

New York Times photo essay that mirrors Black photographer's project in Chicago prompts apology

Within an hour on the morning of Sept. 5, Chicago photographer Tonika Johnson had received a tag on Instagram, a tweet, a Facebook message and text from friends notifying her about the “The Great Divide” a photographic [story](#) by the New York Times that highlights the overt disparities in quality of life for residents in two Chicago neighborhoods.

At first glance, Johnson's friends thought the Times article was a presentation of her work, [Folded Map](#). In 2017, Johnson used Chicago's grid system to create Folded Map, a project that visually connects residents who live at corresponding addresses on the North and South sides of Chicago and investigates the impact of urban segregation on those residents.

“All of them were so excited because they thought it was an introduction or feature of The Folded Map,” Johnson said. “They were broken-hearted and disgusted when they found out that it was not.”

FOLDED MAP

6329 S. Paulina



6330 N. Paulina



ADDRESS
PAIRS

(Courtesy of Tonika Johnson)

The incident, which prompted an editor's note from the New York Times and a public apology from the white photographer whose work was featured, illustrates how hard it still is for Black photographers to break into an industry that is built on connections. Those connections privilege photographers who are white or who went to the "right" schools or who have money to afford the best equipment.

"They cover these important issues and proclaim to be dedicated to being more inclusive in their coverage and showing a variety of perspectives but their internal practices do not reflect that," Johnson said. "There is a system and it's reflective of systemic racism and injustice."

Johnson, a Black social justice

artist who is [well known in Chicago](#), said she knew she was not the only person sharing information about Chicago's segregation and historic inequities. She had seen it written about many times in news stories, reports, studies and books.

But she had never seen it photographed. That is why she created the Folded Map, to visually document those inequities. She said that was her contribution to the larger study of segregation.

When she saw the New York Times did a photographic interpretation of the disparity between two Chicago neighborhoods, Johnson, a 2019 recipient of a [prestigious leadership award](#) funded by the MacArthur Foundation, said she recognized it as her work.

"I was upset because I felt they stole my project, did it in a subpar way and hired a white male photographer to come into my home neighborhood to photograph it," she said. "It looked ill-informed."

Ari Isaacman Bevacqua, director of communications for The New York Times, referred GJR to the editor's note added to the photo essay and declined further comment.

Johnson, a Chicago native, said it was a cheap way to raise awareness about segregation.

Alec Soth, the white photographer who was asked by the Times to do the project, told GJR that he did not intend

to mirror Johnson's work. Folded Map does side-by-side comparison photographs.

Soth said he was asked only to take the photos, which Times photo editors then

arranged them side-by-side. He added that his work was a part of a larger

three-part [series](#) from the New York Times titled "The America We Need."

Soth said he immediately emailed

Johnson an apology when he found out about the Times piece.

When he did not get

a reply, he wrote a public [apology](#) on social media.

"While I had no knowledge of

Johnson's work, I feel terrible for the offense I've caused,"

Soth said on

Instagram. "I apologize to Tonika Lewis Johnson and very much regret accepting

this assignment."

Soth acknowledged Johnson's Folded

Map project in the post and [donated](#) the \$1,500

he received from the New York Times assignment to The Folded Map. Soth said he

will not be working with The New York Times or any other newspaper in the

future because the two instances he has worked with a newspaper in his 20-year

career were problematic. Both occasions were with the Times.

Soth said he also

does not want to be viewed as a journalist.

Juliet Dervin, who lives in Chicago and is a director of digital content and user experience at a publishing company,

said Soth's response impressed her. She said she wrote to Soth and thanked him for his apology.

Soth is the model the New York Times should follow, Dervin said. Dervin, who has produced videos for the Folded Map, said the Times handled the whole situation poorly.

“It’s a sickening feeling when you see someone who’s done such great work over a period of years who committed her life to her work and her community to get so grossly overshadowed and ignored by an institution that has the audience, stature and the importance of the New York Times.”

After “The Great Divide” was published, the Times added an editor’s [note](#) that acknowledged Johnson’s Folded Map project. The acknowledgement did not include an apology.

Johnson said the acknowledgement was an immediate Band-Aid over a wound that will take time to heal. The attribution would not have happened without her supporters emailing and contacting Soth and the Times on social media, she said. She added it was “digital mobilizing” and another form of protest.

Mike Zajakowski, director of photography at Chicago Magazine, said this incident is a good internal teaching moment for the Times or at least worth a discussion for the newspaper.

Zajakowski said after George Floyd’s [death](#), there are more discussions among photographers about proper representation in storytelling and the concerns of

covering communities of color.

When Floyd died, Soth said he turned down several assignments and referred them to local Black photographers.

Nyia Sissac, a young black photography major at Columbia College Chicago, said she often sees artists take credit for other artists' work and would feel disrespected if she were Johnson. Black female photographers work too hard to be overlooked, she said.

The Tonika Johnson Scholarship of Photography recipient, an award Johnson established at Columbia in 2019 to help students develop as socially responsible and engaged photographers, said Johnson is inspirational and has helped her stay in college. The Times should remove "The Great Divide" or do something more than give Johnson a "footnote" Sissac said.

Johnson said she would like the Times to feature the Folded Map, which thoroughly explores segregation in Chicago. The feature would align with the quality of reporting the Times is known to do and properly show respect for the work that Johnson has done.

Johnson's longtime friend, Leslé Honoré, said Johnson has dedicated her life to Folded Map. The poet and author added it is not something she does as a hobby—it is who she is.

“Our entire existence here as a people in the United States has called for us [black and brown people] to do our own art, research and be our own forms of representation,” Honoré said.

“It’s foolish for any person who is not black or brown to assume that a concept that deals specifically with black and brown plight is something new that they just discovered.”

Myer

Lee is a Chicago-based correspondent who has written for the Columbia Chronicle and Fansided’s Rip City Project. You can see more of his work [here](#) or follow him on Twitter @thesquarescriv