
Still Losing the Race?

John H. McWhorter

WHEN I got my doctorate in linguistics from Stanford University in 1993, the furthest thing imaginable to me was that, ten years later, I would be in the midst of a second career as a pundit on race issues, let alone find myself classed as a black conservative. True, in college and graduate school, I had felt frustrated and dismayed whenever a successful black of my acquaintance would go out of his way to adopt the pose of a victim of American “racism.” But to me this sort of angry display was of merely passing interest. My own life was built around writing academic papers, making the rounds of linguistics conferences, and playing piano and performing on stage as a hobby. In 1995 I took my place as a professor of linguistics at Berkeley with little expectation that life would change much thereafter.

Then came Proposition 209, the 1996 referendum banning racial preferences in the state of California. At an elite school like Berkeley, the immediate effect of this ban was to reduce the number of blacks admitted, thereby sparking a furious reaction and much talk of an ominous drift toward the “resegregation” of American society. It was not as if anybody denied that the typical black applicant

to Berkeley suffered from lower grades and test scores than the typical white applicant; but the problem, we were instructed, lay in the grim facts of black disadvantage in America, and to forbid any consideration of those circumstances in admissions procedures amounted to sheer bigotry.

In my own experience, as well as in what I saw of the students I taught, the truth was otherwise: the problem, plainly, was not one of socioeconomic status—most of my black students were in fact middle-class—but of culture, and lowered standards were likely to preserve and even intensify that problem, not to ameliorate it. I was moved to argue as much in an essay for a website; upon reading what I had to say, an agent suggested I expand it into a book. For a while I hesitated, uncertain that anyone would care what some linguist thought about race. But in the end, impressed by how rarely most black professors who entered into public discourse permitted themselves to stray from ritualized tribal plaints, I decided I was responsible for at least getting my views into print. And so in 2000 I published *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*,* a book contending, in brief, that “black America is currently caught in certain ideological holding patterns”—chief among them being the ideology of permanent victimhood—and that these today are “much more serious barriers to black well-being than is white racism.”

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* Free Press. *Losing the Race* was reviewed in COMMENTARY by Damon Linker, October 2000.

Neither my publisher nor I expected much to happen. But, to our joint surprise, *Losing the Race* became a national bestseller. Even now, more than three years after publication, it continues to sell well; it has also become assigned reading in classrooms across the country, and it has kept me busy with speaking engagements and appearances on television and radio talk shows. Among the over 3,000 e-mails and letters I have received about *Losing the Race*, only a trickle have been written in malice. From blacks around the country I have heard, rather, that it touched them deeply, that they wish me well, and that they hope I will continue to speak out. I have been approached regularly in the street by blacks wanting to tell me how much they appreciate my message even if they do not agree with me on every point.

From all this, it has become clear to me that there is a large number of blacks in America, maybe even a silent majority, ready for a message other than the race-baiting and crafted pessimism so often served up as advanced black thought

ONE WOULD never have guessed any of this, however, from most of the reviews of *Losing the Race* that appeared in the mainstream press at the time of publication or from much of the public discussion of its ideas in the years since then. The book received its roughest treatment at the hands of black journalists and professors and their white sympathizers. The black columnist Jack E. White, in *Time*, was first out of the gate—helping, ironically, to bring the book to national attention. Thereafter came a string of contemptuous dismissals in the major newspapers and Sunday book-review supplements, and “profiles” of the author that often rendered me as a sinister blowhard.

Technically, of course, I have to consider the possibility that the negative assessment of *Losing the Race* was the correct one, and that the man on the street is wrong about it and, by extension, about America. My professional work, after all, has not been in political science, sociology, or African-American studies. So, over the intervening years, I have tried to keep up with the work of the so-called authorities. This is itself no small task: almost every year witnesses a new primer on black victimhood and on the continuing tragedy of the black experience in America, and since 2000 I myself have been added to the list of injuries inflicted on my community.

Three recent and notable contributions to the genre are *Yet A Stranger: Why Black Americans Still Don't Feel at Home* by the columnist Deborah Mathis¹; *The Great Wells of Democracy* by Manning

Marable, chairman of African-American studies at Columbia²; and *Another Day at the Front* by the essayist Ishmael Reed.³ Each of these writers has strong views. Mathis, who appears regularly on Juan Williams's radio show, *America's Black Forum*, is convinced that the society in which she lives is as atavistically bigoted as her grandparents' America. Marable, the author of several books on the theme that black Americans remain engaged in a “struggle” against “white supremacy,” here designates me a “race traitor” who “desperately wants to distance himself from his oppressed brothers and sisters.” Reed, a well-known figure in the San Francisco Bay area, has tracked my writings so closely that he can dredge up statements I myself have to labor to recall, denouncing me as an intellectual lightweight and a “rent-a-black.”

