



*Remarks accepting*  
**The Philip Merrill Award**  
for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education

## Is the Problem Free Speech or Modernity? The Principles We Must Regain

by Dr. John H. McWhorter

---

*Introduction by Janice Rogers Brown*  
*Tributes by Glenn Loury, Steven Pinker, & Roosevelt Montás*



**ACTA**  
AMERICAN COUNCIL OF  
TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI

## AMERICAN COUNCIL OF TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI

---

ACTA is an independent, nonprofit organization committed to academic freedom, academic excellence, and accountability at America's colleges and universities. Founded in 1995, ACTA is the only national organization dedicated to working with alumni, donors, trustees, and education leaders across the United States to support liberal arts education, uphold high academic standards, safeguard the free exchange of ideas on campus, and ensure that the next generation receives an intellectually rich, high-quality education at an affordable price. Our network consists of alumni and trustees from over 1,300 colleges and universities, including over 23,000 current board members. Our quarterly newsletter, *Inside Academe*, reaches more than 13,000 readers.



Is the Problem Free Speech or Modernity?  
The Principles We Must Regain

by Dr. John H. McWhorter

*Remarks accepting*

The Philip Merrill Award  
for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education

*with*

**Introduction by**

Janice Rogers Brown

**Tributes by**

Glenn Loury

Steven Pinker

Roosevelt Montás

October 21, 2022  
Washington, DC

# Is the Problem Free Speech or Modernity?

## The Principles We Must Regain

by Dr. John H. McWhorter

---

I don't win prizes, I don't win awards. I am massively flattered that ACTA has granted me this one, not to mention convened this event. And I am so happy to see so many friends and colleagues here. I just turned—don't clap for it yet—just turned 57. It's the oldest I've ever been. And this really does send it home for me in a good way

I hope not to disappoint you. I'm not going to talk for too long, but I am also not going to talk about something as general as that what's threatened in our lives is free speech, because I think that honestly, none of us want completely free speech either in the university or anywhere else. There are certain topics that we might feel, either on the basis of there being limited time or even the limits of human sentiment, that we might feel as not worth our time to discuss.

The issue is what certain people feel we should bar from the precincts of free speech. The issue is less whether or not there's free speech on campus, because I don't think that most of us want to have extended discussions on campus as to whether or not there should be slavery or genocide. The issue is what we *should* be able to discuss.

And our problem is that there's a certain contingent wielding disproportionate influence in not only universities, but thinking culture today, who believe that we must focus on something very specific: battling differentials in power, especially ones that involve white people in power,

and that if you are not battling these differentials in power, then you should not be allowed to speak, you should not be allowed to participate. So, the issue is not free speech, it's whether or not your speech should be free about that very, almost even eccentrically, particular thing.

We might think about it from the perspective of someone in about 1960, asking whether there should be any debate over whether or not it should be central for us to battle differentials in power. Now, if you pull the camera back, that's not an insane proposition. After all, differentials in power and the abuses that come from it have created a great deal of horror in the history of the human species. And it might be a going proposition that we do decide that, out of the maybe 100 things that one might focus on as a thinking person, that before we unduly consider anything else, we deal with the fact that one group seems to too often have its foot on other groups' neck.

That's not crazy in itself. The reason we are here, the real "crazy," is less that formal proposition, and how it could potentially be defended by an intelligent person, than how it comes out in real life: a rather more transparent proposition that something you call whiteness—whatever that is—must be at least questioned and optimally eliminated. And that black people, in particular, can never be wrong and must never be seriously challenged. That's the problem: the proposition that whiteness must be battled and black people must not be challenged. That's a lot of what I have posed myself against over, what I'm realizing lately, is about the past 25 years.

Now, what's interesting to think, and also dismaying to think, is that a lot of why we've gotten to this point is because of the challenges of modernity. There are actually three particular frames of mind that piggyback on this whole ideology, and not only piggyback on it, but—in a kind of feedback loop—help to create it and support it. A lot of this is really just human nature, and innocent human nature.



