theories and methodologies

Reading *"Race," Writing, and Difference*

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.

"RACE," WRITING, AND DIFFERENCE WAS PUBLISHED AS A SPECIAL ISSUE OF *CRITICAL INQUIRY* IN AUTUMN 1985 (12.1). RESPONSES TO THE ESSAYS in the special issue appeared in the journal's autumn 1986 number (13.1). The University of Chicago Press published both parts as a book in 1986. Since then, it has become the best-selling book version of a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* in the history of that splendid publication. And I believe that this occurred because its contributions simultaneously reflected and defined a certain pivotal moment in the history of both literary studies and the larger discourse on race, bringing the two fields together in a way that had not been done before. At least, that was the goal of editing it in the first place.

I conceived of this special issue soon after receiving my copy of the book version of the special issue of *Critical Inquiry* entitled *Writing and Sexual Difference*, edited by Elizabeth Abel and published in the winter of 1981. (The book was published in 1982.) "The 'Blackness of Blackness': A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey"—an essay of mine that would be published in June 1983—had just been accepted by the journal, so I picked up the phone and called the editor, W. J. T. Mitchell, and floated the idea. He encouraged me to develop it and make a tentative table of contents, which I did, not having any idea if scholars such as Anthony Appiah, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Hazel Carby, Mary Louise Pratt, Gayatri Spivak, Bernard Lewis, and Jacques Derrida (of all people) would feel compelled to write on this topic or even agree to be published in a collection of essays edited by an assistant professor who had received his PhD just three years earlier, in 1979. Next I flew to Chicago and presented my proposal to the editorial board. To my astonishment, it was enthusiastically accepted.

It seemed to me that Abel's strategically edited collection could be a model for those of us who cared about race and ethnicity, African and African American literature, the figure of the black in Western discourse, literary theory, and postmodernism to meet on some sort of common ground. And that, I believe, is what was novel about

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR., is the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor at Harvard University, where he directs the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research. He is filming a PBS documentary to be titled *Looking for Lincoln*. His next book, *Searching for Our Roots*, will be published in February.

our special issue of *Critical Inquiry*. Although it may seem somewhat naive and simplistic two full decades later, my goal was to publish essays that inserted the study of African American literature and what I think of as a broader discourse of the black into a larger theoretical discourse on race and various forms of difference as social constructs, while simultaneously inserting contemporary literary theory into the discourse on race, blackness, difference, and the criticism of African American literature. If that sounds like belabored reasoning, it was! But I believed it to be necessary at the time, if African American literature was ever to assume a central place as a canonical literature in English departments in the academy. And helping to achieve this goal—a goal that my colleagues in African American literary studies shared—was foremost in my mind back then. I saw the editing of this special issue as just one of several possible interventions—along, say, with editing a Norton anthology of African American literature, at one extreme, and publishing books on black literary theory, at the other—that could help us to move the study of African and African American literature from the margins of literature departments to the vital center.

Why did I think all this necessary? Today when I attempt to historicize the development of contemporary African American literary criticism to my students, who take the canonical status of black literature for granted, the expressions on their faces suggest that they think I am exaggerating, telling tall tales about a mythical version of jim crow in the academy. But the truth is that very few English departments back then thought of African American literature as canonical. Graduate students who wanted to teach it as a career were "encouraged" to demonstrate their "mastery" of the field by writing about white, canonical figures as the subjects of their dissertations and, somehow, to establish expertise in African American literature outside their thesis, on their own. Of course, since the black studies revolution introduced subjects such as black literature into the curriculum in the late sixties, these courses had begun to appear in English and American studies departments and programs, but they were often seen as marginal, subsets at best of the canon of American literature. Our graduate students back then were told that if they wanted a job at a major research institution, they would have to write about subjects that were, well, white. This was certainly true at Yale, where I was teaching at the time, and at Cambridge, where I had been a graduate student. And I, for one, thought this outrageous. One of my senior colleagues at Yale showed me a draft of an essay that he was about to submit to the journal *American Literature*. It began, "Writing about the slave narratives in a journal dedicated to explicating the canon of American literature is a bit like writing about hamburger in the pages of *Gourmet* magazine." (I persuaded him to strike that line.)