Have these critics grasped a truth that has eluded me? A particular challenge posed by all three books—and others like them—is that they require one to enter into a kind of alternate black universe, the same universe whose unreality prompted me to write *Losing the Race* in the first place. Its outlines have changed little in twenty years, and go roughly as follows.

First, racism continues to suffuse American life at every level. True, overt discrimination has been outlawed; but a network of legal protections has not affected what Mathis terms “passive racism” and Marable “laissez-faire racism.” This system of tacit discrimination, as pernicious in its effects as the poll tax, continues to sustain “the pervasive power of white privilege” (Marable) and condemns all but a lucky few to failure. In Deborah Mathis's doleful words, “Escape is possible, but it usually requires exceptional fortitude, a stroke of good luck, uncommon patience, and soul-sapping perseverance.”

Second, just over the horizon looms the return of Bull Connor and his fire hoses. Mathis worries that “at any moment the little dance of tolerance may be abandoned and there you'd have it: a full frontal assault of prejudice, fear, anger, and deadly assumptions.” She already envisions a state, “over-run by archconservatives,” cutting off welfare benefits entirely.

It follows, third, that nothing short of a profound and thoroughgoing psychological revolution among whites can prevent black America from remaining forever mired in its predicament. How to help bring about this psychological revolution? Marable predictably espouses reparations. Mathis hopes more vaguely for a collective experience of white remorse.

¹ Warner, 272 pp., \$13.95 (paper).

² BasicCivitas, 384 pp., \$18.50 (paper).

³ Basic, 256 pp., \$24.00.

I DO not mean to be unfair. Along the way to their separate iterations of the same thesis, our three authors do raise serious or at least semi-serious issues. All three, for instance, dwell on the overrepresentation of black men in the prison population—a situation that does indeed qualify as a tragedy, if not in the simplistic way they imagine. Nor is there anything illegitimate about questioning the lengthy sentences being served by some of these men for possession of drugs or for acting as low-level footmen in the drug trade, or about expressing concern for the women and children they leave behind, the latter gravely at risk of repeating the mistakes of their fathers.

Devoting a chapter to the violent encounters he had with police in the 1960's and 1970's, and nasty ones thereafter, Ishmael Reed echoes a common complaint of even well-heeled black people across the country. Here, too, no one would dispute that excesses must be curbed, or that police forces must work with local communities to get rid of bad apples, even as sensible "profiling" remains necessary in order to protect people, including black people, from assault and murder. On pragmatic grounds alone, it is in everybody's interest that a generation of blacks be raised without easy or automatic recourse to the iconography of cops as the black man's enemy.

But to speak pragmatically is already to take us far from the apocalyptic vision of race relations that is the ground note of each of these books. Thus, Reed authoritatively informs us that, "for African-Americans, every day is a day at the front." In Mathis's eyes, incredibly, "Life for the multitude of black Americans is not much different from the way it was in 1944 when Swedish economist Gunnar Myrdal wrote his groundbreaking book, *An American Dilemma*." And so forth. Responding to the contention of the black economist Lester O'Shea that there *is* no single black experience, Mathis can only throw up her hands: "What can we say but, Father, forgive him."

Well, forgive me: this collective portrait of degradation bears so little resemblance to my own experience, or the experience of my friends and acquaintances, that I can only throw up *my* hands. Certainly, my friends and I can cite unpleasant and possibly racially tinged incidents here and there in the course of our lifetimes. But for none of us are these the anecdotes we come home with on a weekly, monthly, or even annual basis. Not once to date have I had a nasty, intrusive run-in with the police, despite being no stranger to nightlife in cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Oakland, and despite

having driven a beat-up car in tony white neighborhoods on a regular basis when, as a graduate student, I earned extra money playing piano at parties.

I have been condescendingly assured by some connoisseurs of victimhood that I am an exception—"not the type the cops look for"—and that I have a "straight" appearance. But as for appearance, I am hardly given to the bowtie look, and in any case the going wisdom is that police harassment is as likely to befall the black lawyer in a Lexus as a teenaged boy in the 'hood. Nor do my black male friends who are darker-complected than I, burlier in build, or less middle-class in speech and demeanor have tales to tell of racist abuse by the pigs.

More to the point is that, for writers ostensibly committed to telling the truth about the state of black America, these three display saliently little mastery of easily ascertainable facts, not to mention the literature on their topic. Marable, for instance, simply regurgitates the story about an epidemic of black church burnings in the South in the mid-1990's—an epidemic, it has been decisively and repeatedly shown, that never happened. He decries the reduction in minority admissions at Berkeley after Proposition 209, ignoring the fact not only that minority admissions *rose* at most of the other University of California campuses, but that they have since risen annually at both Berkeley and UCLA, the two elite institutions. He repeats the myth (propagated by Jonathan Kozol) that inner-city schools are undone by insufficient funding, when a vast body of research has demonstrated that such discrepancies have been exaggerated or are nonexistent, and that untold numbers of schools excel on shoestring budgets. He then sees this alleged disparity as justifying lowered admissions standards to college for all black students, ignoring the mountain of studies and books (including mine) showing that even middle-class black students at fine schools lag behind in performance.