For example, we are grappling with anthropomorphization. Robert Macaulay is a philosopher, and he has identified a difference between the scientific and the religious mindset. And he notes that the religious mindset—which as I think all of you know, based on a certain book I wrote recently, I think is analogous to this new ideology—tends to make things into people, as opposed to the scientific mindset that pulls you away from that very natural way of looking at things. So, part of this hyper-wokeness that's infecting the academy and so many places beyond is based on a tendency to think of phenomena as operating like people.

Hence the idea that there is a white devil. It is an attractive way of thinking if you're dealing with the nonscientific variety, which frankly is the human tendency. It is a challenge to think scientifically—that's not the way we're born, that's not our genetic specification. Our genetic specification is to anthropomorphize. Enter the white devil.

Similar in origin is the concept of “societal racism.” Racism starts as bigotry against someone. Then there's a concept that a society can be racist. Now, that's not technically what it means, but it's the way it feels. It's the way it hits the hippocampus. The idea is that it's not that someone's burning a cross on anyone's lawn, but that the society is racist. That's a religious way of thinking, as opposed to a scientific way, which encourages more abstractness. This anthropomorphization is quite normal. There's nothing fanatic about it, but it does underlie a lot of what challenges coherent debate today. It is one of three things.

There is a second thing, and that is a tendency—and as a linguist, I'm familiar with how this works with grammar, and I'm not going to bore you with that—for the objective to drift into the subjective. What starts out as concrete becomes more about yourself, more all about you. Here, the useful source to consult would be Richard Rorty, especially in *Achieving Our Country*, where he writes about the idea that as time goes by, people can start to think that politics consists of, rather than partially entails, the

expression of feelings. Under this misimpression, to have expressed your feelings is political activism in itself. Your sentiments supposedly change society. Even to go a little further back than that book, the aphorism that the personal is political comes from that same well—the idea that it’s about you and what makes you feel good rather than going out and committing and achieving actions. I would say that a lot of the white support for this hyper-wokeness is based on that: How you feel is more important than anything you’ve actually done. That tendency to go from the action to the gesture is as universal as that plants thrive and branch up into the air. That is perfectly human, and it is something that underlies a lot of what we’re talking about.

And then, especially on the black side—not only on the black side, but mainly—there’s something else that’s purely human, and that is the victimization mindset. And I say that not randomly as a one-off, but as something that psychologists know about. Very few of them are brave enough to say that it has an awful lot to do with much of social politics today regarding people of color, but it’s a familiar concept to most of us. We all know the noble victim. And if you imagine the noble victim, you probably don’t necessarily automatically think of it as a black person. This is a human tendency, but there’s a certain way of being where you obsess with your victimhood, where your main interest in interacting with other people is sharing accounts of your victimhood, and where you think ultimately that your victimhood is the most interesting thing about you.

And the problem with that is that just as with the anthropomorphization and just as with the objective going to the subjective, this is anti-modern. The reason that you fall into the peculiarity, the very peculiar state, of finding your victimhood more interesting than anything else about you instead of engaging in the minimization that psychologists know is normal when you are faced with victimhood—especially of a kind that is not especially threatening—is because modernity itself is threatening. It can be

hard in this kind of society, as opposed to amidst a small band of people, to understand where you grab on, what you belong to. If you're not just a dad and a brother and somebody's best friend and a son, what is your purpose beyond that band of 150 people?

It's hard to find a sense of what you are. There are many ways that you can come up with an answer. A tempting one, in a society especially in which you are part of an oppressed or previously oppressed group, is to fall into the victimization mindset. And it's understandable, but it's also unmodern.

All of these things are tendencies that go against becoming modern Homo sapiens, that come together into a cocktail that we perceive as a general threat to free speech, which is actually a more specific threat—to talking about power differentials in any way but one. And there are two reasons that this worries me so much. One of them is that this new movement, which I don't think it's hyperbole to say is taking over our academic and artistic and judicial institutions, is teaching us not to think. The general theme, despite the fact that most people who espouse this think of it as ahead of the curve and think of it as something that you need to do "work" to understand, is teaching us not to think, as a false kind of enlightenment. And especially it teaches that you're not supposed to allow black people to think.

