STATE OF THE DISCOURSE

FEATURED ARTICLE: CONVENIENTLY BLACK

Self-Delusion and the Racial Exploitation of African America[1]

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Commentary on the Following Publications

McWhorter, John H., *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*. New York: Free Press, 2000, 285 pages, ISBN 0 684 83669 6, $24.00.

McWhorter, John H., *Authentically Black: Essays for the Black Silent Majority*. New York: Gotham Books, 2003, 264 pages, ISBN 1 59240 001 9, $25.00.

I am one of those black people whose speech is "white" sounding.
John McWhorter, *Losing the Race*, 2000.

Scholars who rigorously study discrimination in the United States have long known that racial prejudice, while profoundly significant, is the formidable tip of a larger discriminatory iceberg where many factors—often including racial bigotry—have fed prejudicial bias in different ways. The subject is enormous, and, when treated with intellectual integrity, demands considerable research that exceeds anecdotal self-reflection. *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America* (*LTR*) and *Authentically Black: Essays for the Black Silent Majority* (*AB*), fall short of advancing race relations or the plight of Black Americans. Both books greatly oversimplify complex racial, educational, and other social issues and their multifarious consequences.

Numerous studies by anthropologists, biologists, economists, ethnographers, educators, linguists, political scientists, psychologists, and sociologists, among others, affirm the complexity of racial classification and potentially related discrimination throughout the world. McWhorter's audience may not readily detect that his racial heritage alone is no substitute for first-hand research among the African

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American population he seeks to uplift. He resorts to racial pandering as grist for his ideological zeal:

> If we consider it unreasonable for young black people to resist feeling deep, inconsolable offense at the slightest hint of racial bias, then how reasonably can we expect young white people not to take offense at being called racists despite their most earnest efforts to transcend their ancestor's mistakes? (2000, p. 47); or

> *In Living Color*, Damon Wayan's Homey the Clown was a Victimilogist *par excellence*, endlessly blaming his lowly job as a clown on a hopelessly exaggerated conception of racist oppression, . . . (2000, p. 48); or

> Victimology is seductive because there is an ironic and addictive contentment in underdoggism (2000, p. xiv).

Oversimplified assertions of this kind appear frequently in these texts at times breaching the threshold of irresponsible, if not reckless, remarks.

Losing the Race also contains assertions that are wrong and conveniently deceptive, such as the claim that McWhorter was the only African American linguist who was critical of the Oakland School District's Ebonics Resolution of 1996. By opportunistic coincidence, the Ebonics controversy is the very episode upon which McWhorter launched his lucrative public policy career (see Applebaum 1996; McWhorter 1997a, 1997b, 2000).

Because McWhorter completed his doctoral studies at Stanford, his intellectual and personal background were reasonably well known to me in advance of writing this essay. To the best of my knowledge he has never conducted original, first-hand field research in the African American communities of which he speaks. This is atypical among linguists of African descent who study African American English or the educational consequences of speaking it.

McWhorter anticipates criticism of this kind, deftly stating that his race work should not be judged by the same scholarly standards as his linguistic scholarship:

> Most of the criticisms leveled against *Losing the Race* were predictable. But the one that initially took me by surprise was the book is "not scholarly." I have since realized the source of this charge; apparently many are under an impression, quite reasonable, that a book written by someone with a Ph.D. will necessary be an academic one.
>
> Thus I must make it clear that I never intended *Losing the Race* as a work of scholarship, nor do I present this one as such. My academic work is in linguistics. . . . When wearing that hat, I intend my writings as what might be called *informed editorials* [emphasis added] (2003, pp. xiv–xv).

Informed editorials? Upon what basis are his editorials informed? Ironically, I personally brought the very matter of the substantive distinction between scholarly versus editorial writing directly to McWhorter's attention at a 1998 conference at which he and I had an animated public disagreement about his hero, Shelby Steele. On that occasion I leveled the same criticism against Steele that I now raise concerning McWhorter. Their exclusion of first-hand research, to say nothing of their ideological proclivities, has resulted in the intellectually expedient dissemination of factual errors at the expense of their African American kinsmen. Thomas Sowell (1994, 2004), who shares a political philosophy similar to that of Steele and McWhorter, has repeatedly demonstrated that conservative African American authors are at their

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best when buttressed by empirical evidence. Alas, such validating data are greatly lacking in the race writings of both Steele (1990, 1998) and McWhorter (2000, 2003). I therefore find these works of dubious value, particularly when compared to ideologically neutral scholarship that has been the hallmark of social science's finest contributions toward American racial reconciliation.

