theories and methodologies

From "Race" to Race Transcendence: *"Race," Writing, and Difference* Twenty Years Later

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WHEN I BEGAN MY CAREER IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE EARLY 1980S, ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS AT ELITE, HISTORICALLY WHITE COLLEGES AND universities typically only had, at most, one faculty member of color. With a few notable exceptions, that person was usually the only one in the department to teach or conduct research on topics that engaged questions of race. Now, almost thirty years later, 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. Moreover, 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.

One measure of the changing place of what used to be considered noncanonical literatures, theories, and methodologies in the academy is that the path-breaking scholars and scholarship in this field have become the subjects of reassessment and commemoration. Colleagues and current and former students collaborate on innovative symposia, conference panels, and Festschriften when scholars retire or die. These reassessments take place on significant anniversaries, as well as at the end of distinguished careers. For example, in November 2007 Tina Campt and Saidiya V. Hartman organized *Reconstructing Womanhood:* A Future beyond Empire, a symposium commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the publication of Hazel V. Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. The conference paid tribute to Carby's landmark text, which

> traces the emergence of the novel as a forum for political and cultural reconstruction and examines the ways in which dominant racial and sexual ideologies influenced the literary conventions of women's fiction. . . . Honoring the interdisciplinary significance of Carby's scholarship in Literary and Cultural Studies, feminist theory, critical race

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> theory, Marxism, and post-colonial criticism, this one-day symposium [revisited] the import of this work in relation to an extended set of issues that include re-writing the human, the production of disposable life, refashioning masculinities and queer sexualities, and creating a world beyond empire.

PMLA here likewise pays tribute to a text that played a crucial role in the study of race when it was published in 1986.

By every measure, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has transformed the study of race in general and of African American literature and culture in particular, within and outside the academy. Although his varied and extensive oeuvre defies tidy periodization, summary, or categorization, I attempt a brief thematic overview here. In his earliest single-author books—*Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* and *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*—Gates brought postmodern theory and vernacular African and African American cultural practices to bear on the interpretation of African American literary texts. In the literary and cultural-historical projects he edited and coedited—Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig,* the Black Periodical Literature Project, The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women, *The Civitas Anthology of African American Slave Narratives*, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, *The Image of the Black in Western Art, Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, and *African American National Biography*, for example—he preserved and made accessible to a wide readership (and viewership) an array of materials by and about African-descended people. Most recently, his 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.

Throughout his career, Gates has worked across a range of genres and media platforms (from literary histories to multimedia software) to ensure that black literature, culture, and biography, as well as discourses of race more broadly, move from peripheral to more central roles in universities and in the broader American imaginary. He has made this dissemination possible not only through his extraordinary entrepreneurship but also through his intellectual generosity. His legendary talent for institution building has brought a cadre of exceptional scholars, filmmakers, musicians, writers, and visual artists into the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute and the Department of African and African American Studies at Harvard, creating a standard for the study of race against which other such enterprises measure their own successes. Likewise, volumes such as *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*, and *"Race," Writing, and Difference* have provided opportunities for an international, multiracial community of scholars from diverse disciplines to reflect on the construction, production, and circulation of discourses of race in specific cultural formations. These collections of essays have helped to move the study of race from the periphery to a more central role in the academy.

"Race," Writing, and Difference proceeds from the assumption that race is a fiction, but a fiction of extraordinary potency because of the explanatory force power elites have granted it. As Gates remarks, "Race is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application" ("Writing" 5). The essays and responses, by leading scholars across a range of fields, deploy a variety of methodologies to deconstruct the intricate, multifarious connections among strategies of representation and discourses of race and difference. Surveying the essays in the collection, Gates observes:

> We must, I believe, analyze the ways in which writing relates to race, how attitudes toward

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> racial differences generate and structure literary texts by us *and* about us. We must determine how critical methods can effectively disclose the traces of ethnic differences in literature. But we must also understand how certain forms of difference and the *languages* we employ to define those supposed differences not only reinforce each other but tend to create and maintain each other. Similarly, and as importantly, we must analyze the language of contemporary criticism itself, recognizing especially that hermeneutic systems are not universal, colorblind, apolitical, or neutral. (15)

On the occasion of this reassessment of the volume, I want to reflect on the state of racial discourse during the period when the book was initially released and the current conditions under which it is being commemorated.