For example, the educator may fall for the idea that it's backwards to expect people to get the exact answer, that there's something advanced about teaching that people should adopt the mindset that students should buzz around getting the answer, even if they don't happen to get the answer; that students should just "explore," and foster a belly-warming sense that the subject relates to their own mundane lives. The problem with this is that if the choice is between approximation and exactness, one of those things is easier than the other. The approximation is easier. And it's always that theme: Everything that we're being told says, "Don't think." No one's



thinking of it that way, but that tendency in how we think about race and achievement is rather alarming.

Or let us take the related notion that if you are a white person, you stress individuality, but that if you're black, you stress the communal. So white people are individualistic and that's selfish, while black people all work together, right? But: which one is harder? Hanging around with people you know, with everybody agreeing with each other, doing what you've done since you were a child? Where's the challenge in that? As opposed to being an individual, which is a challenge—going out in your own boat, thinking your own way, and having the fortitude to stick to it. That's harder. That's called the Enlightenment. That's called what we've been at for at least the past few hundred years. But we're told that that harder thing must be dismissed because it's white. Once again, the idea is black people take it easy. I'm not falling for it.

Another example. You're supposed to approximate, you're supposed to be communal, and you're also supposed to distrust complexity and nuance. Certainly about the most challenging thing to human psychology ever, which is that everything is about gray zones. Apparently, complexity and nuance are rather white. Instead, what's important is expressing your feelings. Now, one of those things is hard. One of those things is easy. It's so easy to express your feelings. I'm doing it now. I'm not having a hard time.

The idea is that we institute a new regime, a new way of looking at things, but everything that we're told is the right thing to do or that we're supposed to let black people do is always easy. There's only one thing difficult in all of this and it's that white people have to learn to understand how racist they are deep down. Black people aren't supposed to do anything difficult. I don't feel honored by this, despite the fact that a great many very smart, very kind, very well-meaning and even PhD-ed black people tell me that this is the right thing to do. It's not right.

Then I told you that there are two reasons why all of this worries me. One of them is this creeping anti-intellectualism that I just mentioned. Then there is a truly brutal condescension involved in all of this. There are few things that perplex me more, if I'm not thinking hard enough, than the fact that so many of my fellow black people listen to this kind of ideology and don't feel like someone is slapping them in the face.

All around this country, school after school is dropping the SAT. And the reason that they're dropping the SAT is because black and Latino kids tend not to be as good at them as other students, and apparently Asian students are too good at them. Are they perfect tests? No. But then, on the other hand, were they instituted in order to have some sort of race- and class-neutral measure of how quick somebody was on the uptake? Yes, but we're not supposed to talk about that.

There is a mendacity about this that smells every bit as bad as what Tennessee Williams wrote about in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Instead of asking, "How do we get black people better at them?"—which is what black leaders would have said until about January 1, 1966—what you say is, "Get rid of the test because it is racist." This takes us back to Macaulay's anthropomorphization.

Thus esteemed thinkers and all of our media organs and thinking people pretend to go along with this and, having conversations with you if you're black, always do that thing that gives it away: They won't look you in the eye. They keep looking over your shoulder. And I'm always wondering, "What's over there?" And sometimes you look and it's just some tree. They can't look you in the eye. "The test is racist." Well, what does that mean? Any idiot can figure it out. Any six-year-old could figure this out. What you're saying is that it's wrong to submit a black person to a test of abstract cognitive skill.

But, if it's wrong to submit a black person to a test of abstract cognitive skill, what are we close to saying? And then, why are we so angry when

Charles Murray or somebody else publishes a book that says outright that black people aren't as smart? That person has to be put out on an ice floe—despite that we have black writers who are saying the exact same thing. This is pure condescension.

I'm going to give one more example of this. One of the best books ever written was *Moby Dick*. You have to be patient. It helps if there was a pandemic. But the second-best book ever written, other than some of mine, of course, was *The Coddling of the American Mind* by Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff. And there were three tenets in that book that are just pure common sense; it's biblical. The idea is that the last thing you want to teach students is that what doesn't kill you makes you weaker. The second is that you don't want to teach anybody that the world is made of good and bad people. And the third thing that you don't want to teach people is that you must always trust your feelings.

