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Book Review: Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America by John H. McWhorter

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oppression on colonial subjects, and his advocacy of
direct political—even violent—action as a remedy. Al-
though the Black Panther Party would send delegates
to the First Pan-African Cultural Festival, held in
Algiers in 1969, African American participation in such
international gatherings was largely insignificant after
the mid-1950s.

By the time of the 1969 Algiers festival, the former
French colonies in Africa had become established in-
dependent states. Conference participants from the
African continent were more likely to be officials from
cultural ministries than individual artists. But those
cultural ministries failed to build a climate or the nec-
cessary mechanisms for an independent African pub-
lishing industry. The dependence of African institutions
on the technology and distribution networks of the West
continues to afflict publishing on the continent, and to
deny African writers the opportunities they can enjoy
abroad.

More than two-thirds of Black Paris is devoted to
interviews with, and analyses of, the works of contem-
orary African writers in the city among whom the
concept of Parisianism holds sway. Jules-Rosette con-
trasts it with negritude: “While negritude idealizes im-
ages of Africa, Parisianism questions their existence.
In Parisianism, the return voyage to Africa culminates
in a disappointing fantasy. In spite of their emphasis
on Paris as a setting and an ideological space, the writ-
ers of Parisianism reject the notion of responsible as-
similation in favor of solitary rebellion. They eschew
labels and limits without denying the persistence of
discrimination, blockage, and racism” (p. 193). Analy-
ses of these works would have benefited greatly from
comparisons of Jules-Rosette’s findings and conclu-
sions with those reported in earlier studies; moreover,
excessive repetition of quotes from the interviews mars
her own analytical material. Despite these drawbacks,
however, Jules-Rosette has deftly illuminated part of
the African Diaspora’s landscape and set forth plainly
why the search by individual African artists for ident-
ity continues.

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Losing The Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America. John
H. McWhorter. New York, NY: The Free Press (a Divi-
(Cloth US$24.00)

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John McWhorter, a black Linguistics professor at
the University of California, Berkeley, maintains that
affirmative action contributes to lowered expectations
for African American students, and compromises their
intellectual efforts in American universities. Affirma-
tive action should be abolished, he concludes, because
it prevents black students from achieving their true aca-
demic potential. McWhorter theorizes that the root of
this problem cannot be traced to structural inequalities
in the United States, especially unequal power relations,
between black and white people, but to specific Afri-
can American ideological and behavioral patterns that
undermine Black American well-being. His central hy-
pothesis is that these patterns coalesce in three “cults”
which are endemic to Black American culture: Victim-
ology, Separatism, and Anti-Intellectualism.

The Cult of Victimology, the belief that all black
people suffer and are injured by racism, explains why
African Americans have not been as successful as other
racial and ethnic groups. The Cult of Separatism refers
to what McWhorter considers the narrowness of Black
American scholarship, exemplified by a lack of com-
mitment to the objective assessment of intellectual is-
sues, and rigorous debate of relevant theories and meth-
ods, as well as by an obsession with topics which per-
tain only to Blacks, Africa, and the African Diaspora.
The Cult of Anti-Intellectualism is a tendency among
African Americans to attribute low course grades or poor
performance on standardized tests to racially marked
cultural differences, and to characterize book learning
and the pursuit of knowledge as peculiarly “White”
endeavors. McWhorter contends that these defeatist
cults have been woven into the very fabric of Black
American life. Deeply embedded in the ideologies, ritu-
als, and everyday practices of a peculiarly African
American culture, the effects of the three cults are evi-
dent in language use, speech inflection, hairstyles, dress,
and body language among Blacks.

For McWhorter, culture is learned behavior shared
by a social group, and transmitted from generation to
generation. Thus, under the influence of the three cults,
black culture ultimately prevents African Americans
from enjoying the possibilities of freedom, opportuni-
ties for success and high academic achievement, and
full integration into American society. None of these
ideas will be new to readers familiar with the static con-
cept of culture, and understanding of its effects, popu-
larized during the 1960s by anthropologist Oscar Lewis.

In influential books on Mexican and Puerto Rican
families, Lewis (1959 and 1966) argued that the poor
adapted to a set of objective conditions, poverty its chief
element, established by the larger capitalist society, and
transmitted these adaptations intergenerationally as
learned behavior through primary and secondary social-
ization. The result was a “culture of poverty” (Lewis
1968). Having applied this conceptual framework to two
Hispanic groups, Lewis encouraged its use in comparisons of adaptations to poverty among non-Hispanics. Sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan, an adviser to Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, and later a United States senator, appropriated the culture-of-poverty concept for his policy research on African American families, explaining their supposed social deviance in terms of culturally transmitted values and behaviors (Moynihan 1965). This nefarious view of culture helped to produce discourses on poverty, and on African Americans, that deflected attention from fundamental economic and political inequalities in the American social order preventing full black integration, or more widespread black success. McWhorter resurrects this discredited approach to understanding the connections among culture, performance, or achievement, and the structure of society.

McWhorter occasionally makes compelling arguments that African Americans follow and reproduce cults that help them to construct a collective racial identity around victimhood, separatism and anti-intellectualism. For example, the generally poor performance of Blacks on the SAT, regardless of social class, appears to support McWhorter’s assertion that the Cult of Anti-Intellectualism is alive and well. But his method is problematic. He reports and analyzes three disparate kinds of data: statistics; personal experiences that range from childhood memories to encounters with black undergraduates at Berkeley; and accounts of black experiences in America by leading cultural critics. Then, based on an analysis of a small number of observations, he generalizes about an entire population. Similarly, McWhorter observes that black Berkeley undergraduates performed poorly in his classes, submitting incomplete assignments, and failing to show up for final examinations. He takes these observations as both evidence and proof of his theories about anti-intellectualism, victimology, and separatism. Meanwhile, his constant references to the Black American community and Black American culture, mislead the reader to believe that Black Americans are completely segregated from the rest of American society.

For McWhorter, black culture is insular and homogeneous; he conveys no sense of black diversity by class, gender, or region. Where are the adoptions, deletions, and transformations that characterize more fluid, ethnographically based depictions of culture? A detailed ethnography of black Berkeley undergraduates would reveal more clearly the intricacies of how they interact with one another, relate to non-black students, and adapt to their environment. Instead, the reader is left with a view of blackness that is bounded, impermeable, static—and dysfunctional.

Overall, McWhorter relies on an antiquated concept of culture, and his analysis of disparate data (statistical and narrative) fails to address the complexity of power relations in the context of which Black Americans create and reproduce culture. Consequently, his arguments fall short of convincing the reader that “self-sabotage” by Black cults or Black culture explain why African Americans think, talk, and behave differently from other Americans, let alone how those differences affect African American educational achievement and socioeconomic well-being.

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Anthropologists Sally and Richard Price have dedicated more than thirty years to research on the intricacies of Maroon societies within the geopolitical boundaries of Suriname, and more recently, French Guiana. By paying close attention to the details of Saramaka culture, history, and social organization, they have contested the prevailing image of Saramaka woodcarvings or other creations as an African art in the Americas. Much of the evidentiary material evaluated in Maroon Arts has been elaborately analyzed in the Prices’ earlier publications. However, what sets this study apart is their re-contextualization of data assembled over three decades, and of themselves as anthropologists, within current epistemic trends in anthropology, social theory, and art history. In an aesthetically pleasing book, the Prices locate Maroon aesthetic practices within the glo-