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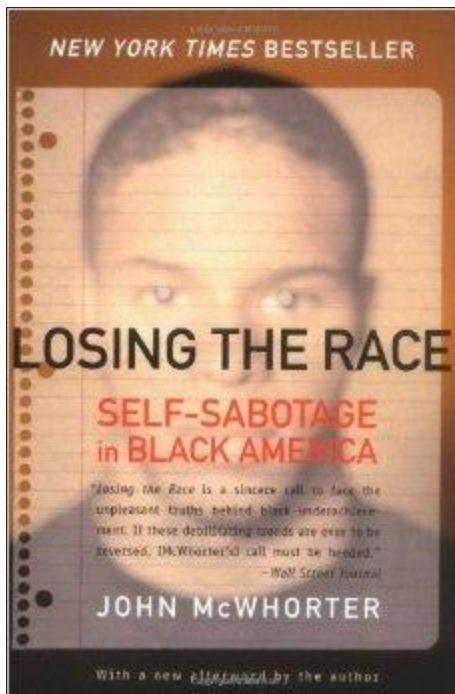
Why Do Black Students Lag Behind?

They don't really try, a Cal professor says – and causes a furor in academia

Rona Marech, Chronicle Staff Writer

After a yearlong sabbatical, John McWhorter is trying to return to the insulated life of academia, but the phone won't stop ringing. A Republican in Orange County wants him to run for office; a radio station in Louisville, Ky., is interested in booking him; a black woman says he's her hero; an older white man just wants to chat.

McWhorter, fielding calls in his University of California at Berkeley office, nods politely, but as the latest addition to a small association of high-profile black conservatives, he's showing some signs of weariness. He no longer does local radio shows. He's tired of hostile crowds at readings, and the insults lobbed at him in the media have left him prickly about interviews.



The attention is unexpected, McWhorter said, but critics contend that when an African American writes a book that affirms what white conservatives have been saying for decades, he's virtually assured an audience. The most cynical suggest it's an easy way to sell books and make money.

McWhorter insists that "Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America" (Free Press, \$24), which came out in August, arose from a genuine desire to lend a service to his race. His opinions, however, are unsettling — even nefarious — to many: Racism, if not over, is greatly reduced. Black culture is "infected" with widespread anti-intellectualism. Affirmative action was a necessary evil, but has outlived its usefulness.

The reaction to the book, which McWhorter said his own mother would have hated, has been swift and loud. Articles in publications from The Weekly

Standard to the Wall Street Journal and U.S. News and World Report have congratulated him for speaking the difficult truth. He's spoken on dozens of radio programs and has been contacted by a host of black conservatives, including — he had to admit this felt glamorous — Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. Meanwhile,

numerous black intellectuals have dismissed the book, now in its sixth printing, as unoriginal and analytically weak.

"If a white man had written a book with shallow arguments such as these, it wouldn't be published," said Ishmael Reed, an author and a UC Berkeley professor of English. "I think he covers familiar territory. . . . It's like whipping a dead horse with the stuff."

In his quiet office at UC Berkeley, McWhorter, a linguistics professor, said: "I just wanted to get my thoughts out there. Generally, we only tend to hear one black view. If you hear the other black view, that person tends to be presented as some kind of freak."

The intense interest in his book has been "utterly surprising and somewhat overwhelming," he said, "but ultimately, if this is the way it's going to have to be, then I will shoulder the burden."

FEELING OUT OF STEP

McWhorter first rose to prominence during the 1996 ebonics showdown in Oakland. As one of the few black linguistics experts opposed to teaching black English as a second language, he was quoted frequently.

"Throughout the '90s, I found that I never seemed to agree with most black people I knew about any race event that came up," he said. "I felt like I was on a different planet than most black people."

Discussions about the O.J. Simpson trial, the Million Man March and affirmative action in the UC system fueled McWhorter's sense of alienation.

"The main thread running through all this disagreement was that even black people who had led advantaged lives such as mine, which today is many more black people than were brought up in the ghetto, their general perspective seemed to be that black Americans still remain victims. And that if it's not a matter of signs on the water fountain, then it's just changed in terms of quality but not in quantity. I didn't feel this. I didn't feel it personally, and I didn't feel that events over the past 35 years of our history supported it."