We all know this. Almost everybody in this room probably has children. Imagine what you would not teach your kids. And yet we're told that the idea that the world is made of good and bad people, that you always trust your feelings, and that what doesn't kill you makes you weaker is what to teach black people and that others should treat us with those tenets in mind. The idea is that the black student and the complaints that we often hear from them must be considered correct.

Now, you would never hear anybody give a reason why we are teaching black kids that whatever doesn't kill you makes you weaker, that the world is about good and bad people, and that you always trust your feelings. If asked why this is wise, the usual suspect will start looking away from your eyes and over the shoulder, and likely say that the matter is complicated. But it is not. That's the wrong big word beginning with "C." The proper one is "condescending."

And yet, all of this is allowed to pass out of a sense that our main issue is to always battle power differentials in such a way that whiteness is condemned and black people can never be wrong.

This simply won't do. My battle when I'm not being a linguist is less against the issue of free speech than this unintended racism against black kids and black people, who deserve much better. And we have two choices. One of them—and sometimes, about every third day, I think this is where we're stuck—is that the humanities and the social sciences are so shot through with this new idea, and so many people have bent over to it, especially since early 2020, that we maybe need to consider whether there are going to be other spaces in our future American society for people who are genuinely curious and genuinely interested in the life of the mind.

There are times when I think we should accept that universities have become cathedrals and figure out that there are different ways of having a true intellectual culture. It used to be that if you went to a bar, there was also a table in the back with sandwiches and cheese. It was understood that you got free lunch. That stopped. Now you have to go get your lunch somewhere else. Society splits things up in different ways. Remember when you used to go to Woolworths and get a hamburger? Walgreens doesn't give you a hamburger.

Maybe you don't get an education at a university. Maybe a university is for being inculcated into this particular ideology and university education has to go online. Of course, I don't like this because I grew up a faculty brat and now I teach at a university. Thus truly, I think and I know ACTA thinks that we need bravery. We need a kind of bravery that can stand up against this professionalized incuriosity and ceaseless virtue signaling, which is perhaps understandable but intolerable in a modern society, and understand that what we're dealing with is something that has arisen amidst a menacing collision between encroaching modernity, the challenges of racial and cultural diversity, and the ravages of social history.

This self-indulgent ideology is manifested and supported largely because of cowering fear. We must battle this, or we will not recognize our intellectual culture in as little as 10 years. I'm sure that all of us here are

ready to march on and fight this slow but necessary fight against something perfectly understandable, yet absolutely poisonous to an American thinking culture that deserves the name.

Thank you for this award.

\* \* \*

## Introduction and Tributes

*The following introduction and tributes were given in honor of Professor McWhorter at the presentation of the Philip Merrill Award on October 21, 2022.*

---

### Introduction

#### Janice Rogers Brown

*Former Associate Justice of the California Supreme Court; Former United States Circuit Judge of the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit*

Good evening. I am Janice Rogers Brown. I'm one of the newer members of ACTA's Board of Directors. Our former board chair, Bob Lewit, confessed at a different Merrill Award ceremony that, in retirement, he discovered his calling was, quote, "saving Western Civilization," and that made me feel good because my own mission is a bit more modest—merely saving America and its commitment to freedom and justice for all. But the ultimate objective, I think, is the same, because America's survival is a prerequisite to the recovery and advancement of Western Civilization. And that means our institutions of higher education must produce a polity up to this urgent task.

The high point of ACTA's year is the ceremony that will follow in a few minutes. We are saving civilization when we cultivate the liberal arts and sciences. It is a gift to the world when distinguished scholars, teachers, and college leaders put their minds and hearts into advancing the studies that are the foundation of living more wisely, more justly, and more productively. That is what we celebrate tonight.