I strongly disagree with any assertion that scholarship on matters pertaining to race should be treated less rigorously when discussed by an African American academic. Indeed, is it not that lack of scholarly rigor that many affirmative action critics lament (Connerly 2000)? Moreover, I am absolutely certain that best-selling trade publications that are written for general audiences by academics, and especially by my fellow linguists (see Pinker 1995; Tannen 1990), routinely do so with explicit adherence to factual accuracy and other basic precepts of academic integrity.

Based on my professional assessment, it is difficult to compare legitimately most African American vernacular English (AAVE) linguistic and educational scholarship, by scholars from various racial backgrounds, with many of the uninformed incendiary platitudes that saturate both books under current consideration. Take for example: "Victimology is today nothing less than a keystone of cultural blackness" (2000, p. 36); or "Victimology seduces young black people just like the crack trade seduces inner-city blacks, virtually irresistible in its offer of an easy road to self-esteem and some cheap thrills on the way" (2000, p. 39); or "At Stanford in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was also understood among black fraternity members that one was only to date white women undercover—to do so openly compromised one's 'black identity.' Harmony this was not" (2003, p. 147). Glib, racially charged, unsubstantiated claims of this kind do more than raise the specter of social irresponsibility, they expose weaknesses in two books that are highly self-reflective from an author who has had very limited first-hand exposure to inner-city Blacks throughout his life.

> Victimololgy feels good. In my teens and early twenties I espoused it wholeheartedly. When I was fifteen a high-school homeroom teacher made me sit separately from the other students because I had continued chatting with my friend in what I thought was a quiet voice despite her repeated requests that I stop. Embarrassed at having been singled out this way (in front of a girl I liked), I grumbled that she was putting me aside so that she could only see white faces in front of her, and worst of all I addressed this sentiment to her daughter. It felt good at the time, but I cringe thinking about it now (p. 39).

Taken at face value, McWhorter's personal confession of having espoused racial victimization took place under circumstances that confirm that he was the only African American student in this high school class, thereby affirming a personal history of considerable racial isolation from fellow African Americans during his formative adolescence; that is, while he attended a predominantly White school. Most Black students whom McWhorter deems intellectually unworthy are unlikely to share the benefit of his superior education afforded by graduation from an elite private college preparatory school and ensuing affirmative action programs of which he has taken every available advantage.[2] Of immediate relevance to the discussion at hand, his racial isolation from other African Americans is evident in both books, to the detriment of their accuracy or practical utility.

The predominantly White racial cocoon in which Professor McWhorter was educated created the racial isolation that, in all likelihood, accounts for his " 'white' sounding" speech. However, all professional linguists are keenly aware that overt racial attribution to speech is misleading and perpetuates fallacious linguistic stereo-

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types. All professional linguists are keenly aware that race does not determine linguistic behavior, or vice versa.

Despite McWhorter's negligible experience conducting original linguistic research among African Americans, he seized upon affirmative action embellished by the occasion of the Oakland Ebonics controversy to make his national debut.

> McWhorter emerged onto the public intellectual scene in 2000 with the publication of *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America* (Free Press), which contends that sociopolitical misconceptions pervasive among black Americans are much greater hindrances to black advancement and interracial dialogue than white racism. He analyzes the cultural ideologies that, since the mid-1960s, have held back so many black Americans from full engagement with mainstream society, and devotes special attention to an insidious anti-intellectualism that is the prime culprit in the school-performance gap between whites and blacks, which cuts across class and income lines. McWhorter also argues that affirmative action policies, while initially wise, today only nurture these self-destructive ideologies, and ought be abandoned "with all deliberate speed" (www.manhattan-institute.org/html/mcwhorter.htm).

McWhorter describes his own rise toward becoming a national public policy "expert" on race as follows: "Why was I, an unknown linguistics professor, consulted so relentlessly that by just two weeks after the early-morning call from ABC, I had appeared on the *Today Show*, guested on NPR's *Talk of the Nation*, and been quoted in *Newsweek*?" (2000, p. 185). McWhorter's modesty strikes me as strategic, because his Ebonics vitae also include quotations in the *New York Times*, and an appearance on Fox News that he fails to acknowledge in *LTR*; I know this because I too was quoted in the overlooked venues.

These omissions are quite significant because they contain the very evidence that contradicts McWhorter's foundational claim to fame; namely, that he was the only African American linguist who was critical of the Oakland School District's Ebonics Resolution (see Applebaum 1996; Baugh 2000).

