theories and methodologies

"Race," Writing, and Difference: A Meditation

FARAH JASMINE GRIFFIN

"RACE," WRITING, AND DIFFERENCE FIRST APPEARED IN 1986. THAT FALL, I ENTERED GRADUATE SCHOOL AT YALE UNIVERSITY; I STILL associate the book with those intellectually heady times. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., left the university before my arrival, but his influence was still felt, and we graduate students followed his every move. We also read and debated the essays of his volume with great excitement. The collection legitimated our intellectual concerns and delineated a set of questions that we would pursue throughout our graduate school careers. The volume set the bar high and helped prepare us for the task ahead. These were the days when we anticipated and greeted the appearance of works by Gates, Houston Baker, Jr., Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, and Cornel West with almost as much excitement that years earlier accompanied the release of recordings by Stevie Wonder and Earth, Wind, and Fire. Many of us came to Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Paul de Man through these brilliant theorists of African American literature and culture. Those were intellectually exciting times: the period also produced *Black Literature and Literary Theory*; the painful exchange between Gates, Baker, and Joyce Ann Joyce on the pages of *New Literary History*; Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood*, and Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Furthermore, through his books *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, *Figures in Black*, and *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates not only provided a theoretical framework for the study of African American literature, he also set forth an intellectual agenda that he would institutionalize in a number of projects, especially *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* and the Department of African and African American Studies at Harvard. In fact, Gates's PBS series *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. Despite the appearance of texts such as Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve* (and other arguments for the

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biological basis of race that rear their heads every so often), few people would disagree with the fundamental premise of *"Race," Writing, and Difference*: that race was not fixed or naturalized but instead socially and historically constructed and institutionalized.

Returning to the essays of *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, I am struck by three things: the impressive roster of contributors and the academic fields they represent; how the kinds of theorizing called for by the volume influenced literary study in the decade following its publication; and the evidence of important political and social change that has happened since the volume's publication as well as the continuing significance of the issues addressed by the essays. For instance, Gates, Edward Said, and Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon all reference South Africa's apartheid regime; within several years that regime would fall at the hands of intense international pressure and as a result of the courageous battles waged by South Africans of all races. However, the situation between Palestinians and the State of Israel, about which Said writes so eloquently, while not the same in 1986, nonetheless continues to be fraught with many of the issues raised by Said.

The volume's other contributors mark a veritable who's who of critics responsible for changing our way of thinking at the end of the twentieth century. Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Derrida, McClintock and Nixon, Baker, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Homi Bhabha, and Mary Louise Pratt were the creators of a paradigm shift that not only shaped our thinking about difference, history, politics, and literature but also produced faculty lines, graduate student cohorts, conferences, and publications. Volumes such as *"Race," Writing, and Difference* helped transform the academy. And this transformation was in response to the work's intellectual legitimization as well as to political pressure. 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, 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. The volume raised the question of race in the context of other forms of socially constructed difference; its very table of contents suggested a kind of intellectual coalition of those engaged in the project, and the volume contained critiques of its own framing in essays by Tzvetan Todorov and Harold Fromm.

The call to consider the construction of race and other forms of difference in our analyses would indeed generate criticism first from the right and then from the left. For these were the days of canon wars, days when critics claimed that the kinds of work represented by the volume were nothing but wholesale assaults on Western civilization. Others made charges of essentialism against those concerned with race or gender as something other than a trope or metaphor of difference. But in the twenty years since the volume's publication, there has emerged a discourse of race theory that builds on as well as critiques the work of thinkers such as W. E. B. DuBois and Frantz Fanon.

Indeed, in the wake of the volume's publication, DuBois and Fanon began to be read in contexts other than Afro-American studies. Even that field would have to respond to the call issued by the volume's essays. For instance, it is almost impossible to discuss the so-called age of Washington and DuBois without also considering Ida B. Wells and Anna Julia Cooper. The essays were not limited to discussions of the United States or to texts written in English, and thus the volume remains one of the very few collections to consider objects of study across national and linguistic boundaries.

The challenges and changes noted above took place not only in the classroom but also on the pages of important journals, in the

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makeup of English and literature departments, and in the kinds of scholarship that became available. My first book was published in the groundbreaking series Race and American Culture, edited by Arnold Rampersad and Shelly Fisher Fishkin for Oxford University Press. Among the books published in this series are Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, and Anne Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*. As with the essays in the Gates volume, these books used a variety of critical approaches to explore the relation of race, writing, and difference, paying special attention to structures of power and dominance, and thus helped transform our understanding and analysis of American literature and culture.

The last twenty years have witnessed a tremendous growth in race studies, yet one of the most influential strains focuses on the political culture, not of dominant or white-supremacist societies, but of racialized groups, in particular African Americans. Here, I am thinking especially of the work of Paul Gilroy, chiefly his *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line*. For Gilroy, even as ideas of race began to fall out of favor in intellectual and academic settings, African American intellectual and popular culture sought to hold on to identities structured by notions of racial difference; consequently, according to Gilroy, formerly dissident cultures of the diaspora have begun to give way to a depoliticized aesthetic that risks promoting cultural forms that are potentially fascist. Gilroy's book enabled a sophisticated debate on the role of race thinking in African American political culture (in many ways a debate initiated by Appiah's contribution to *"Race," Writing, and Difference*). In his review of *Against Race*, the anthropologist Steven Gregory agrees with Gilroy that "globalization and technological innovations are changing the ways in which people imagine their relationship to racial categories and their somatic referents, undermining—yet again—the credibility of race." Gregory warns, however, that "to be against race will require less a critique of the elusive and ever-morphing tropes of race-thinking than an analysis of the power relations that enliven them. And, regrettably, there is no crisis in the architecture of racial power" (315). While some scholars share Gregory's concern and have focused their analyses of the fiction of race on the "architecture of racial power," others, such as Elizabeth Alexander, have challenged Gilroy's critique of a "myopic nationalism" and his belief that it characterizes much of the black intellectual and political traditions of the United States. Alexander argues for the continuing relevance of metaphors of "collective memory" in helping "explain the persistent and positively consolidating (non-nationalistic) aspects of collective identification" between a group of people who share a historical, political, and spatial condition (201). The richness of this ongoing debate follows in the tradition of the essays gathered in the Gates volume.