It is ACTA's privilege to have Professor John H. McWhorter as a new friend. I discovered the gospel according to John McWhorter when I purchased a copy of his first book, *Winning the Race*. Captivated by his candor, I have continued to relish his insights on subjects ranging from linguistics to hip-hop music. The Merrill Award Selection Committee chose very wisely. John



McWhorter is a distinguished scholar and teacher who does not hesitate to follow wherever the data or the unvarnished facts may lead. At a time when this nation is roiled with self-destructive division, his call to reason, truth, logic, and individual excellence leads us forward.

We have three extraordinary guests who will say more about his contributions. First, his powerful interlocutor on *The Glenn Show*, none other than the Merton P. Stoltz Professor of the Social Sciences at Brown University, Glenn Loury. After that by video, Steven Pinker, the Johnstone Family Professor in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University. And then Roosevelt Montás, senior lecturer in American Studies and English at Columbia University. After these tributes to Professor McWhorter, Catherine Merrill, CEO and owner of *Washingtonian* Media, editor of *Washingtonian* magazine, and daughter of the late Philip Merrill—in whose honor this award is named—will present the unique trophy of the Merrill Award, and we will have the pleasure of hearing Professor McWhorter’s acceptance speech.

## **Tributes**

### **Glenn Loury**

*Merton P. Stoltz Professor of the Social Sciences, Brown University*

Let me tell you what is at stake in the conversation about race that I’ve been having with John McWhorter.

There are things that don’t—or can’t—get said when we talk about race in most venues in America. Those who have followed the 15-year-long conversation on this topic that I have been undertaking with John at *The Glenn Show* know what I’m talking about, whether it’s crime in black communities or out-of-wedlock birthrates, academic underperformance or the unbearable intellectual lightness of much anti-racism agitation. In academia, in the mainstream publications and media outlets, and increasingly in K–12 classrooms, what I’ve called “the bias narrative” holds sway. Negative aspects of black life are attributed almost entirely to the

nation's history of racial oppression, which is set to begin in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century and to continue unabated to this day. We are said to be a bandit society built on genocidal plundering undertaken by unrepentant racists.

That's one story you could tell. And if that story were just one of many circulating through our national discourse, it wouldn't be the worst thing. But this "bias narrative" has become not just one of many stories. It's now the *only* story in newspaper opinion pages, in scholarly journals, and in educational materials disseminated throughout our schools. It's the story told by the White House. It's the story that ramifies out from the most elite precincts of our country and shapes ordinary conversations and relations between individuals. Its grip on so many areas of the public imagination has become so tight that anyone challenging it is viewed with suspicion and, often enough, outright contempt. If an alternative explanation for black underperformance is proffered, it's not the explanation that gets challenged but the individual making it. For to challenge this narrative, ipso facto, proves that one is a racist, or a deplorable, or, if the challenger is a black man, an Uncle Tom.

This situation is intellectually infantile and morally bankrupt. How we talk and think about race has consequences that can be measured not just in dollars and cents but in stagnant lives and dead bodies. So, responding with ad hominem attacks to any account of our current predicament that is not rooted in bias isn't merely unfortunate, it is actively damaging. The stakes are enormously high here and the hour is late. Candor, integrity, and courage are in short supply. Name-calling and character assassination have largely replaced open debate, while naked emperors, pseudo-academics, and bombastic demagogues command the public square.

Enter John and Glenn. Or as I sometimes like to refer to our duo, enter the WokeBusters!!

In Hans Christian Andersen's story "The Emperor's New Clothes," two swindlers promise to provide an emperor with magnificent new clothes that will be invisible to those who are too stupid or incompetent to see them.

Officials can plainly see that no clothes are being produced on the swindlers' looms, but none of them will say anything to avoid being thought of as a fool. So when the emperor walks through the city in his new "clothes," everyone can see that he is naked, but no one will be the first to say it. But then comes along an innocent child who, in his naïveté, was willing to defy this false consensus and speak out.

The thing about the child in that story is not that he's saying it. It's not even that other people hear him saying it. It's that everybody knows that everybody else has heard him say it. The child has created a situation in which it becomes common, shared knowledge that the emperor has no clothes. Everyone knows that everyone knows the truth.