Returning to the point at hand, the simplest answer to McWhorter's preceding question is fairly straightforward: he was the lone African American linguist who worked and lived in closest proximity to the city of Oakland, where Ebonics first came to national attention.[3] When the Oakland Ebonics episode first came to light, reporters throughout the country scrambled to find "experts" on Black English, and McWhorter was caught in that dragnet along with other Black and White linguists. However, McWhorter began to get contacted with greater frequency once he had carefully cast himself as the lone Black linguist who was critical of the Oakland School District's Ebonics Resolution, although such an impression is factually inaccurate.

Enticed by the intoxicating prospect of a national spotlight, McWhorter began to write about the Ebonics episode, exposing fundamental gaps in his awareness of linguistic, educational, and historical details (McWhorter 1997a, 1997b). Several books have been written about Ebonics (Adger et al., 1999; Baugh 1999, 2000; Perry and Delpit, 1998; Rickford and Rickford, 2000; Smitherman 2000; Williams 1975) and this body of literature is intricate, complex, and highly diverse. With rare exception, the public unfurling of Ebonics in Oakland caught most linguists by surprise, McWhorter being among them; however, it proved to become expedient icing on his anti-affirmative action cake.

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I must again remind readers of this essay that McWhorter pleads that we not hold his "race work" up to the same scholarly standard as his original linguistic studies. However, those of us who are familiar with his linguistic research are keenly aware of his novice status regarding Ebonics or other linguistic and educational matters pertaining to African America. In the absence of first-hand scholarship, many of the policy assertions derived from McWhorter's anecdotes are of questionable value when compared to the vast number of more technical studies that are so frequently overlooked in the popular media, to say nothing of ideologically predisposed think tanks where political orientation may be paramount.

In McWhorter's case, his educational isolation from other African Americans seems to have done more than whiten his speech. It has clouded his judgment of others and distorted his understanding of the intricate complexity of race relations in the United States, or how best to overcome their negative historical consequences. Indeed, because of his perplexed views on race, much of McWhorter's "race work" is at odds with his professional linguistic training. Linguists recognize, fundamentally, that racial background should not be equated with linguistic background; hence the explicit racial reference to his own speech, quoted at the outset of this essay, is at odds with basic linguistic orthodoxy.[4]

McWhorter and I are two of very few professional African American linguists who were born in the United States. A significant number of linguistic scholars of African descent who study African American English were not born in the United States. Professor McWhorter is keenly aware that his racial heritage and linguistic credentials will, for many, constitute sufficient expertise regarding his "race work." Be that as it may, his "race work" exposes some linguistic shortcomings along with misrepresentation of other noteworthy events.

McWhorter is a leading Creole scholar.[5] As a fellow linguist, I find Creole studies fascinating; however, they have never gained public attention in ways that are comparable, even remotely, to the global discussion that surrounded Ebonics in 1997. *Losing the Race* and *Authentically Black* both suffer from excessive ideological zeal while emphatically exposing the fact that an author's racial heritage may belie any credible knowledge of his racial kinsmen, save televised racial caricatures that masquerade as original research.

By his own admission, McWhorter has been the beneficiary of favorable racial treatment as a direct result of affirmative action and the "whiteness" of his inflexible voice. One example of such favorable treatment can be found in *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*. Upon being pulled over by a White police officer for a crosswalk violation. The officer "sneered" at McWhorter, saying "You always cross streets whenever you feel like it like that?" To which John replied, "I'm sorry, officer. . . . I wasn't thinking." Upon further reflection he notes:

> I frankly suspect that the educated tone of my voice, so often an inconvenience in my life, was part of what made him pull off—"Not the type," he was probably thinking. But if I had answered in a black-inflected voice with subtle mannerisms that distinguish one as "street," the encounter would quite possibly have gone on longer and maybe even gotten ugly (p. 21).

He is absolutely right, and my own research on linguistic profiling affirms McWhorter's suspicion (Baugh 2003a). Substantial research confirms many instances where speakers of vernacular minority dialects are treated harshly, unfairly, and—occasionally—brutally, even when seeking to convey contrition to authority.[6]

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This essay began and will end with linguistic relevance, while exploring some of the contents of *Authentically Black: Essays for the Black Silent Majority* and *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*. The remainder of this essay is organized as follows: we briefly discuss *Authentically Black* (*AB*) before turning to a more substantive discussion of *Losing the Race* (LTR), which will be devoted substantially to the Ebonics controversy where McWhorter's linguistic scholarship and race work coincide.

Authentically Black: Essays for the Black Silent Majority, consists of nine chapters, of which "the first two essays were especially written for this book" (2003, p. xii). There are no acknowledgments, no footnotes, no index, and no bibliography. Ironically, in various places throughout this book, he hearkens the memory of W. E. B. Du Bois, whose intellectual legacy we honor with this journal. Readers of this essay will judge for themselves if a book, or rather, books, that claim any intellectual allegiance to Du Bois should do so through rigorous scholarship, or egocentric self-reflective editorials. I believe with strong conviction that Du Bois would emphatically favor the former and would castigate the latter as an unworthy abomination.