When *"Race," Writing, and Difference* was published, twenty years ago, Ronald Reagan was in the final two years of the second term of his presidency. His administration had ushered in an era when mainstream discourse in the United States about race had become deeply cynical; public officials proclaimed their support for racial retrenchment as a badge of honor. In 1980 Reagan announced his candidacy for the presidency in Philadelphia, Mississippi (site of the 1964 murders of the civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner), affirming his belief in states' rights. The assault on affirmative action and on civil rights gains intensified under Reagan's watch. The Supreme Court continued to bar the application of differential-impact standards in equal-protection cases, requiring evidence of intent to discriminate before a policy could be shown to violate the equal-protection clause (Washington). Ostensibly concerned that the disproportionate-impact standard would lead to lawsuits in virtually every arena of American life, the Court left little recourse for those seeking redress in housing, criminal justice, education, and employment cases. From this position, it was a small step to the decision in *City of Richmond v. J. A. Croson Co.*, which, as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Gary Peller have written, was "the first case in which a majority of the Court applied 'strict scrutiny,' the traditional test for 'malign' racial classifications that burden Blacks, to a 'benign' affirmative-action plan burdening whites" (60). Furthermore, as Patricia Williams, Michael Eric Dyson, Crenshaw and Peller, and a host of others have shown, during the 1980s conservative pundits, intellectuals, appointees, and legislators began to claim that the goals of the civil rights revolution had been achieved. They stripped terms such as *equal playing field*, *equal opportunity*, *civil rights*, and *color-blind* from their historical context and original intent and put them in the service of an agenda antithetical to the interests of the disfranchised. *"Race," Writing, and Difference* was published against the backdrop of these social, political, and juridical shifts, and yet in the volume there is little acknowledgment of their impact on contemporary processes of racialization.

We look back at *"Race," Writing, and Difference* from a moment when the discourse about race in the public sphere has been transformed and when the category of the public intellectual has expanded dramatically. Writing twenty years ago, the contributors could deconstruct the category of race with minimal reference to the contemporaneous mechanisms by which racial hierarchies were asserted. Today such an approach would be virtually unimaginable. In no small measure because of the influence of Gates himself, Stanley Fish, Alan Dershowitz, Williams, Crenshaw, Cornel West, bell hooks, and a host of other scholars, academics of all stripes—legal theorists, political scientists, philosophers, sociologists, religious studies scholars, cultural studies theorists, feminists, and historians, as well as literary critics—regularly find forums for their ideas about contemporary cultural trends in newspapers and magazines, on radio and television, and in the blogosphere.

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At this particular moment in history, public discussion in the United States is preoccupied with the historical and current significance of race and racism. The present invites retrospection: the fortieth anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., prompted reflection on the distance the country had traveled since his murder in Memphis. In the light of this milestone—of biblical significance, as many have noted—Americans from all walks of life have paused to evaluate the nature of our shared wilderness experience. How do we assess the effect that King and the movement for which he gave his life has had on American culture?

In some arenas, black achievement has fulfilled the vision from the mountaintop to which King alluded in the speech he delivered the night before he died. African Americans and other people of color have found success in the highest echelons of the professions and are more prominent in the arts-and-entertainment fields than ever before. These advances and the decline of the most virulent forms of racial discrimination have led many Americans of all races to believe that racism is no longer a problem. Any person of color who claims that the actions of an individual, the policies of an institution, or the values of the nation are bigoted or exclusionary—whether by intent or in their effects—risks being accused of "playing the race card."

Yet public education has become resegregated, leaving poor children and children of color ill-served by de facto separate and unequal school systems. Repressive policing tactics and inequitable sentencing guidelines have resulted in the mass incarceration of people of color, especially African Americans. Black people have been disproportionately victimized by predatory lending practices and have thus been hardest hit by the subprime mortgage crisis. Because of chronic joblessness and underemployment, they are overrepresented below the poverty line. The poor and people of color are more likely to be exposed to and affected by environmental toxins and more likely to receive substandard health care. How do we reconcile these national failures with the successes of the past forty years? Given these realities, what does it mean to deny the long shadow of slavery and segregation? Twenty years ago, the quotation marks around *race* in the title of the volume required explanation. By now the argument that race is socially constructed—even a fiction—is more widely accepted. The more urgent issue now becomes how to resist or overturn practices and policies that are biased in their effects, if not in their intent.

