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Editor's Introduction: Writing "Race" and the Difference It Makes

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

The truth is that, with the fading of the Renaissance ideal through progressive stages of specialism, leading to intellectual emptiness, we are left with a potentially suicidal movement among "leaders of the profession," while, at the same time, the profession sprawls, without its old center, in helpless disarray.

One quickly cited example is the professional organization, the Modern Language Association. . . . A glance at its thick program for its last meeting shows a massive increase and fragmentation into more than 500 categories! I cite a few examples: . . . "The Trickster Figure in Chicano and Black Literature" . . . Naturally, the progressive trivialization of topics has made these meetings a laughingstock in the national press.

—W. JACKSON BATE, "The Crisis in English Studies"

Language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own.

—MIKHAIL BAKHTIN, "Discourse in the Novel"

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They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.
 —KARL MARX, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

1

What importance does “race” have as a meaningful category in the study of literature and the shaping of critical theory? If we attempt to answer this question by examining the history of Western literature and its criticism, our initial response would probably be “nothing” or, at the very least, “nothing explicitly.” Indeed, until the past decade or so, even the most subtle and sensitive literary critics would most likely have argued that, except for aberrant moments in the history of criticism, race has not been brought to bear upon the study of literature in any apparent way. Since T. S. Eliot, after all, the canonical texts of the Western literary tradition have been defined as a more or less closed set of works that somehow speak to, or respond to, “the human condition” and to each other in formal patterns of repetition and revision. And while most critics acknowledge that judgment is not absolute and indeed reflects historically conditioned presuppositions, certain canonical works (the argument runs) do seem to transcend value judgments of the moment, speaking irresistibly to the human condition. The question of the place of texts written by the Other (be that odd metaphorical negation of the European defined as African, Arabic, Chinese, Latin American, Yiddish, or female authors) in the proper study of “literature,” “Western literature,” or “comparative literature” has, until recently, remained an unasked question, suspended or silenced by a discourse in which the canonical and the noncanonical stand as the ultimate opposition. In much of the thinking about the proper study of literature in this century, race has been an invisible quantity, a persistent yet implicit presence.

This was not always the case, we know. By mid-nineteenth century, “national spirit” and “historical period” had become widely accepted categories within theories of the nature and function of literature which argued that the principal value in a great work of literary art resided in the extent to which these categories were *reflected* in that work of art. Montesquieu’s *De l’esprit des lois* considered a culture’s formal social institution as the repository of its “guiding spirit,” while Giambattista Vico’s *Principi di una scienza nuova* read literature against a complex pattern of historical cycles. Friedrich and August von Schlegel managed rather deftly to bring “both national spirit and historical period” to bear upon the

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interpretation of literature, as W. Jackson Bate has shown. But it was Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine who made the implicit explicit by postulating “race, moment, and milieu” as positivistic criteria through which any work could be read and which, by definition, any work reflected. Taine’s *History of English Literature* was the great foundation upon which subsequent nineteenth-century notions of “national literatures” would be constructed.

What Taine called “race” was the source of all structures of feeling and thought: to “track the root of man,” he writes, is “to consider the race itself . . . the structure of his character and mind, his general processes of thought and feeling, . . . the irregularity and revolutions of his conception, which arrest in him the birth of fair dispositions and harmonious forms, the disdain of appearances, the desire for truth, the attachment for bare and abstract ideas, which develop in him conscience, at the expense of all else.” In race, Taine concludes, was predetermined “a particularity inseparable from all the motions of his intellect and his heart. Here lie the grand causes, for they are the universal and permanent causes, . . . indestructible, and finally infallibly supreme.” “Poetries,” as Taine puts it, and all other forms of social expression, “are in fact only the imprints stamped by their seal.”¹

Race, for Taine, was everything: “the first and richest source of these master faculties from which historical events take their rise; it was a “community of blood and intellect which to this day binds its offshoots together.” Lest we misunderstand the *naturally* determining role of race, Taine concludes that it is “no simple spring but a kind of lake, a deep reservoir wherein other springs have, for a multitude of centuries, discharged their several streams.”²

