



WOKE?

JOHN MCWHORTER'S *WOKE RACISM*

Cedric Merlin Powell

CONFLATING THE WHITELASH¹ against anti-racist activism and policy advocacy with a reverse racism conceit ripe with the fervor of a new religion, John McWhorter, Columbia University linguist and social commentator, unearths a new Black pathology – “Woke Racism” – a religion of wokeness that threatens to betray Black America. America is in the looking glass of its own democratic demise where mistruths resonate because they appeal to the basest inclinations of totalitarianism. In this inside-out world of post-racialism, white supremacist insurrectionists waving the Confederate battle flag as they storm the nation’s Capitol are merely patriotic “tourists”; Black Lives Matter freedom activists are “terrorists” and a menacing threat to American democracy; and “voter fraud” runs rampant throughout state electoral districts, subverting the true will of the American people to re-elect the former authoritarian president. Into this fraught and contorted public discourse enters a new rhetorical conception, “Woke Racism.” What is striking about McWhorter’s

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¹ See TERRY SMITH, *WHITELASH: UNMASKING WHITE GRIEVANCE AT THE BALLOT BOX 8* (2020) (“Whitelash is the reaction of many white Americans when they believe that strides toward racial equality have run amuck, to the point of threatening their own material well-being, even as they remain far better-off economically than people of color.”).

book is that it nearly completely misses context while advancing a form of neutrality that obscures the reality of systemic racism and structural inequality. McWhorter views this as an exaggerated claim designed to make Blacks perpetual victims and whites guilt-ridden perpetual oppressors.

Inversion is a devastating rhetorical tool – it turns concepts inside out so that the oppressed become the oppressors; whiteness, and its reifying privileges, becomes a disabling burden carried by innocent whites falsely accused of causing all the racism in the world (p. 16); Critical Race Theory (CRT) becomes a Marxist propaganda tool propagated in elementary and high schools to groom a new generation of social justice warriors (p. 67); and stigmatization of Blacks (as victims) and whites (as oppressors) is the objective of educators who ignore the rights of parents to determine what is an acceptable curriculum for their children.² McWhorter ominously concludes the first chapter of *Woke Racism* with this passage: “Do not heed those who say that this religion isn’t important. Make no mistake: These people are coming after your kids” (p. 22).

Entering this volatile and caustic debate, *Woke Racism*’s alluring appeal to right-wing conservatives and moderate liberals alike is its symmetrical argument that can be used by either side – by white conservatives to deny the existence of systemic racism, and by moderate liberals who acknowledge its existence but who want to shape the public discourse in terms of neutral process values.

Woke Racism engages the burgeoning canon of Black authenticity,³ the fluidity of identity,⁴ and Black respectability⁵ – it is a call to arms to push back against the oppressive self-righteousness of “the Elect,” the self-

² McWhorter argues that the Elect “teach [] toddlers to think of themselves as members of races in an oppositional relationship” (p. 176). This rationale is at the core of anti-CRT legislation. www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/07/02/why-are-states-banning-critical-race-theory/.

³ See generally EUGENE ROBINSON, *DISINTEGRATION: THE SPLINTERING OF BLACK AMERICA* (2010).

⁴ TOURÉ, *WHO’S AFRAID OF POST-BLACKNESS? WHAT IT MEANS TO BE BLACK NOW* (2011); Cedric Merlin Powell, *Identity, Liberal Individualism, and the Neutral Allure of Post-Blackness*, 15 GREEN BAG 2D 341 (2012).

⁵ JUAN WILLIAMS, *ENOUGH: THE PHONY LEADERS, DEAD-END MOVEMENTS, AND CULTURE OF FAILURE THAT ARE UNDERMINING BLACK AMERICA – AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT* (2006).

ordained ministers of the new gospel of Wokeism. McWhorter refers to this as the work of Third Wave Antiracism activists who emerged in the late 2000s and truly ascended to prominence during the Racial Reckoning. McWhorter is particularly skilled at mining old stereotypical tropes (like the stigmatizing effects of affirmative action, Black underachievement due to cultural deficiencies, and exaggerated claims of racism in the absence of discriminatory intent) and reinventing them into something new and appealing to the right- and left-leaning moderates who long for a means to neutralize race with a rhetorical escape hatch away from the complexity, nuance, adaptability, and permanence of systemic racism. *Woke Racism's* enterprise is, however, glaringly incomplete because it does not critically engage structuralism;⁶ rather, its primary focus is on liberal individualism,⁷ so it fails to illustrate how CRT is the foundation of a new religion which ultimately betrays Blacks.