Even as we take the measure of King's legacy, we cannot deny that the present is also a moment full of anticipation and possibility: never before have a woman and an African American man been viable candidates for the United States presidency. Never before have a woman and an African American man garnered such widespread support across racial, gender, socioeconomic, ethnic, generational, and regional lines. Forty, twenty, even two years ago, few would have imagined that candidates like Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama would obliterate the chances of all the white, male aspirants to the Democratic presidential nomination.

For our purposes, it is especially striking that this moment in American history has enabled a new level of conversation and reflection about the politics of race and gender. Whether in meetings, caucuses, blogs, mainstream or alternative media, or private conversation, the American electorate is asking tough and important questions about the place of race, gender, and socioeconomic status in our individual and collective experience and about the extent to which these categories of identification shape voting practices and preferences.

At numerous moments during the past twenty years, controversies have prompted public reflection on the construction and significance of race in American culture: the

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Central Park jogger case (1989), Clarence Thomas's nomination to the Supreme Court (1991), the O. J. Simpson case (1995), and Hurricanes Katrina and Rita (2005), to name only a few. Each of these events prompted extensive commentary and many scholarly essays. Yet no event generated more sustained public and private conversations about race and about the intersection of race and gender than the 2007–08 election cycle.

In the academy, notions of race and of monolithic black communities have been subjected to heightened scrutiny and deconstruction partly—although certainly not exclusively—because of the debates in which *"Race," Writing, and Difference* participated. The current election cycle has provided an opportunity for questions that have preoccupied academics to take up residence in the popular media. How have ideas of blackness changed over time? Is Obama "really African American"? What do we mean by "African American"? Do feminists lose their "feminist credentials" if they endorse a man when a woman candidate is available?[1] Where does that leave black women—forced to choose between their gender and their race? These questions are situated squarely in ongoing academic debates about immigration, diaspora, racial authenticity, essentialism, and intersectionality. But they have also migrated into the wider marketplace of ideas. The conversations and challenges they generate have helped to shape the future of our political culture, forging new alliances and inspiring the next generation of leaders.

Throughout the early months of the campaign, Obama was praised repeatedly for his ability to "transcend race." This formulation has become so commonplace that it is impossible to attach a stable meaning to it. For some, the notion of "race transcendence" alludes to Senator Obama's signature rhetorical flourish, first heard widely when he spoke at the 2004 Democratic convention: "there's not a liberal America and a conservative America—there's the United States of America. There's not a black America and a white America and Latino America and Asian America—there's the United States of America." By this light, his formulation signals his refusal to identify himself with issues historically associated with African American voters, choosing instead to reach across divisions and represent all Americans.

Others imagine some kind of alchemy by which the offspring of a Kenyan father and a white mother, reared in Hawaii and Indonesia, exceeds all known racial categories. For them, his mixed-race, transnational identity is a metaphor for the distance the nation has traveled from the politics of black and white and symbolizes the obliteration of racial difference. Yet others use the phrase to refer to his crossover appeal, as indicated by his record-breaking fund-raising and his wide-ranging victories in the primaries and caucuses. From this perspective, his success marks the extent to which the American electorate has transcended race.

The popular understanding of race transcendence is clearly rooted in the notion that race is a construction. If this extended campaign cycle has shown us anything, however, it is that no matter how adamantly Americans want to assert that we have entered the postrace era, we cannot escape the powerful hold that race exerts on the American imaginary. As John L. Jackson, Jr., has written, "As much as we might try, every single day it gets more difficult to escape the truths of racial Americana, to escape its sordid history. The more we squirm, the harder we fight, the tighter our chains seem to become. They are always with us, returning from repression at the very instant of their supposed dissolution" (397).

In the waning days of the campaign, as we draw closer to the reality of an African American president, we are reminded of the persistence of the tropes of racial difference. Race may be a fiction, but it is the source of some of our deepest wounds. The desire to

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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.

Note

1. In response to some assertions that real feminists were bound to endorse Clinton's candidacy, an ad hoc, multiracial organization called Feminists for Peace and Barack Obama issued the following statement in the form of a petition: "War and peace are as much 'women's issues' as are health, the environment, and the achievement of educational and occupational equality. Because we believe that all of these concerns are not only fundamental but closely intertwined, we will be casting our vote for Senator Barack Obama as the Democratic nominee for President of the United States."

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