



# Voice of DISSIDENT

*Berkeley professor and author of the controversial book *Losing the Race*, Dr. John McWhorter speaks to BLACK ISSUES about leaving the African American Studies Department, being a Black professor and his intense media coverage.* BY PAMELA BURDMAN

BERKELEY, CALIF.

**D**r. John McWhorter was little known outside the field of linguistics until the Oakland school board passed its controversial proposal on ebonics in late 1996. One of a handful of Black linguists, and the only one openly critical of the Oakland plan, McWhorter was for days a regular feature on network news shows. In his latest book, *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*, McWhorter continues to be a voice of dissent among Black intellectuals. Since the cancer (racism) is basically eradicated, he says, African Americans should drop the chemotherapy-like policies of affirmative action that taint their achievements, though he supports affirmative action in some arenas. He urges Black people to stop seeing themselves as victims, stop espousing separatist visions and stop seeing intellectual achievement as the province of White people.

McWhorter's academic specialty is language change and language contact, with a concentration on pidgin and Creole languages. He has written two books on Creoles and one on ebonics. His next book, *The Power of Babel*, will appear later this year.

**BI:** You have said some Black people agree with your ideas, but they don't think these things should be aired publicly? Why do you think it's important to bring these ideas into public discussion?

**JM:** Residual racism is not an obstacle to success as much as we've all been told. We need to start discussing this openly, because these days the overt message we tend to send to new generations of Black students is Whitey's out to get you and this is something that's going to check your progress. The covert feeling that more and more African Americans have is that this isn't really true. Unfortunately, if the overt message is what young people, in particular, Black college students, tend to hear, then I think we end up stanching our potential. And I also think, frankly, that we end up perpetuating racism as White people watch this kind of debate and become more and more disenchanted with the civil rights revolution.

**BI:** Yet, in analyzing the three "cults" you discuss in the book: "victimology," separatism and anti-intellectualism, you call them products of his-

**tory, a seeming point of agreement with some of your detractors. Why didn't you emphasize that point more?**

**JM:** A great many people have traced the roots of these things. This is not a book of scholarship. I have written several scholarly books. This is an informed editorial. There is a sense that many African Americans have taken too much to heart, that history is destiny, which is a tic that I see in a great many very smart and concerned African Americans. The statement is assumed to be that "this is because of sharecropping and segregation," rather than "this is because of segregation and sharecropping, and here's what we're going to do to get beyond it." It's that second part that interests me more than the first part in the year 2001.

**BI:** But didn't you ever feel the instinct to dwell on the first part?

**JM:** Well, if you're a Black teen-ager who grew up with a social worker mother who did not like White people very much, then naturally you're going to start falling for that line. What made me feel differently was simply the empirical evidence. You live a life, you watch White people, you see the things that happen to you, you read your history, and you realize there is something very different about the world I live in than the world people were living in even 30 years ago.

There are mainstream things in life that I love very, very much just as themselves. One of them is foreign languages. I love old movies. The Black ones are nice, but really what first hooked me was Fred and Ginger. I have loved dinosaurs since I was a child. There's nothing Black about that. Developing that oppositional Black identity means that you have to give those things up, and I couldn't do that. I'm too much of a nerd.

**BI:** You say Black students consider school a "White thing," to the extent that you have never had a student who wasn't African American "disappear without explanation or turn in a test that made me wonder how she could have attended class and done so badly." I know some professors at Berkeley dispute that experience. How have students reacted?

**JM:** Since I left the African American Studies Department, I don't have as many Black students as I used to have. A couple of Black students have approached me on campus dismayed. A couple have approached me agreeing with me. I hear there are students who despise what I have written. I am working now, rather closely, with three Black students here, and as far as they're concerned, it's not really an issue. They are pretty much exceptions to what I talk about; I hate to say it, partly because we no longer have racial preferences here, and so the Black students are here for the very same reason everybody else is.

The professors who say they've never seen this, with only one exception, are professors who are teaching what you might call "Black courses" or courses whose subjects are particularly directed toward the victim culture. My thumbnail hypothesis is that African American students might tend to devote themselves more wholeheartedly to courses like this, that would speak to them spiritually in this way. What you don't hear is that there's a kind of a silent, I can't say majority, but a great many Berkeley professors, very concerned, enlightened, thinking

White people, who agree completely with the things I have said. Now they're not going to write an op-ed... No White person wants to seem like they're a racist.

**BI:** You have written about UC President Richard Atkinson's proposal to scrap the SAT, and it sounds like you don't believe him when he says it's not about race.