Taine’s originality lay not in his ideas about the nature and role of race but rather in their almost “scientific” application to the history of literature. These ideas about race were received from the Enlightenment, if not from the Renaissance. By 1850, ideas of irresistible racial differences were commonly held. When Abraham Lincoln invited a small group of black leaders to the White House in 1862 to present his ideas about returning all blacks in America to Africa, his argument turned upon these “natural” differences. “You and we are different races,” he said. “We have between us a broader difference than exists between any other two races.”³ Since this sense of difference was never to be bridged, Lincoln concluded, the slaves and the ex-slaves should be returned to Africa. The growth of canonical national literatures⁴ was coterminous with the shared assumption among intellectuals that race was a “thing,” an inefaceable quantity, which irresistibly determined the shape and contour of thought and feeling as surely as it did the shape and contour of human anatomy.

How did the pronounced concern for the language of the text, which defined the Practical Criticism and New Criticism movements, affect this category called race in the reading of literature? Race, along with all

sorts of other "unseemly" or "untoward" notions about the composition of the literary work of art, was bracketed or suspended. Within these theories of literature to which we are all heir, texts were considered canonical insofar as they elevated the cultural; Eliot's simultaneous ordering of the texts that comprised the Western tradition rendered race implicit. History, milieu, and even moment were then brought to bear upon the interpretation of literature through philology and etymology: the dictionary (in the Anglo-American tradition, specifically the *Oxford English Dictionary*) was the castle in which Taine's criteria took refuge. Once the concept of value became encased in the belief in a canon of texts whose authors purportedly shared a common culture, inherited from *both* the Greco-Roman and the Judeo-Christian traditions, there was no need to speak of matters of race, since the race of these authors was "the same." One not heir to these traditions was, by definition, of another race.

Despite their beliefs in the unassailable primacy of language in the estimation of a literary work, however, both I. A. Richards and Allen Tate, in separate prefaces to books of poems by black authors, paused to wonder about the black faces of the authors and the importance of that blackness in the reading of their texts.⁵ The racism often attributed to the Southern Agrarians, while an easily identifiable target, was only an extreme manifestation of the presuppositions forming much of the foundation upon which formalism was built. The citizens of the republic of literature, in other words, were all white, and mostly male. Difference, if difference obtained at all, was a difference obliterated by the simultaneity of Eliot's tradition. For the writer from a culture of color, Eliot's fiction of tradition was the literary equivalent of the "grandfather clause."⁶ So, in response to the line in Robert Penn Warren's "Pondy Woods"—"Nigger, your breed ain't metaphysical"—Sterling Brown is fond of repeating, "Cracker, your breed ain't exegetical." This signifyin(g) pun deconstructs the "racialism" inherent in such claims of tradition.

2

Race, as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences, has long been recognized to be a fiction. When we speak of "the white race" or "the black race," "the Jewish race" or "the Aryan race," we speak in biological misnomers and, more generally, in metaphors. Nevertheless, our conversations are replete with usages of race which have their sources in the dubious pseudoscience of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One need only flip through the pages of the *New York Times* to find headlines such as "Brown University President Sees School Racial Problems" or "Sensing Racism, Thousands March in Paris." In "The Lost White Tribe," a lead editorial in the 29 March 1985 issue, the *New York Times* notes that while "racism is not unique to South Africa," we must condemn

that society because in “betraying the religious tenets underlying Western culture, it has made race the touchstone of political rights.” The *Times* editorial echoes Eliot’s “dissociation of sensibility,” which he felt had been caused in large part by the fraternal atrocities of the First World War. (For many people with non-European origins, however, dissociation of sensibility resulted from colonialism and human slavery.) Race, in these usages, pretends to be an objective term of classification, when in fact it is a dangerous trope.