McWhorter's book attempts, in part, to answer a troubling question: Why do middle-class black students continue to score lower on tests than their white peers, as a set of recent studies have indicated? That difficult question had long been taboo, because racist arguments about genetic inferiority has surfaced all too often in the past. But in recent years researchers and educators have offered other theories to explain the disparity, such as racial stereotyping or teachers' low expectations.

The racial gap in academic achievement is the “single most important civil rights issue of our time,” said Abigail Thernstrom, co-author of the controversial book “America in Black and White: One Nation Indivisible” (Touchstone Books, \$18). “If we don’t close the gap, we will never get to the point of racial equality in this country.”

In “Losing the Race,” McWhorter writes that while he has occasionally encountered racism, those incidents were inconveniences rather than obstacles to advancement. Most blacks don’t live in poverty or face overwhelming odds, he argues. But, he says, blacks who are part of a growing middle class tend to exaggerate their oppression. This “victimology” mind-set coupled with repudiation of “white” mainstream culture is what keeps them from being the best they can be in school and beyond.

In his book, McWhorter uses observation, personal anecdotes and others’ research to support his conclusions. He describes how a band of black kids tormented him for being a good speller when he was young and moves on from there.

In one of the most disturbing sections of the book, he tells story after story of black UC undergraduates he has taught who had spotty attendance records, disappeared without explanation, avoided research, were generally disengaged or flunked out.

“. . . In my years of teaching, I have never had a student disappear without explanation, or turn in a test that made me wonder how she could have attended class and done so badly, who was not African American,” he writes.

He is convinced that black people think of school as a “white” thing: “The sad but simple fact is that while there are some excellent black students, on the average, black students do not try as hard as other students. . . . All of these students belong to a culture infected with an anti-intellectual strain, which subtly but decisively teaches them from birth not to embrace schoolwork too wholeheartedly.”

He regrets that he personally gained from affirmative action, which he compares to “an emergency measure, doing great harm for the sake of a greater good just as chemotherapy and radiation treatment are worth the benefit of killing a tumor.” Affirmative action diminishes accomplishment, he writes, and deprives black students of the incentive to reach for the highest bar. As it applies to education, he endorses Proposition 209, the 1996 voter-approved initiative that bans state and local governments from giving preference to women and minorities in contracting, hiring and college admissions.

CRITICS WEIGH IN

Critics say McWhorter has gained an undeserved spotlight, noting that books like “Shape of the River,” a comprehensive study of the positive gains of affirmative action by William G. Bowen, Derek Bok and Glenn C. Loury (Princeton University Press, \$16.95), have gotten less play in the media. They say he underestimates racism and is

hypocritical for taking advantage of affirmative action and then pulling the proverbial ladder up behind him.

McWhorter generalized unfairly and sacrificed scholarly rigor, critics assert.

"It's all based on anecdotal information," said Manning Marable, a history professor and director of African American Studies at Columbia University. "In many real ways, it's kind of an egocentric polemic which attributes blame and problems that are manifested in black students' behavior to personal and cultural flaws within the black community rather than looking at the fairly unfriendly constitutional contexts in which they must be successful.

"There's no critical analysis of institutional racism in higher education, nor is there any effort to quantify with analysis," Marable said.

McWhorter responds that he spent eight months researching the book and that he wasn't trying to crunch numbers. When books that dwell on racism use anecdotes, he complained, they're trumpeted as "vivid memoirs" or "reportage from the front lines."

Pedro Noguera, a Harvard University education professor, said McWhorter's analysis of black progress doesn't take into account the fragility of the black middle class or the role inheritance plays in perpetuating the wealth gap between white and black families with similar incomes.

"I think he is right to a certain degree that there is a certain anti-intellectualism that is present among many African Americans," Noguera said. "I would argue that it's also present among students of all kinds." When white students slack off academically, he added, their failures are never explained in racial terms.

Noguera, who taught at UC Berkeley for a decade, said black students often sought his guidance. "When I took the time to mentor and encourage them, I saw many perform at very high levels," he said. "The greatest harm he's done with this book is to send the message that something is wrong with black students and black culture."