Be that as it may, the titles of Chapters 1 through 9 certainly imply scholarly relevance, including: 1) "The New Black Double Consciousness"; 2) "Profiling and 'Getting Past Race' "; 3) "What Have You Done for Me Lately?"; 4) "The 'Can You Find the Stereotype?' Game"; 5) "Aren't You in Favor of Diversity?"; 6) "The Unbearable Lightness of the 'N' Word"; 7) "We Don't Learn Our History!"; 8) "Black Academics and Doing the Right Thing"; and last, 9) "The New Black Leadership."

The book concludes with a one-page scholarly concession in the form of an "Afterword" where McWhorter suspends his "desire that this book not be 'academic' in tone." He refers readers to four works that shed intellectual light on the subject of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) legislation. He briefly observes, "that in my experience (AFDC) evokes the most bewilderment, pique or requests for further information . . ." (2003, p. 265).

McWhorter approaches most chapters in the book in a formulaic manner. He selects a significant work or a visible Black person who has produced one or more major works pertaining to the African American experience. He reflects upon this work and/or this writer and then passes judgment, typically with an emphatic "thumbs up" or "thumbs down." Martin Luther King, Jr.: thumbs up. Shelby Steele: thumbs up. Randall Robinson: thumbs down. Cornel West: two exuberant thumbs down.

Before turning to *Losing the Race*, I was struck that McWhorter relies heavily on television and films as if they were first-hand sources of social science data. His fourth chapter is devoted extensively to this topic, and, because I watch very little television, I am at a considerable disadvantage (in both books) when he makes frequent reference to situation comedies or films that have escaped my attention.

Authentically Black makes extensive reference to *Losing the Race*, illustrated in his statement cited on page 4 where he defends *LTR* against those who claim it is "not scholarly." In addition, *Authentically Black* presumes considerable familiarity with *Losing the Race*, to which we now turn.

Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America (*LTR*) was first published in 2000 with a gushing tribute to Shelby Steele who reinterpreted the concept of "Victimology" in ways that McWhorter finds mightily inspirational. The first printing of *LTR* does not contain a highly revealing Afterword that is included in the edition I reread in preparing this essay. McWhorter is fully aware that critics of *LTR* find it anecdotal, which it is. In response he asserts, "the anecdotes I chose paint a negative overall picture; my point is that this negative picture is sadly accurate" (2003, p. 265).

As we shall see, the anecdotal picture that McWhorter paints is self-serving, oversimplified, and, at times, intentionally fabricated to bolster racially charged

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impressions that, with astonishing frequency, are misrepresented or deceptive by insidious design. In the wake of the Jason Blair scandal at the *New York Times*, McWhorter's fabrications and half-truths raise the specter of professional ethical standards. *LTR* lacks the honesty or integrity that are the hallmark of academic publications.

The first possible deception that I discovered was on page 3. McWhorter describes an incident regarding "[a] black academic at a predominantly black conference in 1998." The protagonist castigated McWhorter's hero, Shelby Steele, recounting

> how typical it is at parties thrown by people affiliated with universities to meet "white racists" who say "Oh, there are black people I like but . . ." Needless to say, the audience ate it up with a spoon, amidst which **she** (emphasis, my own) added, "Shelby Steele is at those parties . . . " (p. 3).

Quite frankly, I am extremely skeptical of the accuracy of this portrayal. Even if it were true, which I doubt, the incident is nearly identical to one that I, and many other scholars, observed first-hand at a 1998 conference on the Sociocultural and Historical Contexts of African American English (Lanehart 2001).

McWhorter fails to identify precisely where or when the "Steele-bashing" statement was made, or the specific conference where this so-called episode took place. Perhaps these details will be forthcoming at a later date. In the meantime, my personal rebuke of Steele at the 1998 conference of which I now speak clearly left indelible impressions on McWhorter in ways that ultimately influenced his writing of *LTR*.

