMA by reading Charlotte Barat and Darby English's introductory essay. At nearly eighty-five pages, it is long enough to be considered a monograph. Though MoMA published the collection, Barat and English refuse to water down the museum's feeble past attempts to recognize the richness of black artists it agreed to showcase. The authors force readers to sit with the discomfiting truth on MoMA's history with their title: "Blackness at MoMA: A Legacy of Deficit." They assert MoMA denied black artists and exhibitions it featured the regard they deserved. While readers quickly grasp MoMA's complicated history with black artists, the authors continue to highlight these struggles with the hard-hitting statement, "Both historically and today, in neither art nor political culture can black subjects assume fair representation. We have had to pursue it, insist on it, insert it, stand witness to its withholding or diminishment or withdrawal—then again pursue it, insist on it, insert it. The history of blackness at MoMA is a case in point" (p. 17). Throughout the introductory essay, Barat and English unearth MoMA's confusions with showcasing black artists, such as William Edmonson, and its missteps acknowledging monumental periods of African American history—for example, the 1969 protest led by artist Faith Ringgold calling for the end of MoMA's "cultural genocide" against blacks and Puerto Ricans (p. 56). Their opening essay in *Among Others* carries a level of gripping honesty that many would deem impressive.

Barat and English include artifacts in their essay that they, presumably, only had access to as curators at MoMA and, more importantly, with the museum's permission to delve through its

archives. For example, included is a letter written in 1938 by former MoMA director Alfred H. Barr stating that he saw little "intrinsic value" in Alain Locke's work. To Barr, several pieces that Locke wanted to contribute to a prospective compilation were "pretty mediocre" (p. 34). Additionally, an excerpt from a 1994 Friends of Education committee membership note illustrates ways to increase the number of black patrons that goes against the public relations firm MoMA hired for the endeavor. Barat and English see the note as a failure to recognize the sense of alienation black artists feel when attempting to coexist in spaces dominated by those not of African descent. These and other artifacts make Barat and English's essay an exceptional historiographic project. The 508 citations also speak volumes to the herculean effort to produce an intellectual piece destined to become a significant contribution to the art world. The research and final product are on caliber with other books English, a professor in art history at the University of Chicago and former MoMA adjunct art curator, has published during his tenure at both institutions.

Art historians may, however, find themselves engaged with *Among Others* less critically for the most considerable portion. The eponymously titled section has over 150 contributors, each writing typically one page, sometimes two or three, on the particular artist's style and contributions to a larger artistic movement before providing a condensed interpretation of select works. A few pages into the collection, there is a table of contents organized by artist plates, and near the end, the list is organized by contributors. The many hands involved in this project, some well known like Kara Walker, who profiles José Clemente Orozco, and others whose connection to the art world is less apparent, make the collection an encyclopedia of sorts. The more than 350 pages devoted to these plates are trusted refreshers, likely closely reviewed by editors Barat and English, which one could reference when researching an artist or artistic movement. Nevertheless, these contributions do not match the magnitude of Barat and English's essay as an authoritative source, especially if one is looking to encounter a detailed biography for an artist.

Between Barat and English's essay and the series of artist plates is Columbia University Architecture, Planning, and Preservation professor Mabel O. Wilson's brief section titled "White by Design." The scholar poses a question specific to her field yet abstractly maintains some implication for the art community: "What then is architecture's power, particularly of racialization, both within the institution and beyond the archive's walls" (p. 102)? Wilson's contribution to *Among Others* reminds readers that much of the art they expect to discover in this collection captures rather than affects black people's daily lives. She makes the argument that architecture and design "racially divide spaces in cities and towns across the United States," which has tremendous power in dictating the welfare of these minoritized people (p. 106). Before her essay comes to a close, Wilson answers her own question by revealing that "the power of the architecture and its archive is to build 'whiteness' by design" (p. 108). As bereaved as her ending may leave readers, between the lines of pessimism, her words offer the same hope as Barat and English's, "It's not all bad news," in their essay (p. 15). If one acknowledges the pathology of racism when brought to light, reparative measures can begin. Ultimately, *Among Others* achieves the objectives that English, Barat, Wilson, and the myriad of contributors set for it. It is exhaustive but not exhausting for the way it is meant to be read—not page by page but more as an anthology or reference guide. It is visceral on account of its truthfulness but gentle in its handling of black subjectivity. Overall, the affective nature of the publication will interest a wide variety of readers.

**Citation:** Nkenna Onwuzuruoha. Review of English, Darby; Barat, Charlotte, eds., *Among Others*:

*Blackness at MoMA*. H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. February, 2021. URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55564>

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