German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann coined a term that describes this phenomenon: the "Spiral of Silence." In a spiral of silence, when holding a certain view entails a stigma, then people stay silent for fear of being seen as having that view. Thus the masses believe that they are alone or in a small minority of people with the stigmatized view, when in fact they are indeed one of the masses.

In progressive-controlled areas of our society today, we are suffering from a spiral of silence when it comes to the topic of racial justice. A great many Americans don't like it when Colin Kaepernick takes a knee at a football game and says, "I'm not going to stand for this national anthem," or when a Black Lives Matter activist rises with his balled fist and says, "Burn this city down." But they are afraid to be the only one in their community saying it, to be perceived either as racist or as a supporter of racism, for holding mild views that, arguably, most of America holds, views such as the obvious fact that "White lives matter, too!"

There is a deeper point here. Though overt censorship is often spoken of as the leading threat to open discourse, the more subtle threat arises from the voluntary limitations of one's own speech that create a spiral of silence. As John Stuart Mill recognized in his masterwork *On Liberty*, it is not the

iron fist of state repression but rather the velvet glove of society's seduction that constitutes the real problem.

Who, we must ask, will speak for compromise and common sense, when to speak in this way is seen to signal a weak commitment to “the struggle”? Who will insist that we speak plainly and tell the truth about delicate and difficult matters (such as the despicable black-on-black violence now ravaging many of our cities), matters which we would all prefer to cover up or ignore? Who will declare “the emperor” to be naked? How can a nation sustain an elevated political discourse when the social forces of conformity which promote silence threaten to usher in a dark age? In truth, it cannot. But, with a simple choice, with just a little bit of bravery, *you and I* can choose to be like that child who spoke truth to the empire. We can put an end to the gaslighting, the lying, and the willful blindness to reality on issues of race and social justice that are characteristic of our time.

My friend and longtime conversation partner, Professor John Hamilton McWhorter IV, with his books, opinion pieces, and via his public ministry at The Glenn Show has, for nearly a quarter-century, been pointing the way. It is now up to those of us who are committed to an honest engagement with this age-old American dilemma of race and social justice to follow his lead, if only we dare do!

Thank you.

### **Steven Pinker**

*Johnstone Family Professor of Psychology, Harvard University*

It's a deep pleasure to help honor Professor John McWhorter with the 2022 Philip Merrill Award. John McWhorter's superhuman record of essays, reviews, podcasts, media appearances, and popular books can make us forget that he's also a major scholar in linguistics. John has published dozens of technical papers in Creole linguistics, which is not as obscure an academic discipline as it might sound.

A problem in understanding language is that the conveniently available languages like English and French emerged more than a millennium ago and are messy legacies of conquests, migrations, policies, viral fads, and self-appointed language guardians of many eras. Creole languages emerged recently from plantations and other new communities and can show us how a language is shaped by the people who speak and expand it in real time.

John has made original, and sometimes contrarian, analyses of these languages. He's argued that they're certainly complex and expressive, like all human languages, but they are simpler than familiar legacy languages because they've had fewer centuries to accumulate irregularities and quirks. He's also argued that they're a product of a generation of children struggling to acquire the dominant language as their second language, rather than of children inventing it as their first, as a famous hypothesis had claimed. And close to home, John has argued that English itself emerged as a Creole when the Viking invaders had trouble mastering the fine points of Anglo-Saxon. More generally, he has recounted the history of the English language in a book with the best title ever for a book on this topic, *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue*.

Which brings us to the second reason John deserves this honor. John McWhorter is America's foremost popular explainer and commentator on language, and I say this as someone who is sometimes described as playing this role himself. Here, too, John is fearless, original, and sometimes contrarian, not out of a querulous temperament, because nothing could be further from John's sweet nature, but out of a gift for seeing through fads and orthodoxies and offering his best assessment. An example is his book *The Language Hoax*, which makes a powerful case against the hypothesis, as popular as it is wrong, that languages have shaped the thoughts of their speakers. Or take John's book *Doing Our Own Thing: The Degradation of Language and Music and Why We Should, Like, Care*. Though John is a vociferous defender of the richness and complexity of nonstandard varieties of English, especially African American English, this did not prevent him

from identifying a historical trend in all languages away from eloquence, articulateness, and formality in speech styles. This is seen in, and perhaps is caused by, the decline in having schoolchildren memorize great poetry, a practice he would like to bring back, hardly a popular suggestion among progressive educators.