At Yale theory was the rage, and *Critical Inquiry* was the font of all cutting-edge wisdom about postmodernism and deconstruction. And at Yale Jacques Derrida—who conducted a special six-week graduate seminar every spring for students and faculty members alike—was regarded as some sort of demigod, so persuading him to write for this special issue was seen as nothing short of devilish trickery by some of my senior English department colleagues, who were desperately trying to impress the master of deconstruction themselves, in part by pretending, in a bizarre reversal of that perverse tradition of American expatriates in Paris, that black people and race didn't exist or, if they did, that never would they sully the purity of thought that was contemporary poststructuralist literary theory at Mother Yale. Please!

At a dinner for four at the home of Barbara Johnson and Shoshana Feldman, Derrida had told me that he had supervised the work of African students in African philosophy, such as Paulin Hountondji, and indeed thought of

himself as "an African," having been born in Algeria, and wondered why no one at Yale ever asked him about that. I almost fell off my chair. Derrida was a brother all this time, and who knew? That was all of the opening I needed. I invited him on the spot to join me in seeing the latest Richard Pryor movie, out at Cinema One to Infiniti in Milford, Connecticut, just outside New Haven. Derrida laughed more than I did. Who could have imagined, reading those massively dense tomes of his, that Jacques Derrida himself would love him some Richard Pryor? Bemused at what I had just witnessed in the movie theater, I asked him if he would write something for the special issue. He said he would be delighted, that it would give him a chance to testify to an identity that he never had sought to hide.

For all these reasons, and especially because of the support and encouragement of the visionary editor, Tom Mitchell, who in the process of creating "*Race," Writing, and Difference* taught me how to edit a journal, I could think of no venue better than *Critical Inquiry* in which to enlist a wide array of brilliant colleagues to intervene in what—as Farah Jasmine Griffin points out—would become a new field. Editing that special issue was not the only way to help move the study of "minority literatures," race, and the politics of difference into the canon and move the canon of literary theory into these discourses, but I hoped it would be one way. It certainly never occurred to me that twenty years later *PMLA* would be pondering its historical significance.

I would like to thank my colleagues Farah Jasmine Griffin, Valerie Smith, and Eric Lott for taking the time to reread the volume of essays and to share their reflections on the book's possible legacies. I am gratified that Griffin believes that it "helped transform the academy. And this transformation was in response to the work's intellectual legitimization as well as to political pressure." As I have argued above, I had hoped that the "volume and others like it provided the basis on which these concerns could enter the academy as an intellectual project that those outside African American, women's, and ethnic studies would take seriously." "Race," she concludes insightfully, it seems to me, "while still undermined as an essential category, nonetheless became an object of investigation considered worthy of attention even by those who were not racially marked."

Similarly, Valerie Smith points to profound transformations in the place of race and of what used to be called race literature in the academy today. Almost thirty years after she began her career in the profession, she writes, "the study of race has assumed a more prominent role in academic life. Not only is it increasingly common to find clusters of scholars working on race in English departments, but scholars of all races and ethnicities are engaged in the study of race." Just as important, "scholars of color are no longer assumed to focus on works of literature and culture produced by people of their own racial or ethnic backgrounds. Generally speaking, we have moved beyond the expectation that academic specialization follows phenotype." In other words, we have deracialized the study of race and of literatures created by people of color. I applaud this development and am deeply appreciative to Smith for suggesting that this publication made even a small contribution to this happy state of affairs.

Smith and Griffin also suggest, rightly, that my recent work as a producer of documentary films is a direct extension of the essays in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, and this work began at the University of Cambridge in my PhD thesis, on pseudoscientific theories of race in creative and philosophical writings in the Enlightenment in Europe. For Smith, my "television documentaries—such as *Wonders of the African World* and *African American Lives*—have brought research about black culture, and about the scientific basis of race, into mainstream discourse." And for Griffin, "*African American Lives*

might be seen as part of this larger project as well in that it demonstrates the fiction of race through scientific evidence without denying its power to determine the lived experience of those identified as black in the United States." I could not agree more.