McWhorter tries to navigate the cultural chasm between the validity and efficacy of Black liberation and empowerment and the jarring self-righteousness of those in the struggle who exclude others who do not follow the precise dictates of the struggle – the penalty is ex-communication from the Woke church by being banished as a racist (pp. 43-50). This is, essentially, a discourse on the boundaries of authenticity and who it impacts – Blacks who are now super-empowered through the audacity of their wokeness (the “Woke Mob”) and whites who are now cowering citizens afraid to be allies (or engaged collaborators) and terrified of being branded as racists (pp. 14-15). To McWhorter, this new state of religious affairs manifested in *Woke Racism* weaponizes white privilege so that whites are stained with this original sin: “to be white is to be born with the stain of unearned privilege. . . . The proper response to white privilege is to embrace the teachings of Ta-Nehisi Coates, Ibram Kendi, and Robin Di’Angelo . . . with the understanding that you will always harbor the

⁶ KHIARA M. BRIDGES, *CRITICAL RACE: THEORY A PRIMER* 147-49 (2019) (discussing how ostensibly neutral laws, policies, and procedures perpetuate subordination without a clearly identifiable discriminatory perpetrator).

⁷ In this manner the book echoes the jurisprudential rhetoric of the United States Supreme Court that the Constitution protects individuals, not racial groups. See Crystal S. Yang & Will Dobbie, *Equal Protection Under Algorithms: A New Statistical and Legal Framework*, 119 MICH. L. REV. 291, 352 n.208 (2020); Stephanie Bornstein, *Antidiscriminatory Algorithms*, 70 ALA. L. REV. 519, 544-45 (2018).

privilege stain nevertheless” (p. 33). He concludes that “[t]his is worship, by people embracing the self-mortification of the inveterate sinner, stained by the original sin of white privilege” (p. 33). To McWhorter, Coates, Kendi, and Di’Angelo are the “clergy” of a new religion, KenDi-Angelonianism (p.175), a form of Woke Racism based on the writing found in the Tri-Testament of Coates’ *Between the World and Me*, DiAngelo’s *White Fragility*, and Kendi’s *How to Be an Antiracist* (pp. 57-58).⁸ While McWhorter references these works, he barely engages with them in relation to how they function within his theory of Woke Racism.⁹

But where *Woke Racism* falls short is that it never acknowledges how CRT assesses systemic power and its reifying processes, neutrality and its rationalization of structural inequality, and the present-day effects of past discrimination.¹⁰ Instead, McWhorter summarily dismisses any consideration of attempts to dismantle structural inequality. There is no structural inequality because it cannot be identified with exacting particularity, thus proving that claims of systemic racism are exaggerated (pp. 71-76). What is exaggerated, however, is the claim of wokeness as a new religion.

Woke Racism is symptomatic of racial exhaustion.¹¹ In today’s post-racial world, no one wants to discuss race unless we are transcending it, or explaining how it victimizes whites. Much like the symmetrically neutral concepts of reverse racism, political correctness, and cancel culture, Woke Racism is a rhetorical inversion – race and racism are turned inside out –

⁸ Interestingly, McWhorter does not reference Kendi’s National Book Award-winning book, *STAMPED FROM THE BEGINNING THE DEFINITIVE HISTORY OF RACIST IDEAS IN AMERICA* 471-473 (2016) (discussing how McWhorter minimizes the significance of race to advance a contrived vision of racial progress). *Woke Racism* is limited in its analysis of context. See, e.g., TA-NEHISI COATES, *WE WERE EIGHT YEARS IN POWER: AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY* (2017).

⁹ Zaid Jilani, *John McWhorter Argues that Antiracism Has Become a Religion of the Left*, N.Y. TIMES, October 26, 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/10/26/books/review/john-mcwhorter-woke-racism.html.

¹⁰ See, e.g., R.A. Lenhardt, *Race Audits*, 62 HASTINGS L.J. 1527, 1539-77 (2011).