The sense of difference defined in popular usages of the term “race” has both described and *inscribed* differences of language, belief system, artistic tradition, and gene pool, as well as all sorts of supposedly natural attributes such as rhythm, athletic ability, cerebration, usury, fidelity, and so forth. The relation between “racial character” and these sorts of characteristics has been inscribed through tropes of race, lending the sanction of God, biology, or the natural order to even presumably unbiased descriptions of cultural tendencies and differences. “Race consciousness,” Zora Neale Hurston wrote, “is a deadly explosive on the tongues of men.”⁷ In 1973 I was amazed to hear a member of the House of Lords describe the differences between Irish Protestants and Catholics in terms of their “distinct and clearly definable differences of race.” “You mean to say that you can tell them apart?” I asked incredulously. “Of course,” responded the lord. “Any Englishman can.”

Race has become a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents of specific belief systems which—more often than not—also have fundamentally opposed economic interests. Race is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application. The biological criteria used to determine “difference” in sex simply do not hold when applied to “race.” Yet we carelessly use language in such a way as to *will* this sense of *natural* difference into our formulations. To do so is to engage in a pernicious act of language, one which exacerbates the complex problem of cultural or ethnic difference, rather than to assuage or redress it. This is especially the case at a time when, once again, racism has become fashionable. The extreme “otherness” of the black African continues to surface as a matter of controversy even in such humanitarian and cosmopolitan institutions as the Roman Catholic Church. On a visit to west Africa in August, Pope John-Paul II sailed across Lake Togo to face Aveto, “supreme priest” of Togo’s traditional African religion, on the edge of the sacred forest at Togoville, the historical meeting point of the Roman Catholic and traditional black religions. It was a confrontation of primal dimensions: the Pope, accompanied by the Vatican Secretary of State and other top officials, and Aveto, accompanied by five of his chief priests and priestesses, exchanged blessings and then discussed the compatibility of their belief systems. The Pope, however, a rather vocal critic of the creative African integration of traditional black (“animist”) beliefs with those received from Rome, emerged

from his confrontation with the mystical black Other in the heart of darkness, still worried about "great confusions in ideas," "syncretistic mysticism incompatible with the Church," and customs "contrary to the will of God," thereby denying Africans the right to remake European religion in their own images, just as various Western cultures have done.⁸

Scores of people are killed every day in the name of differences ascribed only to race. This slaughter demands the gesture in which the contributors to this special issue of *Critical Inquiry* are collectively engaged: to deconstruct, if you will, the ideas of difference inscribed in the trope of race, to explicate discourse itself in order to reveal the hidden relations of power and knowledge inherent in popular and academic usages of "race." But when, on 31 March 1985, twenty-five thousand people felt compelled to gather on the rue de Rivoli in support of the antiracist "Ne touche pas à mon pote" movement, when thousands of people willingly risk death to protest apartheid, when Iran and Iraq each feel justified in murdering the other's citizens because of their "race," when Beirut stands as a monument of shards and ruins, the gesture that we make here seems local and tiny.

I have edited this special issue of *Critical Inquiry* to explore, from a variety of methodological perspectives and formal concerns, the curious dialectic between formal language use and the inscription of metaphorical racial differences. At times, as Nancy Stepan expertly shows in *The Idea of Race in Science*, these metaphors have sought a universal and transcendent sanction in biological science. Western writers in French, Spanish, German, Portuguese, and English have tried to mystify these rhetorical figures of race, to make them natural, absolute, essential. In doing so, they have *inscribed* these differences as fixed and finite categories which they merely report or draw upon for authority. It takes little reflection, however, to recognize that these pseudoscientific categories are themselves figures. Who has seen a black or red person, a white, yellow, or brown? These terms are arbitrary constructs, not reports of reality. But language is not only the medium of this often insidious tendency; it is its *sign*. Current language use signifies the difference between cultures and their possession of power, spelling out the distance between subordinate and superordinate, between bondsman and lord in terms of their "race." These usages develop simultaneously with the shaping of an economic order in which the cultures of color have been dominated in several important senses by Western Judeo-Christian, Greco-Roman cultures and their traditions. To use contemporary theories of criticism to explicate these modes of inscription is to demystify large and obscure ideological relations and, indeed, theory itself. Before discussing the essays gathered here, it would be useful to consider a typical example of Western culture's use of writing as a commodity to confine and delimit a culture of color. For literacy, as I hope to demonstrate, is the emblem that links racial alienation with economic alienation.