Yet this exploration in these documentary films of "race" as a social construct and of biologically based genetic differences that can be sorted by social categories or constructions of race is deeply troubling to Eric Lott. In fact, he questions the connection between my recent films and the special issue of *Critical Inquiry* that we are reconsidering here. But if I were to choose an epigraph that explains the connection among *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, my three most recent documentary films, and my latest two books, nothing would be more appropriate than these words from Smith's essay, which speak directly to Lott's concerns: "Race may be a fiction, but it is the source of some of our deepest wounds. The desire to forget, move on, or transcend only dooms us to traumatic returns. The rush to transcend race propels us into acts of forgetting or misremembering that we can ill afford. From the spaces of difference into which blacks and other people of color have been written have emerged powerful strategies of resistance and wellsprings of creativity that have shaped every aspect of our shared humanity."

I believe that some of the most important contributions to scholarship that our generation has made in the discipline of African American studies have been large-scale, old-fashioned recovery or editing projects that have made available to new generations of readers canonical works by black writers who celebrated and defined their sense of black racial or ethnic and sexual difference. Why this should be troublesome to anyone is deeply puzzling to me. If nothing else, canon formation is a prelude to deconstruction, necessarily. But it is so much more than that: canon formation is our generation's tribute to the creators of the tradition that we study, teach, and explicate and our gift of ready availability to future generations of students, teachers, and others who wish to celebrate the myriad manifestations of the human spirit in forms created by persons of African descent. Who could possibly be disturbed by that?

Eric Lott worries that "what began . . . as the legitimation of African American literary study by way of canons of antiessentialist theory should have eventuated in the certification of black roots using the latest in genetic science." Lott wonders about the "recrudescence of racial biologism" in these documentary film series, which explore and critique the role of biology in the creation of difference. While I edited the proposal that I would submit to the editorial board of *Critical Inquiry*, my second daughter, Elizabeth, was born. Just as we had done when her older sister, Maude, was born, in 1980, we had her doctor administer a test for the sickle cell trait. Fortunately, both tests were negative. And why did we do this? Precisely because there is a biological basis to inheriting the sickle cell trait that often tracks along socially understood racial lines. I pondered the irony of editing a special issue of a journal of criticism and theory that was about to deconstruct the concept of "race" yet willingly—eagerly—accepting the significance of biology and ethnicity in the heritability of this trait. (I fully realize that people who are not of African descent also have the sickle cell trait, but those of West African ancestry, and African Americans in the United States, have a disproportionate share of it too.) Was there a tension there? Only if you deny histories of evolution and migration that have resulted in Africans' having higher rates of the sickle cell trait than do most populations in Europe (with the exception of some Greeks and Italians).

Toni Morrison once asked me about this tension on another register. Didn't I think it was ironic, she asked me, that we were determined to put scare quotes around "race" precisely when our presence in the academy, and the strength of our literary tradition, had

never been stronger and more central? Indeed, both *Playing in the Dark*, by Morrison, and Cornel West's *Race Matters* can be seen as critiques—valid critiques—of *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, reminding all of us who wanted to declare "race" nothing more or less than socially constructed that surely the matter was far more complicated than that. And Morrison and West were right. With the mapping of the genome, we are witnessing the massive exploration of interindividual genetic difference, which will profoundly influence our understandings of virtually every aspect of the human condition, directly or indirectly. We need to probe the limits of social-constructionist frameworks to account for physical realities—such as physiology—while we also need to interrogate the limits of genetic constructions, or models, to account for their social valences.

As Griffin and Smith (and a host of geneticists and social scientists who serve as consultants on the films) have recognized, *African American Lives* introduces the received categories of four or five races, inherited from the Enlightenment, but does so to deconstruct them. This is how deconstruction must work; this is the irony, the trap, of language use. For this reason, I am not sure that we had a choice, for example, but to place scare quotes around the word "race" in the title of the volume. And this process of deconstructing the typological categories of racial purity occurs ideally through the results of the genetic-admixture tests that we administer to the subjects in the series, even if these tests are in their infancy and even if their precision may only increase after more individual genomes are sequenced. As the molecular anthropologist Mark Shriver puts it, "Then, of course, there is also the possibility that with many more markers from many more of the world's populations considered, individuals from all continental groups would seem to bleed genetically into each other to varying degrees." Today the model is fashioned to reflect—and to project—realities of America's history by focusing on the encounter of Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans.