Although McWhorter makes no reference to our personal or professional encounters surrounding my observations about Shelby Steele, it is clear that he took no less than three memorable lessons away from our discussion of Steele's scholarly shortcomings; moreover, the episode was witnessed by several of our linguistic and educational colleagues. The first lasting impression on McWhorter corresponds to my own critique of Steele (and Richard Rodriguez) who both celebrate their attendance at predominantly White suburban parties; that is, in ways that are nearly identical to the (female?) academic who criticized Steele during "her" conference presentation. The second lasting impression results in McWhorter's careful depiction of his own "race work" as being editorials; that is, not to be confused with his linguistic scholarship. The third indelible impression centered on linguistic matters, where McWhorter was simply unaware of Steele's linguistic stereotypes about Black speech. I carefully and judiciously directed John McWhorter to those passages where Steele spouts hurtful and uninformed linguistic assertions of the racial shame that he associates with vernacular Black speech. While McWhorter clearly took these lessons to heart, his gentle rebuke of Shelby Steele's linguistic ignorance is understated: "even many black intellectuals, like Shelby Steele and Stanley Crouch, are not aware that Black English is not a failing, but it is true" (2000, p. 188).

Before considering other limitations in *LTR* we should first outline its content, some of which is praiseworthy. *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America* consists of seven chapters: 1) "The Cult of Victimology"; 2) "The Cult of Separatism"; 3) "The Cult of Anti-intellectualism"; 4) "The Roots of the Cult of Anti-intellectualism"; 5) "African-American Self-Sabotage in Action: The Affirmative-Action Debate"; 6) "African American Self-Sabotage in Action: The Ebonics Controversy"; and 7) "How Can We Save the African-American Race?" As already mentioned, recent editions include an Afterword, which seeks to defend this work against the waves of sustained criticism that repeatedly wash over this book.

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I hesitate to restate some of the more obvious limitations that have been aired, and re-aired extensively, by others. In fact, I prefer to call immediate attention to some of the redeeming insights that exist in *LTR*. For example, chapter 5 begins with the following valuable observation:

> Whether minority students ought to be admitted to universities with lower grades and test scores than others is one of the most complex and difficult issues to decide in America today. In a country with such a racist past, surely we can do better than the blinkered and unfeeling line that all people ought to "pull themselves up by their own bootstraps" (2000, pp. 164–165).

Similarly, when speaking of the Ebonics controversy he makes a clear and cogent point when he observes that "the general public was unable to see any legitimacy in the claim that Black English was anything but bad grammar, not necessarily because of racism (although this surely played a small part here and there), but because of this general—and importantly, pan-racial—misconception that a language is a set entity rather than a bundle of dialects" (2000, p. 195). I also heartily agree that "the signs of progress are stark, relentless, and certainly cause for celebration" (2000, p. 7).

These valuable insights are, regrettably, quite scarce in a book that far more frequently than not misrepresents the experience of American slave descendants of African origin, and in so doing it—at times willfully—sacrifices truth and integrity in pursuit of an expedient and simplistic political and racial agenda.

McWhorter bristles at the suggestion that opinions like his are mere racial opportunism. To prove his point he cites Christopher Edley's observation that "I could get an enormous amount of print from the *Wall Street Journal* or the *New Republic* if I decided to attack affirmative action or repudiate mainstream civil rights positions, and I think there's no shortage of people who have been seduced by the glitter" (2000, p. 34).

McWhorter took considerable umbrage at this remark, thereupon attacking John Hope Franklin, claiming some of his historical observations as "vicious, barely processible as coming from an academic" (2000, p. 35). To prove his point McWhorter cites a scene from Spike Lee's *Get on the Bus*, commenting on the contrast between "a plain, rather squat actor" (i.e., "Shelbysteele") as opposed to "the good-looking ones playing the principal roles" (p. 35).

This is not an anomaly. Films and television inform the vast majority of McWhorter's writings about race. Indeed, his opening sentence of Chapter 3 titled "The Cult of Anti-Intellectualism" states: "The reader may have detected by now that I watch a lot of television" (2000, p. 83). He then celebrates "anti-intellectualism" with an episode from the now defunct T.V. show "The Facts of Life," where "Tootie" learned Latin.

These media musings set the stage for McWhorter's disappointing encounters with Black students at the University of California, Berkeley, where he was first hired through an affirmative action program in a joint position between African American Studies and Linguistics. Although he claims that he "spent a long time resisting acknowledging . . . that black undergraduates at Berkeley tended to be among the worst students on campus, by any estimation" (2000, p. 89), I am struck by the fact that his observations are limited to a single class titled "The History of Black Theater," which is hardly a scientific survey of African American student performance throughout U. C. Berkeley.

I, for one, have always felt that professors have an ethical obligation quite similar to that of a physician or an attorney when it comes to privileged communication with

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their students. Those who attend our classes should not be subject to "kiss-and-tell" tactics from their faculty. By claiming to write an editorial McWhorter has conveniently circumvented the extensive human subject approval process that is standard practice among social scientists. He proceeds to shed crocodile tears for Black students who he claims to be "my favorites."