Where better to test this thesis than in the example of the black tradition's first poet in English, the African slave girl Phillis Wheatley. Let us imagine the scene.

One bright morning in the spring of 1772, a young African girl walked demurely into the courthouse at Boston to undergo an oral examination, the results of which would determine the direction of her life and work. Perhaps she was shocked upon entering the appointed room. For there, gathered in a semicircle, sat eighteen of Boston's most notable citizens. Among them was John Erving, a prominent Boston merchant; the Reverend Charles Chauncey, pastor of the Tenth Congregational Church; and John Hancock, who would later gain fame for his signature on the Declaration of Independence. At the center of this group would have sat His Excellency, Thomas Hutchinson, governor of the colony, with Andrew Oliver, his lieutenant governor, close by his side.

Why had this august group been assembled? Why had it seen fit to summon this young African girl, scarcely eighteen years old, before it? This group of "the most respectable characters in *Boston*," as it would later define itself, had assembled to question closely the African adolescent on the slender sheaf of poems that she claimed to have written by herself. We can only speculate on the nature of the questions posed to the fledgling poet. Perhaps they asked her to identify and explain—for all to hear—exactly who were the Greek and Latin gods and poets alluded to so frequently in her work. Perhaps they asked her to conjugate a verb in Latin, or even to translate randomly selected passages from the Latin, which she and her master, John Wheatley, claimed that she "had made some progress in." Or perhaps they asked her to recite from memory key passages from the texts of John Milton and Alexander Pope, the two poets by whom the African claimed to be most directly influenced. We do not know.

We do know, however, that the African poet's responses were more than sufficient to prompt the eighteen august gentlemen to compose, sign, and publish a two-paragraph "Attestation," an open letter "To the Publick" that prefaces Phillis Wheatley's book, and which reads in part:

We whose Names are underwritten, do assure the World, that the poems specified in the following Page, were (as we verily believe) written by Phillis, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from *Africa*, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best judges, and is thought qualified to write them.⁹

So important was this document in securing a publisher for Phillis Wheatley's poems that it forms the signal element in the prefatory matter

printed in the opening pages of her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, published at London in 1773.

Without the published "Attestation," Phillis Wheatley's publisher claimed, few would believe that an African could possibly have written poetry all by herself. As the eighteen put the matter clearly in their letter, "Numbers would be ready to suspect they were not really the Writings of Phillis."¹⁰ Phillis Wheatley and her master, John Wheatley, had attempted to publish a similar volume in 1770 at Boston, but Boston publishers had been incredulous. Three years later, "Attestation" in hand, Phillis Wheatley and her master's son, Nathaniel Wheatley, sailed for England, where they completed arrangements for the publication of a volume of her poems with the aid of the countess of Huntington and the earl of Dartmouth.

This curious anecdote, surely one of the oddest oral examinations on record, is only a tiny part of a larger, and even more curious, episode in the Enlightenment. Since the beginning of the seventeenth century, Europeans had wondered aloud whether or not the African "species of men," as they most commonly put it, *could* ever create formal literature, could ever master "the arts and sciences." If they could, the argument ran, then the African variety of humanity and the European variety were fundamentally related. If not, then it seemed clear that the African was destined by nature to be a slave.