And then there's the body of accomplishments that I suspect bring us here tonight. John McWhorter is one of America's most original, thoughtful, and courageous commentators on race. More than two decades ago, he argued against racial preferences in admissions and hiring and against the habit of attributing all group differences to bigotry by outsiders rather than considering cultural norms of the groups themselves. In 2015, before anyone had heard the word "woke" or experienced the "Great American Awakening," John anticipated this revolution in his eerily prescient essay, "Antiracism, Our Flawed New Religion." And in his latest book *Woke Racism*, John fearlessly indicts this recent lamentable return to treating people as interchangeable members of a racial category rather than as individuals.

John's defiance of all shibboleths, dogmas, creeds, and tribes has inevitably led him to be called a conservative, an attribution that comes from what I call the Left Pole, the mythical point from which all directions are right. But though John has never avowed the orthodoxies of the left, he's also resisted the temptation to find succor and support in the welcoming arms of the right. Politically, John is nonbinary, and we all know how good that is. Congratulations to John McWhorter, outstanding contributor to liberal education, linguistics, and 21<sup>st</sup>-century intellectual life.

## **Roosevelt Montás**

*Senior Lecturer in American Studies and English, Columbia University*

It's really my honor to join the American Council of Trustees and Alumni as well as some of John McWhorter's distinguished colleagues in recognizing John's contributions to liberal education. Few things matter more to the



health of our republic than the character of the education young people receive. The very possibility of democracy hinges on the success and diffusion of liberal education. To recognize John's contributions to liberal education is to recognize his contribution to the discursive fabric of our culture—to the quality of deliberation, open debate, and intellectual honesty that makes democratic politics possible.

John's work first came to my attention when I was in graduate school and studying a phenomenon that began getting a lot of media attention in the mid-to-late 1990s, after the Oakland Unified School District passed a resolution declaring something that it called "Ebonics" was the primary language of the African American students in its schools. I was a student of African American literature with an interest in African American Vernacular English, and John entered my radar as someone who wrote with unusual insight and precision about both the linguistic phenomenon that was being called "Ebonics" and about the layered political and cultural meanings of the controversy set off by the Oakland Unified School District resolution.

In the wake of that controversy, John brought together his academic training as a linguist specializing in the formation of Creole languages and his experience as a black man growing up in post-Civil Rights America, to produce a powerful meditation on race in America with his 2000 book *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*. The book reverberated widely and, perhaps in ways unanticipated by John, launched his relatively quiet though brilliant academic career into the public sphere as a commentator on a broad range of thorny issues. John took up that role like he was born for it.

I met John in person not long after that. This is how that happened. While still living in the Bay Area, John maintained something of a social life in New York and so it happened that we had a mutual friend. One random day, I attended a small dinner party at this friend's house. One of the other guests was this guy named John, who was visiting from California. A lot of wine was consumed. The conversations were intense, fierce, and this John

person seemed unable to stop saying brilliant and irreverent things. Like almost any serious conversation, at some point we started talking about language. It was then that it dawned on me that this John who lived in California, who had such a cutting mind, and who spoke so authoritatively about language, had to be John *McWhorter*. And, of course, it was John McWhorter.

John left his academic post at Berkeley to write full-time in 2003, but some people are born teachers, and John is one of those people. After a couple of years away from the classroom, John came to me and lamented how much he missed students. At the time, I was about to assume the post of director of Columbia's Undergraduate Core Curriculum and immediately saw the opportunity to bring John into the Core classroom: If he wanted intense, challenging, sustained interactions with students, I knew where to find it.

Perhaps before fully understanding what I had roped him into, John agreed to teach a section of Introduction to Contemporary Civilization (or CC) in the 2008–2009 academic year. CC is a year-long seminar in which students and teachers read and discuss together foundational texts in the history of Western moral and political thought, from Plato to Hannah Arendt.