¹¹ Darren Lenard Hutchinson, *Racial Exhaustion*, 86 WASH. U. L. REV. 917, 922 (2009) (“[R]acial exhaustion rhetoric has operated as a persistent discursive instrument utilized to contest claims of racial injustice and to resist the enactment of racial egalitarian legislation. Racial exhaustion rhetoric has enjoyed particular force during and immediately following periods of mass political mobilization by antiracist social movements and institutional political actors, and it retains potency in contemporary racial discourse”).

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so that any anti-racism activism aimed at eradicating structural inequality is characterized as the irrational protestations of a religious cult (“the Elect”) sanctified in their own contorted self-righteousness. America has matured beyond its shameful history of racist oppression, and its orientation now must be forward-looking because most discrimination has been eliminated from all aspects of American life. Formalistic equality is appealing to McWhorter and his argument. Thus, any claims of racism by the Elect are gross exaggerations crafted in their own self-interest without regard to how much significant progress has been made (pp. 162-167).

It is a great analytical leap to equate progressive activism to a new religion (or cult) based on a series of discrete anecdotes depicting how disconcertingly fervent *individuals* are in a climate of political divisiveness fueled by cultural wars. *Woke Racism* does an excellent job of cataloguing individual grievances within what can be called cancel culture, but these extreme examples of blowback based upon missteps on racial issues reveal little about the enduring significance of race, racism, and inequality. While McWhorter references Third Wave Antiracism activism following Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement, he misses entirely the fundamental point that this Third Wave is a political and cultural response to the virulent racism promoted and advanced by the former president. This is not an exaggeration of the racism that exists in this fractured nation. American racial history is a series of cycles of retrogression and retrenchment.¹²

In perhaps one of the most striking passages in the book, McWhorter cursorily dismisses and downplays the defining significance of the insurrection by white supremacists on January 6, 2021. He writes that

This claim is a debate-team feint. As scary as those protesters were, which institutions are they taking over with their views? The question is not whether conservatism, in a much broader sense, dominates certain institutions and even societal structures. The question is: Which official institutions are bowing down to the militant physicality of *those who battled with police officers in the Capitol lobby*? Note that the answer is none (p. 156, emphasis in original).

While the reader is relieved that McWhorter does not engage in historical revisionism by claiming that the insurrectionists were humble tourists, his

¹² Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, *Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law*, 101 Harv. L. Rev. 1331 (1988).

argument is no less devastating to the integrity of historical fact. The self-assured formalism of his argument – that the insurrection was simply a physical act limited in scope and intent – is breathtaking: He goes on to conclude that

“It could happen here.” Okay, we must be wary, but in this case, where did “it” happen beyond one awful episode at the Capitol, which is vanishingly unlikely to ever happen again?” (p. 156).

“Be wary”? It is “vanishingly unlikely to ever happen again?” This historical disaggregation belies reality on the ground.¹³ What happened on January 6, 2021 was the culmination of a series of events to undermine American democracy and keep the first seditious president in power.¹⁴ This quest for a totalitarian regime is rooted in racist replacement theories, fantastical claims of voter fraud, and denials about the legitimacy of Joseph R. Biden’s presidency. And this radicalism is a practiced political strategy of the Republican Party, a party devoid of any ideas except racism and white grievance. To make his “Woke Racism” argument work, McWhorter conveniently ignores all of this, which leads him, in much the same manner that Trump revisionists do, to shift the blame for this failed political coup d’état to progressive activists. This is the discredited query of “what about Black Lives Matter or Antifa”? And McWhorter buys into it with

no one can deny that Elect ideology has a stranglehold on institutions that barely knew it just a few years ago. . . . The Capitol mob are changing nothing. . . . That they tried to threaten democracy is less important than that their attempt failed. The Elect are resonant successes in comparison” (pp. 156-157).

Certainly, this cannot mean that the Elect are more successful than the insurrectionists? Here, McWhorter’s argument falls apart because he is willing to trade critical reasoning for much of the illusory rhetoric that

¹³ The Editorial Board, Opinion, *Every Day Is Jan. 6 Now*, January 2, 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/01/01/opinion/january-6-attack-committee.html (“Above all, we should stop underestimating the threat facing the country.”).