Following the publication of Gates's important collection, among the most powerful articulations of the relation of race, writing, and difference have been Toni Morrison's. Beginning with *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison troubled our readings of the United States literary canon in her exploration of the "Africanist" presence in literature by Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, Willa Cather, and Ernest Hemingway. For Morrison, the presence of enslaved African Americans and their descendants helped shape these writers' imaginations and became the template on which these writers could project both their fear and their desire. This "Africanist" presence is the foundation on which themes of white American freedom, individualism, and national innocence sit. A little less than a decade after *"Race," Writing,*

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and Difference, Morrison wrote an introduction to the volume *The House that Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain*, edited by the brilliant theorist Wahneema Lubiano. Unlike the Gates volume, this one focuses on the United States and on black Americans, and the contributors are all African American. Not concerned primarily with literature, the later text is interdisciplinary and seeks to demonstrate both matters of race and the way that race still matters. (It is made up of published essays generated by a conference celebrating West and his influential *Race Matters*.)

Indeed, today I finish this essay in a country and in a world where race and other forms of social difference still matter. In the academy, where the vernacular theories of literature proposed by Gates and Baker came to dominate the study of African American literature, race sometimes feels like an unwelcome subject of discussion (outside those sites where it always mattered). At my institution, however, I am excited about a new site of intellectual exchange and discourse, the Center for the Critical Analysis of Social Difference (CCASD). Spearheaded by Columbia's Institute for Research on Women and Gender, Institute for Research in African-American Studies, Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race, Institute for Comparative Literature and Society, and Barnard Center for Research on Women, CCASD will be an

> advanced study center that promotes innovative interdisciplinary scholarship on the global dimensions of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and race. . . . CCASD Fellows and faculty [will] challenge the disciplinary divides among the humanities, the arts, and the social sciences by asking not only how historical categories of social difference intersect on the level of identity, but also how these categories shape institutions, modes of knowing, acts of representation, and processes of globalization.

The new center will support projects that cross disciplinary, national, and linguistic borders.

If difference continues to inform an analytic framework through which we can speak to one another in the academy, outside it seems to threaten sustained, intelligent dialogue and debate. Twenty years after the publication of *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, we find ourselves in the midst of a political and public culture that we might have imagined then but that few of us thought we would live to see. I doubt we could have imagined 9/11 or George Bush, Abu Ghraib (about which McClintock has written brilliantly) or Guantánamo, but the political climate that produced them was one where the kinds of historically constructed differences outlined in Gates's book came to the fore and resulted in horrific acts of inhumanity and violence. We also find ourselves in the midst of a United States presidential election with two front-runners for the Democratic nomination, a biracial man who is part African American and a white woman. In 1987 many of us could not have imagined this campaign season, not because it presents us with a black man and a white woman as viable candidates, but because these candidates emerge from the liberal side of American politics. Then we believed a woman of any race or a black man could only have made it this far if he or she had emerged from the right. On the other hand, I doubt we would have conceived of a time when the face of American foreign policy at its worst would be represented by a southern black woman, Condoleezza Rice, and a son of Caribbean immigrants, Colin Powell. As I listen to the language around the current election, I sometimes wonder if the work of the academy has found its way beyond the walls of the ivory tower. To hear political debate and difference couched in terms of "blacks" versus "women" or "blue-collar, working-class" versus "black" voters, I have to think that twenty years of black feminist analysis (indeed over a century of analysis, as demonstrated by Carby in her contribution to the Gates volume) have done little to penetrate the broader public discourse. Furthermore, I

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have often been dismayed that the candidate whom I support spent much of his campaign avoiding issues of race in general and the concerns of black people in particular because he believed, rightly, that not to do so would have allowed his opponents and the media to portray and ghettoize him as "the black" candidate. And yet they blacked him up anyway. When race (which, as Morrison reminds us, is always there) did finally rear its head, it did so in the most absurd fashion. Instead of focusing our attention on how race continues to organize our society, how this biological fiction nonetheless continues to determine the life chances of millions of our citizens, and how the language of race dominates our discussions about matters of national importance from immigration to education, the issue of race arose in the form of a caricature of a progressive black minister from Chicago. A 24-7 television media machine, as well as the swift, unedited, un-fact-checked World Wide Web (neither of which was available twenty years ago), fed us loop after loop of a fair-skinned, kinky-headed, mud-cloth-berobed preacher shouting, "God damn America!" All hell broke loose, forcing our charmed and charming great unifier to address RACE. By the time other intelligent voices, voices familiar with the kinds of work contained in the Gates volume, emerged, they did so in a circus–cum–horror show that made it difficult for them to gain a hearing. The circus told our nation that racism is the sin of black people, black women are black or women but not both. This is the same context in which a biracial candidate who had his first substantial relationship with black Americans as an adult can only run for president as an African American, a context in which a white woman with substantive political experience is nonetheless presented (and presents herself) as having gained that experience first and foremost as the wife of a former president, and, finally, a context that demands belief in Christianity (along with adamant disavowals of any connection to Islam) and uncritical allegiance to our government's policies. At this historical moment we need not only to reread, engage, and rethink our theorizing about race and difference but also to evaluate the relation between our theorizing and the messy, complicated, changing sameness of our public discourse.

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