

A Letter from Berlin:
What The Hell is McWhorter Doing in a Place like This?

P. Lewis

I am familiar with Berlin's famed Literatur-Haus. Twenty years ago, Darius James, myself and if I recall rightly Bernie Wilmot, a Jamaican expat and sometime writer (who is now pushing 80) did a reading at the Literatur-Haus. Darius noted (or one of his friends noted) that during his reading, most of the women in the audience abruptly got up and left—exactly why, I can't say; but knowing German women, they probably took offense to his reading. When I did my own reading I personally took offense—initially—when everyone in the room (about 50 or so) began laughing their guts out when I read the third chapter of the then-unpublished NATE. I read on, annoyed by their bemusement, which my paranoid mind at the time took to be typical German condescension and racism. I felt I had the right to be paranoid; I had heard (quiet) racist remarks on the streets of Charlottenburg (not so unusual in 2002) and even in the Literatur-Haus itself, notably by some of the older female staff members who obviously resented my presence. After reading Chapter Two of *Nate*—the part where Nate Morris is discovered by his father while dressed in military rags—I frustratedly slapped the paper down on the lecturn.

Everyone gave me a hearty applause. They loved the book.

However I was neither shocked nor surprised when I discovered that, twenty years later, this same Literatur-Haus invited John McWhorter to speak within its halls. McWhorter, of course, was not unknown in Germany. On September 3, 2021, the online English language edition of *Deutsche Welt* devoted an article in its American section to McWhorter entitled "Criticizing Cancel Culture as a 'Woke' Author," highlighting McWhorter's soon-to-be-published book "Woke Racism: How A New Religion Has Betrayed Black America." On the surface, McWhorter's criticisms of the "woke" left appear to be valid. McWhorter's

objections to the knee-jerk, reactionary, sanctimonious middle-class “leftism” is echoed by actual leftists such as Revolutionary Blackout or even Vaush (of all people), who upbraid the American left as being suburbanized, with virtually no vital connection whatever to the American proletariat. Yet one must keep in mind that--although McWhorter styles himself as a “liberal”--he is, according to Marc James Léger, a “long-time advocate of (Black) capitalism and a critic of (Black) radicalism.” McWhorter has also frequently appeared with Glenn Loury (NOT a liberal by any stretch of the imagination) on Loury’s own YouTube *Glenn Show*. In other words, McWhorter is a “liberal” only in contrast to other flaming conservatives such as Candace Owens, Kanye West and Mr. Shit-Bag himself, Jesse Lee Petersen.

I don’t see Owens, West or Petersen showing up at Literatur-Haus any time soon, though I could be wrong. Neither would I be surprised if they did show up at the Literatur-Haus. There has always been a very strong reactionary strain running through the heart of Berlin. It’s probably more reactionary than I wish to believe. A year after our reading at the Literatur-Haus, Darius told me at a cafe in Gneisenaustrasse that--at least for the time being--he needed to get the fuck out of Berlin. Germans, as he explained to me--and as I came to discover when I finally moved to the country--were a very passive-aggressive people. “That makes them dangerous,” Darius told me. He never learned German largely because he did not want to know what people were saying to him in the street. As I came to discover, if you were an American Black person, Berliners were far less likely to call you a “nigger” to your face but if you were African, you got the full monty of white (and non-Black) Berlin’s hatred.

Between that time and now, an entirely new generation of Afro-Berliners has emerged which, sad to say, has internalized much of Berlin’s anti-Blackness. I find it infuriating to encounter here black people who are just as militantly prejudiced towards unfamiliar Black faces as any close-minded East German. This is not hyperbole. I can pull up any number of instances in which I’ve encountered flat-out, unwarranted prejudice from Black Berliners on subways, buses, on the street, on various odd jobs, and so on and so forth.

Five years ago, in the Wedding borough, three young African hoods began mean-mugging me for no apparent reason, then attempted to push me into an onrushing car. (They must have learned from the Turkish hoods of that same borough, who used to spit on the ground as I passed them.) In another incident, on the U-Bahn trains, I saw a fat Cameroonian woman glaring at me with such vile contempt I thought she was going to vomit. Turning up her nose in outright disgust, she continued with her phone conversation in French, saying aloud, "oh my goodness, they've just allowed monkeys on the trains here!"

