

# PRACTICE READING, ANNOTATING, AND ANALYZING

Before you read the following essay, think about its title, the biographical and rhetorical information in the headnote, and the journal prompt. Make some marginal notes of your expectations for the essay, and write out a response to the journal prompt. Then, as you read the essay itself for the first time, try not to stop; take it all in as if in one breath. The second time, however, pause to annotate key points in the text, using the marginal rules we have provided alongside each paragraph. As you read, remember the nine basic questions we listed earlier on page 10.

## What's in a Name?

HENRY LOUIS GATES JR.

Title: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Biographical  
note: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
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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), and *Thirteen Ways*

of *Looking at a Black Man* (1999). His most recent books are *Mr. Jefferson and Miss Wheatley* (2003) and *Finding Oprah's Roots: Finding Your Own* (2007). In 2011, Gates published *Life Upon These Shores: Looking at African American History*. His *Colored People: A Memoir* (1994) recounts 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, 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.

Publication information:

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
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In "What's in a Name?," 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 firsthand. Notice how Gates's use of dialogue gives immediacy and poignancy to his narration.

Rhetorical highlight: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
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**WRITING TO DISCOVER:** Reflect on racially charged language you have heard. For example, has anyone ever used a racial or ethnic epithet to refer to you? When did you first become aware that such terms existed? How do you feel about being characterized or defined by your race or ethnicity? If you yourself have ever used such terms, what was your intent in using them? What was the response of others?

Journal prompt: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
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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.

Epigraphs: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
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—JAMES BALDWIN, 1961

...blood, darky, Tar Baby, Kaffir, shine...moor, blackamoor, Jim Crow, spooks....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 *Para. 1.*  
 Trey Ellis's essay, "Remember My Name," in a recent  
 issue of the *Village Voice*<sup>1</sup> (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.

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.

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, brood-  
 ing, 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<sup>2</sup> 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.

1. *Village Voice*: a nationally distributed weekly newspaper published in New York City.  
 2. A character on the U.S. television show *The Life of Riley*, a blue-collar, ethnic sitcom popular in the 1950s.

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 "Hello, Ge  
 I stopped li  
 in a loud voice  
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“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<sup>3</sup> curtain, at another world that we could not affect but that affected us. 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<sup>4</sup> or Jackie Robinson.<sup>5</sup>

“Nobody hits better in a clutch than **Jackie Robinson**.”

“That’s right. Nobody.”

I never again looked Mr. Wilson in the eye.

Para. 5-8

Para. 10-14

Para. 15. \_\_\_\_\_

Once you have read and reread Gates’s essay and annotated the text, write out answers to the six Thinking Critically about the Reading questions as well as the Language in Action activity found below. Then compare your answers with those of the other students in class.