¹⁴ See money.yahoo.com/gen-steve-anderson-january-6-145951213.html, January 2, 2022 (noting the danger that the military has become politicized and that 10% of the insurrectionists were members of the military).

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passes for the truth in public discourse.¹⁵ Even if we were to concede that the Elect is taking over the ideological debate, there is no direct analogy to the use of violence by white supremacists to overthrow a valid election. McWhorter invites the reader to take an analytical leap too far.¹⁶

Woke Racism is intended as a rhetorical call to arms to push back against wokeness and a distorted orthodoxy that compels allegiance without reason, yet it instead threatens to chill anti-racism discourse, characterizing it as “the eccentric and self-serving renovated definitions of racism forced upon us by religionists” (the Elect who “preach” from anti-racist works rooted in CRT) (p. 173). In fact, McWhorter’s thesis gives credence to the hyperbolic arguments of the Right because he echoes many of the themes found in public discourse. Rhetorically, he centers himself as the Black proxy arguing, to a large extent, against anti-racist activism, at least if it can be characterized as religious extremism; next, he foregrounds neutrality to assert that racism, while it exists, is largely a thing of the past so that all processes are open and fair and preferential racial outcomes, like affirmative action, are illegitimate; he offers a reductive critique of CRT; and, finally, he offers a discrete set of incremental remedies that are fastened to his conception of liberal individualism.

I.

THE BLACK PROXY

The rhetorical appeal of *Woke Racism* places McWhorter in a double bind – he is sensitive to being derisively labeled an Uncle Tom, sell out, or race traitor, and he acknowledges that his argument may be selectively deployed by whites against substantive remedial efforts for Blacks

¹⁵ TIMOTHY SNYDER, ON TYRANNY: TWENTY LESSONS FROM THE TWENTIETH CENTURY 56-62 (Graphic Edition, illustrated by Nora Krug, 2021) (noting how truth is displaced in four modes leading to totalitarianism: (i) “open hostility to verifiable reality”; (ii) “shamanistic incantation” – repeating fantastic claims endlessly so that they become distorted truths; (iii) “magical thinking, or the open embrace of contradiction”; and (iv) misplaced faith). The casualness of McWhorter’s argument about the insurrection is disconcerting in light of the four modes which are readily discernible in public discourse today.

¹⁶ Robert Pape, *Why We Cannot Afford to Ignore the American Insurrectionist Movement*, Chicago Project on Security & Threats, August 6, 2021, cpost.uchicago.edu/research/domestic_extremism/why_we_cannot_afford_to_ignore_the_american_insurrectionist_movement/.

and people of color. While noting the complexity of his position as a Black man advancing an argument against extreme progressive activism equivalent to evangelical religion, he nevertheless believes that the argument must be made because it is his “*duty as a black person to write this book*” (p. xv, emphasis in original).

McWhorter seeks to challenge the orthodoxy underlying wokeism, which requires monolithic thinking on issues of race and racism, and if there is any challenge to this, then the Elect will ex-communicate any non-believer in Black victimization that “*living while black* is such an unmitigated tragedy” (p. 94, emphasis in original). Blacks should be free to question the work of Ta-Nehisi Coates and to think differently from what the religion of antiracism demands. In other words, Blacks as free-thinking individuals should be empowered to reject wokeness. And this proposition resonates more persuasively because McWhorter, as a center-right liberal, advances a new strain of post-racialism when he concludes that “it has always been quietly clear that much of our discourse on race entails a certain exaggeration of just how bigoted most whites are” (p. 83). This is a classic rhetorical device, known as the distancing move, that diminishes the significance of racism in American society.¹⁷

Eschewing consistent focus on power differentials and race, McWhorter argues that structuralism – the proposition that systemic racism and structural inequality perpetuate the subordination of Blacks and other discrete and insular minorities – is conceptually irrelevant because it cannot be proved. He notes that there is a distinction between an “uneven playing field” and individual “prejudice,” and that the terms “societal racism, structural racism, systemic racism, and institutional racism” have been anthropomorphized so that individual prejudices have been exaggerated to substantiate claims of structural inequality (p.77). This argument will be particularly attractive to conservatives who deny the existence of structural inequality. Indeed, McWhorter embraces much of the argument, espoused