Lott mistakenly contends that these documentary film series only explore "black celebrities' racial genealogies," whatever a "racial genealogy" is supposed to be. The series explore the family trees of subjects from various professions, on this side of the Atlantic, and then use highly reliable y-DNA and mitochondrial DNA tests to trace the haplotypes of the subjects' fathers' fathers' fathers and mothers' mothers' mothers. If the database reveals an exact match with a person of, let's say, Yoruba descent, then the subject—indisputably—shares a common ancestor with that person. This is not an opinion; it is a fact.

What this means is enormously fascinating and complicated, since multiple exact matches are often found in different parts of the world. We explore these relations, raising questions of identity and identity formation just as surely as the contributors to *"Race," Writing, and Difference* tried to do, but in another way. My roots films use genetic types much like fingerprints or fossil records, enabling us to trace the movements of our indomitable ancestors beyond the veil of our literate past. It is an archeology that is inscribed—and is now increasingly legible—within the individual human genome itself. Let's consider just one example: in twenty-five percent of the tests administered to African American males, their y-DNA (again, their fathers' fathers' fathers' line) traces to Europe. According to Shriver, no less than fifty-eight percent of the African American people have a significant amount of European ancestry, the equivalent of one great-grandparent. In the series, we use the admixture tests to potentially deconstruct the series's own four or five received categories of so-called races, showing how fluid they are and have always been. My own admixture test revealed a fifty-fifty split between European ancestral markers and African ancestral markers. It is astonishing that

none of the nineteen subjects studied in my documentary films has tested one hundred percent of anything. Large numbers of marker loci or alleles differ in frequency among source populations. When you average over a large number of loci and compare the frequency of one of these alleles among populations, you estimate admixture with some accuracy. And the reason for these differences in ancestral markers in the gene is an important question.

What *African American Lives* has tried to show is that genetic ancestry must be measured on a continuous scale, not divided up according to the typological race categories that we sought to deconstruct in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*. If anything, instead of reifying the racist categories received from the Enlightenment, ancestry tracing can show the fuzziness, the arbitrariness, the social constructedness, of what have appeared to be clear "racial" divides. The problem arises when someone associates individual genetic differences (which, of course, exist) with ethnic variation (which is sociocultural and malleable). But recognizing the arbitrariness of typological categories of "race" does not mean that genetic differences are not real; to paraphrase Cornel West, biology matters. The question that confronts us in the academy today (in an era of the new genetics, the sequencing of the genome, and the recuperation of biology for identity mapping, health-disparities research, and increasingly forensics) is how biology matters, and to whom? Neither essentialist sinners nor social-constructionist saints will have a monopoly on how these differences will be parsed. Humanists need to engage these questions. Accordingly, perhaps the most fitting sequel to *"Race," Writing, and Difference* would be a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* entitled *"Race," Science, and Difference*. Given all the developments in cultural studies and genetics over the past two decades, what could be more timely?

Nineteen African Americans, some famous, some not, agreed to be subjects in my series because they wanted to discover their African American, Native American, and white ancestors on their family trees. Many white Americans have been able to trace their family trees for decades, even centuries; traditionally, this process has been difficult for African Americans. Now, with the digitization by *Ancestry.com* of tens of thousands of records relevant to the African American past, the process of tracing one's black ancestors is far easier than it was even as recently as when Alex Haley published *Roots*, in 1977. I wanted to make those resources more readily available to African Americans, and the response of African Americans of every social stratum has been marvelously enthusiastic. Surely Eric Lott is not suggesting that African Americans should not have the right to reconstruct their family trees, just as other Americans have long been able to do. Now we can do this through genetics as well as genealogy, and the process can be an enormously gratifying form of personal canon formation.

Work Cited

Shriver, Mark. Letter to the author. 5 Apr. 2008.