Every semester, during the registration period, students came to the Core Office and explained urgently why they absolutely had to get into Professor McWhorter's section of CC. Invariably, the class would be full. It will not surprise you to learn that many of the students who spent a year discussing Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Machiavelli, Smith, Marx, Nietzsche, Mill, Freud, and many others under John's guidance, had their lives transformed.

John's politics can't be put in a box. Some people like to classify him as a conservative. But no, if you know John's work, that doesn't fit. A liberal? That doesn't fit either. Someone called him a "radical centrist." Radical, yes. Centrist, I'm not sure—John has a devilish propensity to unsettle and

disturb. He loves to shock and challenges us, and to show that a counter-intuitive position is actually the most sensible. It's hard to imagine someone who is more effective at offering even-toned and irrefutable demonstrations that this or that emperor in fact has no clothes. John seems to have a constitutional insolubility into the prevailing pieties of the day. Whether it be about longstanding issues like reparations, or the future of the past participle, or about today's fevers over critical race theory and cancel culture, John speaks with clarity, with insight, and without fear of challenging the pious orthodoxies that can gum up our thinking and our politics.

I join you today in paying tribute to John McWhorter. An admired colleague, a fellow-at-arms, a role model, a standard bearer for reasoned discourse, a man of principled convictions—my friend.

\* \* \*

## Dr. John H. McWhorter

---



John H. McWhorter, a scholar, teacher, editorialist, and social critic, is one of the most important voices in contemporary American life. A linguist by training, he currently serves as associate professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, having previously served as associate professor of linguistics at the University of California–Berkeley. His seminars on the change of

languages, and what happens when they come in contact with one another, have won high acclaim. As the author of more than 20 books and a contributor to numerous leading publications, his incisive writings have powerfully increased the public’s understanding of language, race relations, and liberal arts education. His books include *The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language*, *Losing the Race: Self Sabotage in Black America*, *All About the Beat: Why Hip Hop Can’t Save Black America*, and *Our Magnificent Bastard Tongue: The Untold History of English*. In his most recent, bestselling book, *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America*, he argues that what he terms “Third Wave Antiracism” amounts to a new, and perverse, religion. In this religion, “white privilege” serves as original sin, and cancel culture and social media mob attacks are the weapons of choice to silence heretics. He was nominated for an NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work in Non-Fiction and has appeared on many TV and radio shows, including *Meet the Press*, *John McLaughlin’s One on One*, *The O’Reilly Factor*, and NPR’s *Fresh Air*. Dr. McWhorter earned his B.A. in French from Rutgers University, his M.A. in American Studies from New York University, and his Ph.D. in linguistics from Stanford University.

## The Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education

---



ACTA is most pleased to present the 17<sup>th</sup> annual Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education. The awarding of this prize, made with the advice of a distinguished selection committee, advances ACTA's long-term goal to promote and encourage a strong liberal arts education.

The Merrill Award offers a unique tribute to those dedicated to the transmission of the great ideas and central values of our civilization, and it is presented to inspire others and provide public acknowledgment of the value of their endeavors.

The prize is named in honor of Philip Merrill, an acclaimed public servant, publisher, businessman, and philanthropist who served as a trustee of Cornell University, the University of Maryland College Park Foundation, the Aspen Institute, the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Throughout his career, Mr. Merrill was an outspoken proponent of academic excellence and an articulate spokesman for the importance of historical literacy in a free society. Mr. Merrill was a founding member of ACTA's National Council.

Traditionally, threats to higher education have stemmed from outside academia. Today's challenges, it seems to me, stem more from an interior hardening of the arteries.

—Philip Merrill, in an early correspondence urging support for the newly founded ACTA



**ACTA**  
AMERICAN COUNCIL OF  
TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI

**American Council of Trustees and Alumni**

1730 M Street NW, Suite 600 • Washington, DC 20036

Phone: 1-888-ALUMNI-8 or 202-467-6787 • Fax: 202-467-6784

Email: [info@GoACTA.org](mailto:info@GoACTA.org) • Website: [GoACTA.org](http://GoACTA.org)