It isn't just me. When Hubert Adjei-Kontoh visited Berlin last summer, he found the city to be so racist that even African immigrants snubbed him. (Hubert Adjei-Kontoh is full-blooded Ghanaian.) A colleague of mine from Detroit stopped going to some of the Nigerian-owned barber shops because he found the barbers there to be too overtly racist. Rashidii Graffiti, a brilliant singer, pianist and long-time resident of Berlin, gets blatantly condescended to whenever he works a particular cafe in Charlottenburg. The bartenders are not African but Bangladeshis, and get their jollies making corny wise cracks about his dreadlocks. "Aren't you Bob Marley's cousin?" Rashidii told me, angrily mimicking their hostile voices.

Rashidii himself has choice words for most of the black American musicians working the music circuit in Berlin. Rarely does he have a kind word to say about them. Most of the Black musicians here are, in his own words, perverts, Uncle Toms, mummies and lunatics, with just a modicum of talent. I tend to agree with him, though Rashidii is certainly no saint. He has been in Berlin since 1987. He should be far more acclaimed than he is at the moment (he will be 69 years old this coming May). Coincidentally, he did not get along at all with that colleague from Detroit (whose name I won't bother mentioning), and in the end even I fell out with him. I made the cardinal mistake of moving in with this buffoon when I was being evicted three years ago. This man, a musician in his own right, had *no* grasp of the history of his own people. He was always lecturing me about being a "sell out" (because I was from the

fucking suburbs, and apparently had my *own* German friends, just like he in fact) and not being “real black people” when he himself knew nothing of the Black Arts Movement; he didn’t know who Amiri Baraka was, let alone Ishmael Reed. He literally thought that the Great Migration was just a mass movement of uncle toms to the north to get closer to “Mr. Charlie.” (As if Mr. Charlie wasn’t killing us in the Jim Crow South.) He was functionally illiterate, a bully, a sex maniac-cum-cokie and to top things off, a Trump supporter.

Why did it not surprise me to see him getting along very well with rank-and-file Germans, especially German women? It’s a hypothetical question. This “colleague” seemed to encapsulate a lot of German fantasies about African Americans: he was perennially drugged-out, decadent, loutish, obsessively physical (to the absolute detriment of his brain, which must have been full of cobwebs). I haven’t failed to notice that those Black folk in Berlin who do best here tend to shape up pretty much along these lines--on the black-faced (minstrel) side of things. Germans don’t have to play guessing games with these *Negers*. In fact, one can safely call this place The Coon Capital of Europe.

Therefore, it seemed only natural that a McWhorter would show his ass here at the famed Literatur-Haus. Perhaps Candace Owens would do better at a symposium held by the Alternativ fuer Deutschland--she is more blatant with her right-wing b.s.--but the slippery, passive-aggressive kind of reactionary views espoused by McWhorter are right up the alleys of many Berliners...especially those who consider themselves “Marxists.”

I can’t say that I hadn’t been warned about this situation beforehand. Back in 1995, long before I visited Berlin, the late Erich Maas (of the defunct Maas-Verlag publishing house, which put out Darius James’s “Negrophobia” in German translation) wrote me and said, “there are a lot of assholes in Berlin who consider themselves left-wing and pro-Semitic, but just use that as an alibi to bullshit around.”

As a matter of fact, I called up the Literatur-Haus several times over the past week and a half, trying to get in touch with the geniuses that organized this symposium. (Why

wouldn't I call them "geniuses"? After all, the organizers were from the Einstein Forum!) On several occasions their phone was switched off. When I managed to get through to Literatur-Haus two days ago, a young woman answered my call. Her responses to my inquiries were very vague and matter-of-fact. When I told them that McWhorter was indeed fairly far to the right of the political spectrum, her responses got even more vague. "I can assure you that all we did was discuss the topic at hand," she said; a few seconds later, the phone line went dead.