**JM:** Of course not. It's about race, and I accept his concern and his pity. It's clear why he can't admit it. Richard Atkinson is very understandably operating under the impression that a White man of his generation would — that it's simply impossible for Black and Latino kids to do well on an abstract standardized test, because society keeps them from doing well. But he's not thinking about the fact that there are a great many Black and Latino students who are not poor. As far as I'm concerned, any Black education solution that doesn't set standards as high for us as for everyone else is an insult.

**BI:** When did you leave African American Studies and what prompted that?

**JM:** I left African American Studies in the spring of 1998 for the simple reason that it was a department that was very unfriendly to me. Ebonics was not a big deal to them. Ebonics was more of interest in linguistics departments than it was to the African American Studies Department. It wasn't that. But I guess I didn't walk the walk or talk the talk enough for them. I wasn't Black enough for them. I was faintly disliked, and I found it extremely

## John McWhorter

**AGE:** 35

**TITLE:** Associate Professor, Linguistics Department, University of California at Berkeley

**HOMETOWN:** Philadelphia

**EDUCATION:** Bachelor's, Rutgers University; master's in American Studies, New York University; Ph.D. in education, Stanford University

**LANGUAGES:** Fluent in Spanish and French, and proficient in German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Dutch, Swedish and Hebrew

**WHAT YOU'D BE SURPRISED TO KNOW ABOUT McWHORTER:**

He plays cocktail piano. He loves dinosaurs.

**WORDS TO LIVE BY:** "It's OK to look back as long as you don't stare."



uncomfortable. I think that the department does not challenge its students and that it was a den of mediocrity with the exception of two or three people.

**BI:** I couldn't help but wonder, reading the book, about (African American Studies professor) June Jordan. She comes up often, in very negative terms. Were there personal conflicts?

**JM:** I don't bear any animus toward her. I don't like her ideology. The reason that I quoted her by name, whereas many people I just said a professor or person, was that we did an ebonics debate in early 1997, where she basically verbally jumped me and made fun of me in a forum in which I couldn't defend myself. We were supposed to be colleagues in the same department, and she strayed from what academics are supposed to do and just did a backyard, ghetto catfight sort of thing. After what she did to me that day, why should I keep her name out of it? I needed a few names. I needed it to be clear that I was talking about real people. I could not have written this book if I was still in the African American Studies Department, but when I left the African American Studies Department, I had no idea I was going to write this book.

**BI:** You received tenure in early 1999, a year before the book came out. Would you have published this book before having tenure?

**JM:** Certainly. Think about it: Is UC Berkeley going to fire a young Black professor for expressing views that are against the mainstream? The irony would be rich. Even before I had tenure, they couldn't fire me. Not to mention that I had been almost overly diligent in my academic work. I have a CV a mile long.

**BI:** If you weren't Black enough for the African American Studies professors, wouldn't Black students respond that way, too?

**JM:** As I say in the book, the Black students tended to be my favorites. If anything, I think some of them were kind of playing me to an extent, because we got along so well. But the sort of things I saw went beyond even what would explain that. It was hard to write that section, because I like these kids. A lot of people think I don't like Black people. No, I know that I'm doing well for the race. We need the honesty first. I have a stack of old exams from that time sitting over there, and every six months, I go through it to make sure that I'm not crazy. This needed to be written about.

**BI:** You've written a lot for a 35-year-old professor. Is that in any way



related to the feeling you describe in the book of somehow being diminished by having been a beneficiary of affirmative action? Is it a way of proving yourself?

**JM:** No, it isn't, although that's a very apt question. I do it because I love it. I love writing more than anything. I'm not trying to prove anything. And to be honest, the sad and simple fact is no matter how much I write, it's not considered the same as if I were White. There is always a sense that it's a Black professor who has done these things and I think there's always a suspicion that the things I wrote were not as scientifically rigorous.

For example, there's one professor in this department — it's clear he doesn't think I speak French. Time and time again, he has seen me speaking French. He has read my CV. He has seen a whole paper

that I wrote in French. He still has the assumption that I don't speak the language.

**BI:** And that's not racism?

**JM:** No. He can't quite process it, but he's not a racist. But it's the sort of thing that I'm talking about: There is a sense that I'm a bit of a performing monkey, and there always will be. I was meant to be a scholar. I think both Whites and Blacks see that as something that a Black person only does to study themselves and not solely to do head work. I can't change that in my lifetime, but that is my tiny burden to bear. And frankly I think that's a darn sight better than where I would have been 50 years ago.

**BI:** Having left African American Studies, what are your thoughts about ethnic studies as a discipline?

**JM:** It varies from department to department. A major in Blackness and being Black and what it used to be like to be Black, unfortunately in practice has a way of teaching Black kids the extent to which they are victims even if they didn't know it before. It teaches Black kids about literature that people of their own ethnicity wrote, and that means that that's a course they're not taking about literature of the world. In an ideal world, I would like to see there be advanced degrees in those things. But for undergraduates, I would have it be just a minor. However, I don't think of ethnic studies departments as a scourge. It gives many Black students a great sense of belonging to be in those departments.