¹⁷ Sumi Cho, *Post-Racialism*, 94 IOWA L. REV. 1589, 1603-04 (2009); Christian B. Sundquist, *Beyond the “Resiliency” and “Grit” Narrative in Legal Education: Race, Class, and Gender Considerations*, 50 J. MARSHALL L. REV. 271, 272 (2017) (“Our country has a long and troubling history of adopting such post-oppression ‘distancing moves’ in order to discount the effect that systemic bias has on inequality, including disparate legal outcomes, by focusing on personal responsibility and individual deficit.”). *Woke Racism* fits squarely in this canon.

by the Right, that formal discrimination has been eradicated (he notes that America has matured racially), so the focus should not be on exaggerated connections between slavery and the present-day effects of past discrimination, but on “seeking and measuring the results of efforts to make black people’s lives better” (p.49). *Woke Racism* will be quoted far and wide by conservatives who will argue that the Racial Reckoning is nothing more than an attempt to divide America along racial lines by punishing whites for something that they did not do. And this argument will be deployed more broadly because a Black man is making the argument that racism, while it exists, has been exaggerated and that there should be more celebration of the progress that America has made (pp. 36-39).

II.

THE NEUTRAL ALLURE OF WOKE RACISM

Woke Racism fits squarely within what I have described elsewhere as Rhetorical Neutrality.¹⁸ What drives McWhorter’s *Woke Racism* theory are three interlocking myths that advance neutrality and give solace to those, on either side of the debate, who believe that the processes and systems of American society function well and are open to all. Because the core of McWhorter’s argument is liberal individualism – the focus is on the *individual*, not tribalized racial groups¹⁹ – he readily embraces rhetorical neutrality: (i) he relies on a historical myth actively dismissing, disregarding, or attempting to discredit valid analytical connections to the present-day effects of past discrimination (in this vein, McWhorter notes that discussions of slavery have saturated public discourse, pp. 130-32); (ii) he constructs a definitional myth so that discrimination is defined so narrowly that it is impossible to prove (here, McWhorter dismisses the significance of structural inequality and concludes that disparate impact is irrelevant in the

¹⁸ Cedric Merlin Powell, *Rhetorical Neutrality: Colorblindness, Frederick Douglass, and Inverted Critical Race Theory*, 56 CLEVE. STATE L. REV. 823, 831-59 (2008); CEDRIC MERLIN POWELL, POST-RACIAL CONSTITUTIONALISM AND THE ROBERTS COURT: RHETORICAL NEUTRALITY AND THE PERPETUATION OF INEQUALITY (forthcoming Cambridge Univ. Press).

¹⁹ McWhorter, *Woke Racism* at 112 (arguing that Electicism – the new religion of wokeness – “forbids us non-whites from being individual selves, out of an idea that white racism is so onerous that our self-definition must be fashioned against it, despite that this vastly exaggerates the role of racism in most black lives”).

absence of identifiable discriminatory intent, pp. 120-125, 163); and, finally, (iii) he offers a rhetorical myth explaining why there is persistent inequality (the problem is with Black agency, not structural systems).

McWhorter forcefully argues against the self-flagellation of white Elects (p. 68) and the performative victimhood of Black Elects who commodify subordination to have a collective identity under the new religion of Woke Racism (pp. 86-87). Rather than the racial balkanization that accompanies wokeness, which seeks to place blame on whites for everything, McWhorter suggests that the individual should be free to pursue her choices in a post-racial world without outcomes being artificially tied to race. He concludes that “To be Elect is to insist that unequal outcomes mean unequal opportunity, which is false” (p. 129). Because of his strict adherence to liberal individualism and neutrality, McWhorter never questions *why* there are unequal outcomes – these outcomes must be the product of a legitimate and rational post-racial process.²⁰ Yet again the limitations of *Woke Racism* are revealed because there is no structural context to McWhorter’s assertions. He accepts neutrality – that contemporary processes are open, accessible, inclusive, and meritocratic, and racism should not be used as an excuse for failure – yet because there is no structural frame, he exaggerates the significance of individualism and obscures the salience of race and racism. This leads to the most fundamental distortion in McWhorter’s *Woke Racism* – the reductive critique of CRT.