The questionable ethics of discussing student work without their overt consent notwithstanding, one would hope that experienced faculty would do everything within their power to alert any student, regardless of background, to the full array of academic and/or professional services available to them to increase their prospects for academic success. This is exactly what the vast majority of McWhorter's teachers did for him throughout his own elementary, secondary, undergraduate, and graduate education.

While readers may disagree about the wisdom or ethics associated with relationships between professors and their students, there is no higher professional ethical standard than that associated with being honest and truthful, and, when it comes to the Ebonics controversy, McWhorter falls woefully short of this fundamental standard.

In order to understand fully the gravity of this statement one needs to know something about the history of events leading up to the Oakland School Board's passage of their notorious Ebonics Resolution in December 1996. During the spring of 1996 the Oakland School District hosted a conference for teachers affiliated with their Standard English proficiency (SEP) program (see Baugh 2000). The vast majority of attendees at this conference were African American teachers of African American students who were active participants in California's SEP program, which had been in existence since 1981.

There were five presenters at that conference: Dr. Toya Wyatt, Professor of Speech Pathology; Dr. Orlando Taylor, Dean of Graduate Studies at Howard University; Dr. Mary Hoover, Professor of Education at Howard University; Dr. Ernie Smith, Professor of Medicine at Drew University; and me, Professor of Education, and, by courtesy, Linguistics at Stanford University.

The conference had several linguistic and educational objectives, not the least of which being to determine the appropriate nomenclature to refer to the linguistic consequences of the African slave trade in America. As McWhorter accurately notes in *LTR*, Ernie Smith advocated forcefully for the term Ebonics. McWhorter is apparently unaware that Dean Taylor attempted to offer a compromise in the form of coining the term "African language systems." I represented the linguistic view that slave descendants of African origin in the United States speak a dialect of English, which most linguists continue to refer to as "African American vernacular English" (AAVE).

The vast majority of people in attendance at the Oakland SEP conference rejected my interpretation in favor of the Afrocological position espoused by Ernie Smith. Our disagreement was sufficiently cordial, but it was absolutely clear that Oakland's SEP administrators were not only unconvinced by my arguments, but they stated, on that occasion, that to accept my position would prevent them from making a case to the federal government to obtain bilingual education funding for their African American students. It was during that meeting that I told Oakland's SEP administrators that their strategy would fly in the face of linguistic evidence and inevitable political resistance. They disagreed, claiming that an interpretation of Ebonics as a language other than English would allow them to build political alliances with Asians, Latin Americans, and others whose children were learning English as a non-native language in Oakland's public schools. Again, we parted on a cordial note, agreeing to disagree.

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I then took a leave of absence as a visiting professor at Swarthmore College, where I began my teaching career in 1975. On December 19, 1996, the day after the Oakland School Board passed their now infamous Ebonics Resolution, I received a call from Peter Applebaum of the *New York Times*, who first informed me of the official passage of Oakland's Ebonics Resolution, the very type of resolution that I had previously discouraged.

Ebonics rapidly, and briefly, captured global public attention. When Applebaum's article appeared on December 20, 1996, I was surprised to see not only quotes from me but also from McWhorter. Again, having known John McWhorter during his graduate studies at Stanford, and, because of his primary interest in Creole languages, I confess that I was somewhat confused to see him weigh in on a subject for which he had never conducted original research, nor had he ever expressed extensive interest in the subject while he was a graduate student at Stanford.[7]

McWhorter's admonitions against the Oakland School Board were harsh, yet consistent with those of Maya Angelou, Bill Cosby, Jesse Jackson, and Kweisi Mfume. McWhorter quickly joined—and then tried to lead—the chorus of Black detractors who decried Oakland's Ebonics escapade. Based on the *New York Times* article in which we were both quoted, Fox News immediately requested interviews from us, and we complied. On December 21, 1996, Professor McWhorter and I appeared together on a broadcast that was repeatedly interrupted by other breaking news stories. When we finally appeared on the air, McWhorter exclaimed that White taxpayers would never go along with the Oakland debacle. As he spoke, I thought to myself; "Why is his limiting his remarks to 'White taxpayers?' There are a lot of Black tax payers who aren't too happy with Oakland either." I had planned to make this very point when the news anchor asked me, quite pointedly, "Dr. Baugh, are you then a supporter of Oakland's Ebonics Resolution?" to which I firmly replied, "No. No, I am not."

Had this particular exchange been with anyone other than McWhorter I might understand his bold assertion that he was "consulted so relentlessly" because of the "simple reason that every other African linguist or education specialist supported Oakland's resolution." To be sure that this point is not lost on his readers, he rephrases it, observing, "I was initially surprised to be the only voice of black dissent among linguists."