**BI:** You voted for Ralph Nader, you think Mumia Abu-Jamal was wrongly imprisoned, yet you've been contacted, I assume warmly, by Ward Connerly and Clarence Thomas. You wrote that Black people should be open-minded about George Bush. You've been described as a conservative. How do you describe yourself politically?

**JM:** I'm a centrist. "Black conservative" is a very sloppy label, because it means only one thing: a Black person who doesn't agree with racial preferences. That's it. One litmus test that you see is that Orlando Patterson, who wrote a very widely reviewed and very readable book called *The Ordeal of Integration*, says a lot of the things I say and is just as snippy in his tone sometimes as I am, but who decides that affirmative action ought to be continued. As such, somehow he keeps his good Black person's stripes. I'm the other litmus test. Because I don't believe in affirmative action, suddenly I am allied with Clarence Thomas. I can't fix that. The more you rail against a label, the more it's going to stick.

**BI:** Have any of these experiences changed your views or made you more open to conservative points of view?

**JM:** I would say that the experiences I've had since this book has come out have probably moved me a little bit to the right than I was before in terms of how I see a race getting ahead. I'm appalled at everything I see going on in the Bush administration, except for what relates to race. For me, it's becoming a wedge issue like abortion for some women. I'm not a Republican. This administration keeps reminding me I will never be a conservative. It's really how I feel about how a race moves up, and the idea that self-help or government-assisted self-help is a conservative position to take shows that our sense of what liberal and conservative is is getting extremely confused these days. My commitment is to raising a previously oppressed group upward that I belong to, and yet I'm a conservative? No. Clearly, that makes no sense. As time goes by, that label will lose its sting, as it becomes clear that we quote-unquote Black conservatives are the vanguard.

**BI:** What are the signs that Black conservatives are the vanguard?

**JM:** For example, there's a movement among Black ministers to develop closer relationships with Republicans, the idea being to solicit funds for churches to help inner-city communities. These ministers are not leftists in the sense of thinking that community pathology is OK because the White man won't cough up. But it's a more centrist Democratic than your Ishmael Reed would want. Here's another example: Shelby Steele 11 years ago caught holy hell with his book. I'm not catching as much. I have 1,100 pieces of mail, and of them, probably 400 of them are from Black people. And almost all of it is in praise. They're ordinary Black people who have stopped seeing themselves in the Black radical message of, say, the Congressional Black Caucus. There is a gestural lag, which is that Black people once they're in the voting booth, seem to think that the only party they should vote for is Democra-

tic, but if you look at polls of how most Black people seem to feel about many things, we're not really a very Democratic race anymore, and that will start to show.

**BI:** Before this article, you complained to me about articles you felt were taking pot shots at you, and yet, I think a lot of professors would envy the amount of coverage you've gotten.

**JM:** Not this kind of coverage. One thing nobody ever believes is that I really didn't know this book was going to be so successful. I wrote the book as just my 2 cents. This book was a very hard sell. It went through four proposals. The advance was quite moderate. I really expected to spend last fall semester sitting in my study, and then all of a sudden, I'm on TV every week. It's a chore frankly. Most Black interviewers think you're a freak. The White interviewers are a little too enthusiastic. You're on the line every time. Nothing is funnier to me than reading the occasional person saying I love seeing my face on TV.

**BI:** Does that mean you'll avoid writing these kinds of things in the future to avoid the glare?

**JM:** There will never be another book where I spend 300 pages criticizing Black people. Publishers in New York would love for me to write that book, and I've told them no. There will be a book that treats race, but it's going to surround race with a whole bunch of other topics. It's going to be a more philosophical book. The limelight is exhausting, and if there is more limelight, I would like it to be as something other than being a critic of Black people. I can't get my message out

without ever going on TV. But it's not fun.

**BI:** Do you think your message is getting out?

**JM:** I do. I did an appearance on "Fox News Sunday." It shot my book up to No. 1 on Amazon for three days.

**BI:** How many copies have you sold?

**JM:** Approaching 44,000.

**BI:** You mentioned to me that you may have children some day. Given what you've written in the book, how would you feel about being a parent to a Black child growing up in the early part of the 21st century?

**JM:** No child of mine could possibly take on those attitudes. My little girl will not be swayed by what Black kids tell her. I will exert too much of an influence on her. I just know that in my heart. By the time I have kids, it's going to be a rather different world. My children will grow up in a pretty interracial environment. ■