HENRY LOUIS GATES JR.

"What's in a Name?"

Henry Louis Gates Jr. was born in 1950 in Keyser, West Virginia, and grew up in the small town of Piedmont. Currently W. E. B. Du Bois Professor of Humanities and chair of the Afro-American Studies Department at Harvard, he has edited many collections of works by African-American writers and published several volumes of literary criticism. However, he is probably best known as a social critic whose books and articles for a general audience explore a wide variety of issues and themes, often focusing on issues of race and culture. In the following essay, which originally appeared in the journal *Dissent* in 1989, Gates recalls a childhood experience that occurred during the mid-1950s.

At that time, the first stirrings of the civil rights movement were under way, and in 1954 and 1955 the U.S. Supreme Court handed down decisions declaring racial segregation unconstitutional in public schools and other publicly financed venues. Still, much of the country—particularly the South—remained largely segregated until Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, or national origin in businesses (such as restaurants and theaters) covered by interstate commerce laws, as well as in employment. This was followed by the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which guaranteed equal access to the polls, and the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which prohibited discrimination in housing and real estate. At the time of the experience Gates recalls here, prejudice and discrimination against African Americans were the norm in many communities, including those outside the South.

> The question of color takes up much space in these pages, but the question of color, especially in this country, operates to hide the graver questions of the self.
>
> —JAMES BALDWIN, *1961*

> . . . blood, darky, Tar Baby, Kaffir, shine . . . moor, blackamoor, Jim Crow, spook . . . quadroon, meriney, red bone, high yellow . . . Mammy, porch monkey, home, homeboy, George . . . spearchucker, schwarze, Leroy, Smokey . . . mouli, buck. Ethiopian, brother, sistah. . . .
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> —TREY ELLIS, *1989*

I had forgotten the incident completely, until I read Trey Ellis's essay "Remember My Name" in a recent issue of the *Village Voice* (June 13, 1989). But there, in the middle of an extended italicized list of the bynames of "the race" ("the race" or "our people" being the terms my parents used in polite or reverential discourse, "jigaboo" or "nigger" more commonly used in anger, jest, or pure disgust), it was: "George." Now the events of that very brief exchange return to mind so vividly that I wonder why I had forgotten it. 1

My father and I were walking home at dusk from his second job. He "moonlighted" as a janitor in the evenings for the telephone company. Every day but Saturday, he would come home at 3:30 from his regular job at the paper mill, wash up, eat supper, then at 4:30 head downtown to his second job. He used to make jokes frequently about a union official who moonlighted. I never got the joke, but he and his friends thought it was hilarious. All I knew was that my family always ate well, that my brother and I had new clothes to wear, and that all of the white people in Piedmont, West Virginia, treated my parents with an odd mixture of resentment and respect that even we understood at the time had something directly to do with a small but certain measure of financial security. 2

He had left a little early that evening because I was with him and I had to be in bed early. I could not have been more than five or six, and we had stopped off at the Cut-Rate Drug Store (where no black person in town but my father could sit down to eat, and eat off real plates with real silverware) so that I could buy some caramel ice cream, two scoops in a wafer cone, please, which I was busy licking when Mr. Wilson walked by. 3

Mr. Wilson was a very quiet man, whose stony, brooding, silent manner seemed designed to scare off any overtures of friendship, even from white people. He was Irish, as was one-third of our village (another third being Italian), the more affluent among whom sent their children to "Catholic School" across the bridge in Maryland. He had white straight hair, like my Uncle Joe, whom he uncannily resembled, and he carried a black worn metal lunch pail, the kind that Riley* carried on the television show. My father always spoke to him, and for reasons that we never did understand, he always spoke to my father. 4

"Hello, Mr. Wilson," I heard my father say. 5

"Hello, George." 6

I stopped licking my ice cream cone, and asked my Dad in a loud voice why Mr. Wilson had called him "George." 7

"Doesn't he know your name, Daddy? Why don't you tell him your name? Your name isn't George." 8

For a moment I tried to think of who Mr. Wilson was mixing Pop up with. But we didn't have any Georges among the colored people in Piedmont; nor were there colored Georges living in the neighboring towns and working at the mill. 9

"Tell him your name, Daddy." 10

"He knows my name, boy," my father said after a long pause. "He calls all colored people George." 11

A long silence ensued. It was "one of those things," as my Mom would put it. Even then, that early, I knew when I was in the presence of "one of those things," one of those things that provided a glimpse, through a rent curtain, at another world that we could not affect but that affected us. 12

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*EDS. NOTE—The lead character in a 1950s television program titled *The Life of Riley*.

There would be a painful moment of silence, and you would wait for it to give way to a discussion of a black superstar such as Sugar Ray or Jackie Robinson.

"Nobody hits better in a clutch than Jackie Robinson." 13

"That's right. Nobody." 14

I never again looked Mr. Wilson in the eye. 15

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RESPONDING TO AN ESSAY

Once you have or read an essay carefully and recorded your initial reactions to it, you should be able to respond to specific questions about it.

The study questions that follow each essay in those chapters will guide you through the rest of the reading process and help you think critically about what you are reading. Five types of questions follow each essay:

Comprehension questions help you to measure your understanding of what the writer is saying.

Purpose and Audience questions ask you to consider why, and for whom, each selection was written and to examine the implications of the writer's choices in view of a particular purpose or intended audience.

Style and Structure questions encourage you to examine the decisions the writer has made about elements like arrangement of ideas, paragraphing, sentence structure, word choice, and imagery.

Vocabulary Projects ask you to define certain words, to consider the connotations of others, and to examine the writer's reasons for selecting particular words or patterns of language.

Journal Entry questions ask you to respond informally to what you read and to speculate freely about related ideas—perhaps exploring ethical issues raised by the selection or offering your opinions about the writer's statements. Briefer, less polished, and less structured than full-length essays, journal entries not only allow you to respond critically to a reading selection but may also suggest ideas for more formal kinds of writing.

Following these sets of questions are three additional features:

Writing Workshop assignments ask you to write essays structured according to the pattern of development explained and illustrated in the chapter.

Combining the Patterns questions focus on the various patterns of development—other than the essay's dominant pattern—that the writer uses. These questions ask why a writer uses particular patterns (narration, description, exemplification, process, cause and effect, comparison and contrast, classification and division, definition), what each pattern contributes to the essay, and what other choices the writer had.

Thematic Connections identify other readings in this book that deal with similar themes. Reading these related works will enhance your understanding