Reed is also perplexed by McWhorter's assessment of black students at UC. "He can say black students aren't interested in intellectual pursuits, and I can say they are," he said.

Though McWhorter considered pulling those damning passages, he said he decided the anecdotes illustrated his point better than statistics ever could. "Many think I'm hanging my brothers and sisters out to dry. Yeah, I know what they mean, but if I hadn't told those stories, there wouldn't be a debate going on right now around the country," McWhorter said.

"He may be right, he may be wrong. We'll argue about it for a long time," author Abigail Thernstrom said. "But he really has focused the attention of a lot of people on that (achievement gap) question."

LABEL DOESN'T QUITE FIT

His opponents might scoff, but McWhorter says the "conservative" label he's been stuck with is more convenient than absolutely accurate. He's not a registered Republican, he voted for Ralph Nader in the last two presidential elections, is decidedly pro-choice and resents being used as a football by Rush Limbaugh and his ilk. His favorite director is Spike Lee. Because he approves of class-based affirmative action in college admissions and favors using affirmative action in the business sphere, he said he's the lefty in the group of black conservatives he's suddenly found himself amid.

McWhorter began developing his eclectic ideology in Mount Airy, an integrated enclave of Philadelphia. His mother, who earned a doctorate in child psychology, taught social work. His father was a student activities administrator.

Later, McWhorter's family moved to the black community of Lawnside, N.J., and at 15, the precocious teenager left home to attend Simon's Rock College in Massachusetts, a school for high-school-age students. He received an undergraduate degree in French from Rutgers University, a master's degree in American Studies from New York University and a linguistics doctorate from Stanford University.

A UC Berkeley fellowship eventually led to an appointment, and in 1999, he was awarded tenure. He can speak or read French, Spanish, German, Italian, Portuguese, Dutch, Russian, Hebrew, and at 35, he has five books behind him and the sixth, a natural history of language, is on its way.

McWhorter loves musicals and dinosaurs, has studied opera and watches a great deal of television. Though he's unfailingly civil in explaining all this,

he's also inscrutable. Even his smile seems contained.

"The truth is," he said, "it's not easy to get inside me."

His sister, Holly McWhorter, paused when asked to describe him. "He tries hard to be a good person," she said. "I think he has a lot of guts."

When critics say that McWhorter is trying to escape his heritage, he is quick to point out that he grew up among black people even if he doesn't sound like it.

"I don't have the right voice for what I'm doing," he said. "I'm perceived as 'talking white.' . . . If I could say what I'm saying with the voice of Chris Rock, my message would get across more."

When McWhorter returned to the university classroom Jan. 17 for the first time in a year, the lecture hall where he's teaching an undergraduate survey class in linguistics was packed.

McWhorter, obviously passionate about the material, went through the usual routine: office hours, homework, midterm, final. He gave a short lecture sprinkled with jokes and made a point of saying what the class was not about. "This will have very little to do with education, politics or racial issues," he said. "You will be disappointed if that's what you've come for."

P.J. MacAlpine, a junior, said most black students she's talked with were incensed by McWhorter's conclusions. She's read articles about him and was offended by some of his opinions, but doesn't expect politics to surface in class and chose to enroll anyway.

"I did enjoy it," she said after the first lecture. "But a lot of people will not see that because they can't divorce his political views from his classroom. . . . Will he assume those things of them? That's uncomfortable."

McWhorter is concerned that black students might despise him or avoid his classes, but said he's willing to suffer that reputation. He wishes he had made it clearer that many of his arguments don't apply to black students admitted to UC Berkeley after Proposition 209 went into effect. Otherwise, he has no regrets.

"Black people all know about this," he said. "It's very easy to talk about at a black barbecue, but the idea is that when the mike is on, you're not supposed to talk about it."

Hundreds of supportive black and white readers have written, e-mailed or called him, he said, and, if anything, he's only grown more resolved. "I think I'm right," he said. "I am right. I know I'm right. They're wrong. It's so plain. They can no more hurt me than they can tell me the sky is fuchsia."