III.

THE REDUCTIVE CRITIQUE OF CRT

What is striking about McWhorter’s critique is its superficial reference to the scholarship and recitation of criticisms that are decades old and add little to the power of his argument. But this is the state of affairs in the public discourse surrounding CRT, so this is not surprising.

²⁰ Cedric Merlin Powell, *Harvesting New Conceptions of Equality: Opportunity, Results, and Neutrality*, 31 ST. LOUIS U. PUB. L. REV. 255, 267 (2012) (“It should be clear that whether discrimination ‘exists’ or not is a product of how the Court chooses to define it. This brings us to the underlying ‘tension’ between equal opportunity and equal results. This is a largely manufactured tension because the Court disregards history, context, and the present-day effects of past discrimination to construct a neutral rationale for inequality.”).

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For example, McWhorter references “copies of Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas (one of the signature early CRT anthologies)” (p.66) without so much as an attempt to ground this reference with substantive analysis and critique.²¹ Instead, the reader is offered the old playlist of criticisms of CRT that it is all about hierarchies and power (white privilege as a defining feature of American life); storytelling by Blacks that must be accepted as true stories of discrimination which are exaggerations; and “fantastical pessimism” (p. 43) that focuses on structural inequality rather than great societal progress in eliminating racism from public and private life (pp. 63-71, 87).

The point is that CRT is not simply “communal” storytelling, and McWhorter gives it short shrift in characterizing it so. Unfortunately, *Woke Racism* also privileges some of the distortions inherent in the current debate about CRT being “taught” in public schools. Building upon his polemical argument, McWhorter even makes the careless comment that “Critical race theory makes Marxism look like ABCs” (p. 67). An obvious rhetorical play to the hordes of uninformed parents eager to grasp on to the false narrative that their children are being indoctrinated to be social justice warriors by the liberal state.²² This has even led to violence at some school board meetings²³ – there is no mention of this anywhere in the book. The reader is left to wonder where this would fit in McWhorter’s conception of wokeness, and whether this is a “religion” of ignorance and white supremacy targeted at school board officials simply doing their jobs. Here, again, McWhorter

²¹ For example, McWhorter’s argument would be more engaging and critical if he had noted any criticisms involving the literature that he superficially references and how *Woke Racism* fits within this critique. What does Woke Racism portend for these texts? See, e.g., RICHARD DELGADO AND JEAN STEFANCIC, *CRITICAL RACE THEORY: AN INTRODUCTION* (NYU Press 2017); KIMBERLÉ WILLIAMS CRENSHAW, NEIL GOTANDA, GARY PELLER AND KENDALL THOMAS, *CRITICAL RACE THEORY: THE KEY WRITINGS THAT FORMED THE MOVEMENT* (New Press 1995); DERRICK BELL, *FACES AT THE BOTTOM OF THE WELL: THE PERMANENCE OF RACISM* (Basic Books 1992 & 2018); Linda S. Greene, *Critical Race Theory: Origins, Permutations, and Current Queries*, 2021 WISCONSIN L. REV. 259.

²² See *supra* note 2 and accompanying text.

²³ PBS News Hour, *Politics of Masks, Critical Race Theory Fueling Heated School Board Elections*, October 27, 2021, www.pbs.org/newshour/show/politics-of-masks-critical-race-theory-fueling-heated-school-board-elections.

misses the significance of the insurrection – it is *still* happening as white supremacists now concentrate their efforts on dismantling the American polity through usurpation of school board meetings, county board and city council meetings, and even secretary of state offices throughout the country,²⁴ and the argument that the insurrection was a one-time aberration (“vanishingly unlikely to ever happen again”) gives these anti-democratic initiatives the perfect cover.

IV. INCREMENTALISM

Woke Racism concludes with McWhorter offering solutions to stem the tide of the “ideological reign of terror” (p. 151) that is wokeness. Arguing that the Elect is a woke mob that must be othered (p. 152) – this is an extraordinary proclamation given that McWhorter’s core argument is that individuals should not be excluded because of their viewpoints – he offers post-racial remedies that are progressive but are not based upon the blind religious fervor of Woke Racism. But McWhorter’s remedial approach is limited in scope because, once again, his exclusive focus is on the individual, not structural inequality.

