# What's in a Name?

## Henry Louis Gates Jr.

*The preeminent African American scholar of our time, Henry Louis Gates Jr. is the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor and director of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University. Among his impressive list of publications are* Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self *(1987),* The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism *(1988),* Loose Canons: Notes on Culture Wars *(1992),* The Future of the Race *(1997),* Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man *(1999),* Mr. Jefferson and Miss Wheatley *(2003), and* Finding Oprah's Roots: Finding Your Own *(2007). In 2010, Gates published* Faces of America: How 12 Extraordinary Americans Reclaimed Their Pasts. *His* Colored People: A Memoir *(1994) recollects in a wonderful prose style his youth growing up in Piedmont, West Virginia, and his emerging sexual and racial awareness. Gates first enrolled at Potomac State College and later transferred to Yale University, where he studied history. With the assistance of an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellowship and a Ford Foundation Fellowship, he pursued advanced degrees in English at Clare College at the University of Cambridge. He has been honored with a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, inclusion on* Time *magazine's "25 Most Influential Americans" list, a National Humanities Medal, and election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.*

*In this essay, excerpted from a longer article published in the fall 1989 issue of* Dissent *magazine, Gates tells the story of an early encounter with the language of prejudice. In learning how one of the "bynames" used by white people to define African Americans robs them of their identity, he feels the sting of racism first hand. Notice how Gates's use of dialogue gives immediacy and poignancy to his narration.*





### Reflecting on What You Know

Reflect on the use of racially charged language. For example, has anyone ever used a racial epithet or name to refer to you? When did you first become aware that such names existed? How do you feel about being characterized by your race? If you yourself have ever used such names, what was your intent in using them? What was the response of others?

*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. ...*

—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*[1] (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

[1] *Village Voice:* a nationally distributed weekly newspaper published in New York City.

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.

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[2] 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.

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

"Hello, George."

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

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

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.

"Tell him your name, Daddy."

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

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[3] curtain, at another world that we could not affect but that affected us. There would be a painful moment of silence, and

[2]*Riley:* Chester A. Riley, the lead character on the U.S. television show *The Life of Riley*, a blue-collar, ethnic sitcom popular in the 1950s.
[3]*rent:* torn.



you would wait for it to give way to a discussion of a black supers such as Sugar Ray[4] or Jackie Robinson.[5]

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

"That's right. Nobody."

I never again looked Mr. Wilson in the eye.

1. In paragraph one, Gates wonders why he forgot about the exchange between his father and Mr. Wilson. Why do you t he forgot about it?
2. How is the social status of Gates's family different from that other black families in Piedmont, West Virginia? How does Gates account for this difference?
3. What does Gates mean when he says, "It was 'one of those things,' as my Mom would put it"?
4. Why do you think Gates "never again looked Mr. Wilson in eye"?
5. What is the point of Gates's narrative? How does the title su Gates's point?
6. How does the dialogue contribute to the narrative? How wo the omission of dialogue impact the selection?
7. Do you think Gates's parents should have used experiences l the one in this piece to educate him about the family's social status? Why do you think they chose to dismiss such incider "one of those things"?