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Social media erupts over depiction of mayoral candidate Tami Sawyer

Critics call caricature of Sawyer racist and sexist. Memphis magazine says it's part of "a long-standing satirical tradition."



MLK50 Memphis Following

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The cover of Memphis magazine juxtaposed against a photo of Tami Sawyer.

By Deborah Douglas

Memphis magazine's cover caricature of black mayoral candidate Tami Sawyer set social media afire this weekend as many denounced the depiction as racist and sexist.

Sawyer released a statement calling out the magazine for what she calls a "Jim Crow Era cartoon" that makes her look like a "monster." The campaign also pointed to several factual errors in the cover story and demanded a retraction. The illustrator, Chris Ellis, defended his gross rendering in online comments calling Sawyer a "monstrously obese female of color" who is "deserving" of the final outcome.

Under the headline "Regarding Our September Cover," the magazine issued a statement Saturday on its website addressing the uproar after receiving complaints about the cover, which included caricatures of the three major mayoral candidates in the Oct. 3 municipal election — Mayor Jim Strickland, former mayor Willie Herenton and Sawyer.

"It was not our intention to demean any of the candidates or to satirize one more than the others, but we are sympathetic to the perceptions our readers have shared. We regret and apologize for any pain this caricature of public figures has caused."

(Update: Contemporary Media CEO Anna Traverse issued a second statement Sunday, headlined "We Failed Memphis." "Being a print publication, a certain number of copies already exist out in the world. We have, however, halted newsstand distribution of the September issue to as many retail locations as possible," she wrote.)


Ellis, who grew up in Memphis and now lives in California, was profiled in *The Commercial Appeal* in 2017.

Here's what people are saying:

Reactions aren't confined to Memphis. Ida B. Wells' great-granddaughter, Michelle Duster, a Chicago-based academic and author, got wind of the controversy. She took aim at Memphis magazine's statement:

The artist spoke for himself, via Facebook. Twice he referred to Sawyer as “monstrously obese.” Here's one explanation he offered:





A few people defended the rendering, suggesting the caricature did its job to exaggerate or that people were overreacting. Overwhelmingly, folks deemed the cover a failure.

On Sunday, the Memphis Association of Black Journalists released the following statement:

“The Memphis Association of Black Journalist is gravely concerned about the images and the message behind the cover of the September issue of the Memphis Magazine. While we have received words of concern about the magazine’s cover, MABJ finds the images on the cover of the September issue unflattering and does not paint either of the three mayoral candidates in a positive light.

“We acknowledge the move of Contemporary Media CEO, Anna Traverse, stopping the circulation of the September issue of the Memphis Magazine. However, we ask this be taken as a teachable moment. All art does have a place in the universe, but it doesn’t mean questionable art should be displayed on the cover of a magazine named after a city we all are working to unify. That art should always be vetted thoroughly before circulation.

“MABJ believes firmly this situation opens the door for Contemporary Media to revisit the diversity of its editorial board. Going forward, I offer the opportunity for the artist and leaders from Contemporary Media to begin dialogue about this situation with MABJ and its members.”

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