McWhorter offers three remedies: (i) ending the war on drugs²⁵; (ii) teaching reading properly through direct instruction (phonics); and (iii) offering specialized vocational education as a real alternative to the four-year college (pp. 139-144). These remedies are fine as starting points, but McWhorter’s central premise in advancing them is that structural inequality cannot be identified, so moving beyond “dismantling structures” must be the real work in saving Black America. This reframing of the work of anti-racism is severely limited – these remedies will surely help individuals and

²⁴ PBS, Frontline, *American Insurrection*, January 4, 2022, www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/american-insurrection/.

²⁵ This is the closest that McWhorter comes to articulating a structural remedy, but he does not conceptualize it structurally. He references the personal benefits of the remedy, but not ending the war on drugs and mass incarceration; his focus is on the market for drugs not the systemic factors of incarceration. See, e.g., Mugambi Jouet, *Mass Incarceration Paradigm Shift?: Convergence In An Age of Divergence*, 109 J. CRIM. L. & CRIMINOLOGY 703, 712-13 (2019) (noting that ending the war on drugs will not end mass incarceration and advancing an Eight Amendment argument to limit disproportionate punishment).

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give them a sense of purpose and worth in society, but incremental remedial approaches do very little to eradicate structural inequality.

The Racial Reckoning has meant that there are many movements for social change – from Black Lives Matter to Black Votes Matter and everything in between. The power, validity, and resiliency of struggle should not be distorted by a makeweight trope derived from distorted depictions of social engagement, self-determination, and political empowerment. All movements have flaws, but those flaws cannot be retooled to turn legitimate claims for equality into reverse racism claims where the oppressed become the oppressors; this is not performative victimhood but the realization that in 2022 there are identifiable vestiges of past discrimination. We should not be afraid to acknowledge this, because America cannot bury its past. And *Woke Racism* should not be used to allow America to do so. McWhorter certainly recognizes this, but he declines to offer a structural critique of inequality because he thinks that such an analysis and approach is overblown.

Woke Racism is incomplete in its analysis of racism because the focus is on *individual* beliefs, not structural reality. A telling example of the limits of McWhorter’s liberal individualist approach is when he concludes that “police brutality, while appalling, is just one of thousands of types of experience one goes through from cradle to grave” (p. 112). This is a startlingly narrow assessment of police brutality, and it illustrates how neutrality – the suggestion that everyone has the same “experience” – is a flawed doctrine to address inequality. McWhorter’s analysis would have benefited from an engagement with the scholarship in this area even if his objective was to critique this body of work.²⁶

Considering the systemic disparities in society today, many of which are not even mentioned in *Woke Racism* – such as voter suppression, housing segregation and redlining, and the rise of the white supremacist movement at the core of the insurrection – liberal individualism is no an-

²⁶ See, e.g., PAUL BUTLER, *CHOKEHOLD: A RENEGADE PROSECUTOR’S RADICAL THOUGHTS ON HOW TO DISRUPT THE SYSTEM* (2017); JAMES FORMAN, JR., *LOCKING UP OUR OWN: CRIME AND PUNISHMENT IN BLACK AMERICA* (2017); ANGELA J. DAVIS (editor), *POLICING THE BLACK MAN* (2017); Devon W. Carbado & L. Song Richardson, *The Black Police: Policing Our Own Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America*, 131 HARV. L. REV. 1979 (2018).

swer for this: “We must advance theories of group empowerment which seek to dismantle the present day effects of past discrimination.”²⁷ Woke? Being woke is being aware.

Black America will truly be betrayed if post-racialist conceits like *Woke Racism* shift the conversation to neutrality and liberal individualism devoid of history and context. Interestingly, *Woke Racism* says nothing about the power of redemption even within an argument that non-adherents to the evangelical religion of antiracist activism must push back to reclaim American society. If Woke Racism is a new religion, how are woke zealots “saved”? They cannot be. McWhorter concludes that “there is no discussion to be had” (p. 157). This adds to the narrative power of the disparaging label “wokeness” without offering any rhetorical space for a discussion about what this awareness and empowerment mean. So, we are back where we started, and perhaps worse, if *Woke Racism* gains currency.



²⁷ Powell, *supra* note 4, at 354.