Ishmael Reed is so caught up in his battle at "the front" that he often simply fabricates.⁴ "The only black opinion-makers with any visibility are those who serve as mind doubles for their neoconservative or right-wing bosses," he asserts, requiring us to classify as obscurities writers like Bob Herbert and Brent Staples of the *New York Times* and, for that matter, Marable and Reed himself. As for Mathis,

⁴ Reed's book is a self-obsessed, rambling mess, and its publisher appears not even to have subjected the pages to proofreading. Thus, Reed shares with us his views on the Palestinian "intafada," on people getting what is "their's," and on such inventively spelled figures as Betty Freidan, Sir Thomas Moore, Jonas Savibimbi, Jane Austin, D'Nesh D'souza, and someone rather zealously flagged as John McWorther.

she, like Marable, subscribes to the canard that, historically, black communities thrived until white flight and the traitorous departure of the black middle class, developments that then left the less fortunate to sink into rampant criminality, unemployment, drug abuse, and illegitimacy—as if these problems were the inevitable and universal results of poverty. Although she does not approve of what open-ended welfare did to black communities, she considers the welfare-reform act of 1996 to have been a disaster, despite evidence to the contrary so persuasive that most of those initially opposed to the reform have since changed their minds.

Not only do the three authors maintain a studious blindness to progress, they evince little interest in solutions to the miasma they so urgently depict. Or, rather, Reed shows no interest at all. Marable and Mathis, who devote 95 percent of their texts to declaiming and denouncing, relegate their solutions to the parenthetical, the hazily presented, and the unlikely.

Finally, given the central role played by faith and hope in black advancement, it is astonishing how little confidence these authors repose in the ability of blacks to determine their own destiny. In my own writing, I have celebrated the local, mostly unknown black leaders who have dedicated their lives to helping their people help themselves. Marable does rhapsodize about the “deep humanistic belief in African Americans as a people” that was characteristic of black leaders of the past; ultimately, however, he deems it less important to instill such a “deep, humanistic belief” in contemporary blacks than to inform them of the hopelessness of their condition (short of the revolution that he has little faith will occur). In Mathis’s case, although one of her prescriptions to American blacks is to persevere and move on, her whole book preaches the futility of the effort.

WHAT EXPLAINS the discrepancy between contemporary black experience and the portrait drawn by the likes of Marable, Mathis, and Reed? Here I can only speculate. As it happens, all three are old enough actually to have known a segregated America. Deborah Mathis, for example, tells us how she and her family were once barred from a hotel, and remembers white parents forbidding their children from playing with her when her family moved to a white neighborhood. Having been born in an earlier era, the three seem stuck in the realities of their childhood and early adolescence. But if this explains something, it hardly excuses: they, of all people, living through what they lived through, should know better than to depict modern Amer-

ica as having advanced barely a step beyond the past.

Something else may bear mentioning in this connection: neither Marable, Mathis, nor Reed is dark-skinned. Nor are similarly-minded blacks of their age, like Julianne Malveaux, Randall Robinson, and Jack E. White. At my speaking engagements, I have frequently noticed that my most vociferous critics tend to be lighter-skinned blacks in their fifties. There was a time when such light-skinned blacks looked down on dark-skinned blacks; but that was before the black-is-beautiful movement of the late 60’s. One cannot help wondering whether part of the animus in the writings of Marable, Mathis, and Reed stems from a desire to show how “black” they really are.

Be that as it may, Reed’s *Another Day at the Front* offers a different sort of clue. Its thesis is that racism persists because white Americans have a vested interest in maintaining the fiction of white superiority and, especially, black inferiority. Behind what Reed sees as an “industry” of white writers engaged in describing “black pathologies” is, he asserts, a dirty little secret—namely, that people of all races often display the same pathologies, and to the same degree. If black reading scores are disproportionately low, reading scores are no less abysmal among American students as a whole. If black graduation rates are low, Hispanic women drop out of school at even more alarming rates. If there is an AIDS epidemic in black communities, the epidemic is also nationwide. In short, Americans need a scapegoat for their own manifold ills, and blacks have been designated to fill the role.