This is not mere hyperbole, and there is no polite way to conceal the fact that these statements are blatantly untrue. While I fully acknowledge that constraints of press and television deadlines are greatly compressed, and that trade publications cannot be written as if for scholarly peers, they can only go so far toward excusing what must be regarded as deliberate misrepresentations.

While McWhorter's misinformation is, at best, most unfortunate and, at worst, a very revealing character flaw, it pales in comparison to the more important educational problems that continue to plague the vast majority of African American and low-income students who attend overcrowded under resourced public schools throughout the nation (Baugh 1999, Darling-Hammond et al., 2002; Darling-Hammond 2004).

Before turning to substantive matters regarding Ebonics, McWhorter shares another revealing insight that has direct relevance to his scholarly prowess—or lack thereof: he hates footnotes because they otherwise interfere with his preference for "a straight-through line."[8]

One topic that would have benefited from footnotes pertains to his claims regarding the linguistic distance between Black English and Standard English. He asserts, quite forcefully, that Black English and Standard (American) English are

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sufficiently similar that African American students should be able to learn the standard with relative ease: "It is extremely difficult to conclude from these things taken together—how similar Black English is to the standard dialect, what students in other countries effortlessly do, the results of the studies—that Black English is a significant factor in why black children tend not to perform well in school" (2000, p. 190). Alas, McWhorter does not demonstrate any familiarity with the vast volumes of solid research that contradict this statement. More precisely, his off-hand comparison with students in European countries fails to consider instances where racial discrimination combines with linguistic discrimination; for example, Gypsies in Hungary and Arabs in France are aware of the double-edged sword of discrimination based on race and nonstandard dialect use. Their plight is more analogous to that of African Americans who employ vernacular African American English.

While I too recognize the value of Standard English fluency (Baugh 2004), I disagree that second dialect mastery among racially homogeneous speakers in Europe is comparable to that of AAVE speakers who strive to gain greater Standard American English proficiency. Moreover, if the type of linguistic transformation that McWhorter extols is such a simple matter for poor Black students, then why has he—a professional linguist with extensive training as an actor—found it so very difficult to speak AAVE? Close reading of his ideological tomes will expose other eye-popping statements that exceed my capacity to comprehend or assess. Two such illustrations include: "There is a theatrical rock concert thrill about Victimology that makes it addictive" (2000, p. 43) or "We are hollow chocolate bunnies, beached in an alien culture" (2003, p. 88). I confess that I do not understand the preceding statements; however, despite my confusion I have come to expect better from any professionally trained social scientist regardless of racial background.

When viewed in its entirety, *LTR* fails to meet the very goal that McWhorter found lacking among one of his African American students, namely, "it was obviously a last-minute job based more on impressionistic reflection at her desk than on research" (2003, p. 90). In my opinion, he replicates this flaw, which, while noteworthy, pales when compared to his ethical breaches.

Armed with the evidence now provided I fear that McWhorter's supporters and detractors alike may assume that I equate his personal missteps with a wholesale condemnation of the conservative agenda that he advocates; however, such an interpretation would be wrong. McWhorter's mistakes are fundamentally a personal matter. His well-articulated brand of deception, garnished with quixotic race baiting, is a personal proclivity that should not be generalized to others who share his controversial political opinions.

Beyond the obvious lessons that most of us learned early in life through basic home training, namely, that one should never lie, lay the professional and ethical standards of academics and journalists alike, never to fabricate or distort evidence, of any kind, for any reason. For all of the alleged intellectual shortcomings that McWhorter attributes to Berkeley's African American students, they fall far short of his own self-inflicted ethical lapses.

It is with a heavy heart that I share my disappointment in these books, because I am keenly aware of McWhorter's underutilized potential to describe his life's circumstances and the spectacular challenges that he has met and overcome as one of very few Black students in elite schools where even fewer African Americans have prevailed. He could write forcefully, and honestly, describing his own experience of racial isolation in schools and society, because he is not a product of the public educational system that has yet to close academic achievement gaps successfully across racial lines in America.

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In 1972 my mentor, William Labov, wrote an important article titled, "The Linguistic Consequences of Being a Lame." Since then I am unaware of any scholarship that fully explores Labov's observation that lames are far more likely to succeed than are Black men who are active "members" (i.e., participants) in the vernacular culture.

> . . . it is evident that the lames are better off than members in many ways. They are more open to the influence of the standard culture, and they can take advantage of the path of upward mobility through education, if they are so inclined or so driven. . . . Even if he does not go to college, he has a better chance of making money, staying out of jail, and off of drugs, and raising children in an intact family. Given hindsight or a little foresight, who would not rather be a lame? (Labov 1972, pp. 285–286).

"Lames" continue to be the nerdish bookish Black boys who "are not *hip*, since they do not hang out" (Labov 1972, p. 258). They are routinely ostracized by their Black inner-city peers. Speech styles among Blacks have always identified those who were castigated and racially marginalized as "Lames," and therefore lacking in "Street cred." Based on Labov's observations, I would gladly support McWhorter's self-reflections as an African American who experienced rare educational and extensive social exposure to affluent Whites, albeit in relative racial isolation from his fellow Blacks. Very few African Americans have had comparable experiences or opportunities, and many people from various racial backgrounds could benefit greatly from an unvarnished portrayal of African American racial isolation at elite educational institutions; this is a worthy intellectual task that is easily within McWhorter's reach. Were he to expound upon the educational benefits of being a lame, as foretold by Labov over thirty years ago, he could truly begin to help smother the smoldering embers of racism that he rightly detests and which need no further political provocation.

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NOTES

1. I am especially grateful to Lawrence Bobo, Michael Dawson, and Charla Larrimore Baugh. They provided many insightful comments and sustained encouragement throughout the preparation of this essay. I have not uniformly followed their sage advice; all limitations herein are my own. I would also like to acknowledge, with appreciation, support for my own research that is cited in this essay that has been funded by the Carnegie Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the National Fair Housing Alliance, the National Science Foundation, Stanford University, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, the United States Department of State, and Washington University.
2. McWhorter is one of very few African Americans to have attended and graduated from Philadelphia's elite and distinguished Friends Select School. He also describes some of the other affirmative action programs that have benefited his education and career in *Losing the Race*.
3. Those of us who have regular dealings with the press and mass media know well that our statements are being solicited to lend "expert opinion" to the news at hand. On what grounds did McWhorter consider himself an expert on Ebonics, a dialect he cannot speak despite his own African American heritage? Upon reflection the nation would have been better served had McWhorter directed all callers to his mentor John Rickford, who has conducted original linguistic research in African American communities (see Rickford 1999).

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4. The history of colonialism has established that speakers of different racial backgrounds have acquired, and continue to acquire, native languages that defy racial classification. Racial linguistic stereotypes are central to my own studies of linguistic profiling (Baugh 2002), and confirm that many citizens in the general public typically refer to speech with racial attribution (e.g., "White speech" or "Black speech" or "Mexican-sounding speech," etc.). However, every professional linguist, including McWhorter, is aware of the fact that racial stereotypes about languages or their dialects are fundamentally flawed, particularly so when they are given exclusive racial attribution. Although racial linguistic stereotypes abound in the United States and many other parts of the world, it is essential that those of us who are trained professional linguists should do all that we can to dispel linguistic myths rather than perpetuate them.
5. McWhorter is described in his University of California Web site as follows:

> He came to Berkeley in Fall 1995 after holding a postdoctoral appointment in this department (of Linguistics) in 1993–94, followed by an Assistant Professor position at Cornell University. He specializes in creole languages and typology, with a general interest in language contact models. His language of focus is the Suriname creole, Saramaccan, which he and graduate students are in the process of writing a grammar of with the help of consultants who speak the language natively. He has also developed the "Afrogenesis Theory" of creole origins, stressing the importation of most plantation creoles from West African trade settlements, as opposed to most theories which derive creoles from local aspects of plantation demography.
> (www.linguistics.berkeley.edu/lingdept/Current/people/facpages/mcwhorter.html)

6. I became interested in this research for several personal and professional reasons. Although I often escape linguistic profiling during telephone calls (see Baugh 2003a), I have experienced racial discrimination during face-to-face encounters. Some of my research strives to understand these processes, primarily to advance racial and social equality.
7. Stanford University has offered a graduate course titled "African American English in Schools and Society" since 1990; it is the only graduate course on this topic. Students from anthropology, education, English, various ethnic studies programs, linguistics, sociology, and urban studies typically enroll in this class. Unlike the vast majority of his peers who expressed professional interest in the study of African American English, McWhorter never enrolled in any of Stanford's graduate courses pertaining to African American English or the academic welfare of Black students. His writings on Ebonics, affirmative action, and the education of Black students are not as strongly supported as might otherwise be the case due to voluntary gaps in his academic training.
8. Those who read this will note that I differ considerably from McWhorter regarding the value of footnotes. I find they provide readers and authors greater opportunities to consider important ancillary topics without detracting or distracting from the body of the central text. I learned this important lesson by direct example from one of my mentors, namely, Erving Goffman. His books masterfully demonstrate that outstanding social science writing is best served by the well-informed, and thoroughly researched, footnote.

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