The worst thing about this thesis is not that it is ignorant, which it is, but that taking Reed at his word requires a heartless dismissal of, precisely, black suffering. There may be a rhetorical thrill to be had in pointing out that even if most killers of blacks today are themselves black, whites killed a much larger number of blacks over the course of the 20th century. But does Reed truly think that this nimble factoid furnishes a useful higher wisdom to a Chicago community leader helplessly watching black teens gunning each other down? Would he stand beside this man at the real front, at perhaps the third funeral for a teenager he has attended in a month, reminding him how the massacre at Columbine showed that violence is not restricted to young blacks?

The only way to make sense out of such lapses in common empathy is to understand that the “insights” of writers like Marable, Mathis, and Reed have no truly constructive intent. For all their passion, they are driven by motives less analytical than recreational. Under the guise of seeking to better

the lives of black people, theirs is a simple, self-indulgent quest for indignation now, indignation forever. In an only slightly more sophisticated way, they are like the legions of up-and-coming blacks under forty-five who can be seen mouthing the cop-hating lyrics of hip-hop music as they drive to their corporate offices in their new Mercedes sedans.

THERE IS, to be sure, nothing inherently “black” about this. It is natural for human beings to seek the balm of superior feeling. Gossip is a relatively harmless manifestation of the syndrome; reflexive alienation is more pernicious. The latter has been a crutch especially available to blacks, with an audience of whites eager for absolution and blacks no less eager to be comforted by assurances that they have been deprived of “understanding” and are owed a “debt.”

Nor do I mean to suggest that race writers like Marable, Mathis, and Reed are “hustlers,” out for gain. Rather, they exemplify what can happen when an unhealed spiritual wound meets an opportunity to vent one’s outrage. It has always bemused me that Marable and Reed call me “self-hating,” since that is exactly the quality I notice in their writings. Theirs is a historically contingent condition, one that accounts, I believe, for the lack of fit between their rhetoric and present reality.

Thankfully, most black Americans today are not buying it. I see evidence of this even in the rarefied realm of the university, the arena of American life most conducive to gestural politics and most resistant to reality. Just as *Losing the Race* met a warmer reception among the black public than among the experts, there are signs that younger blacks, including on campus, are moving toward a more constructive politics.

One such sign is to be found in the statistics of voter registration. Thus, a recent poll by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies shows that, whereas only about a quarter of all blacks in 2002 registered as independents, the figure rose to a third among blacks between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. According to the same survey, the number identifying themselves as Democrats dropped from 74 percent in 2000 to 63 percent in 2002. Al Sharpton himself seems barely able to take seriously his run for the presidency, and no other blacks of his race-baiting type have risen to national prominence. Cynthia McKinney of Georgia and Earl Hilliard of Alabama, two black members of Congress who tarred their opponents as insufficiently “black,” were voted out by blacks ready for a new message. The NAACP, its national lead-

ership frozen in a reflexive battle pose, plays an increasingly marginal role in black affairs.

Even the overwhelming support that blacks gave to Al Gore in the last presidential election masks a growing conservative strain. A *Washington Post* exit poll of black voters, for example, showed a whopping 86 percent opposed to racial preferences. In a recent study titled *Black Pride and Black Prejudice*, the political scientists Paul Sniderman and Thomas Piazza report an even more astonishing 90 percent of blacks rejecting the idea of admitting a less qualified black student over a more qualified white one, even if the disparity in test scores is slight.

IT IS harder but truer to believe that the world changes slowly than to believe that the world does not change at all. Last November, at the annual awards ceremony of the National Urban League in New York, the predominantly black audience sang dutifully along with the black anthem, “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing,” but joined lustily in “God Bless America.” Seated at my table was a woman (once again, light-skinned and in her fifties) who, a few years before, had condemned me as a racist and a self-hater for a talk I gave at a Manhattan community college. This time she was quite cordial; it was as if, having seen that I am not going away, she has opened herself to the possibility that I and my kind may not be the Antichrist after all.

No doubt, someone like Manning Marable, so disgusted with America that he excoriates the NAACP for giving an award to Condoleezza Rice, would see the National Urban League evening as a gathering of sellouts to the evil white establishment. But to pretend that successful, contented black people making their way in an imperfect but promising nation are moral perverts, with nothing to teach their less fortunate brothers, flies so directly in the face of logic, compassion, and experience as to qualify as a kind of mental onanism. To insist that successful blacks, no matter how numerous they become, qualify only as a few lucky souls squeaking through a squeezed-shut door is a grievous insult to the memory of the thousands of civil-rights leaders and footworkers who gave their all to making possible the lives that Marable, Mathis, Reed—and I—enjoy today.

The pity is that such writers, and those who echo them in the mass media and popular culture, will inevitably entice young blacks who remain susceptible to the cheap thrills of staged aggrievement. We must bear this in mind in criticizing them—even as, moving ever more blissfully beyond the America of their dire imaginings, we murmur, charitably, “Father, forgive them.”