Why was the creative writing of the African of such importance to the eighteenth century's debate over slavery? I can briefly outline one thesis: after René Descartes, *reason* was privileged, or valorized, above all other human characteristics. Writing, especially after the printing press became so widespread, was taken to be the *visible* sign of reason. Blacks were "reasonable," and hence "men," if—and only if—they demonstrated mastery of "the arts and sciences," the eighteenth century's formula for writing. So, while the Enlightenment is characterized by its foundation on man's ability to reason, it simultaneously used the absence and presence of reason to delimit and circumscribe the very humanity of the cultures and people of color which Europeans had been "discovering" since the Renaissance. The urge toward the systematization of all human knowledge (by which we characterize the Enlightenment) led directly to the relegation of black people to a lower place in the great chain of being, an ancient construct that arranged all of creation on a vertical scale from plants, insects, and animals through man to the angels and God himself.

By 1750, the chain had become minutely calibrated; the human scale rose from "the lowliest Hottentot" (black South Africans) to "glorious Milton and Newton." If blacks could write and publish imaginative literature, then they could, in effect, take a few "giant steps" up the chain of being in an evil game of "Mother, May I?" For example, scores of reviews of Wheatley's book argued that the publication of her poems meant that the African was indeed a human being and should not be

enslaved. Indeed, Wheatley herself was manumitted soon after her poems were published. That which was only implicit in Wheatley's case would become explicit fifty years later. George Moses Horton had, by the middle of the 1820s, gained a considerable reputation at Chapel Hill as "the slave-poet." His master printed full-page advertisements in Northern newspapers soliciting subscriptions for a book of Horton's poems and promising to exchange the slave's freedom for a sufficient return on sales of the book. Writing, for these slaves, was not an activity of mind; rather, it was a commodity which they were forced to trade for their humanity.

4

Blacks and other people of color could not write.

Writing, many Europeans argued, stood alone among the fine arts as the most salient repository of "genius," the visible sign of reason itself. In this subordinate role, however, writing, although secondary to reason, is nevertheless the *medium* of reason's expression. We *know* reason by its writing, by its representations. Such representations could assume spoken or written form. And while several superb scholars give priority to the *spoken* as the privileged of the pair, most Europeans privileged *writing*—in their writings about Africans, at least—as the principal measure of the Africans' humanity, their capacity for progress, their very place in the great chain of being.

The direct correlation between economic and political alienation, on the one hand, and racial alienation, on the other, is epitomized in the following 1740 South Carolina statute that attempted to make it almost impossible for black slaves to acquire, let alone master, literacy:

And whereas the having of slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attending with great inconveniences;

Be it enacted, that all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach, or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write; every such person or persons shall, for every offense, forfeith the sum of one hundred pounds current money.

Learning to read and to write, then, was not only difficult, it was a violation of a law.

As early as 1705, a Dutch explorer, William Bosman, had encased the commodity function of writing and its relation to racial and economic alienation in a myth which the Africans he "discovered" had purportedly related to him. According to Bosman, the blacks

tell us, that in the beginning God created Black as well as White men; thereby . . . giving the Blacks the first Election, who chose Gold, and left the Knowledge of Letters to the White. God granted their Request, but being incensed at their Avarice, resolved that the Whites should for ever be their masters, and they obliged to wait on them as their slaves.¹¹

Bosman's fabrication, of course, was a claim of origins designed to sanction through mythology a political order created by Europeans. But it was Hume, writing midway through the eighteenth century, who gave to Bosman's myth the sanction of Enlightenment philosophical reasoning.

In a major essay, "Of National Characters" (1748), Hume discusses the "characteristics" of the world's major division of human beings. In a footnote added in 1753 to his original text (the margins of his discourse), Hume posited with all of the authority of philosophy the fundamental identity of complexion, character, and intellectual capacity:

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, *no arts, no sciences* . . . Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if *nature* had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are Negroe slaves dispersed all over Europe, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity. . . . In Jamaica indeed they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning [Francis Williams, the Cambridge-educated poet who wrote verse in Latin]; but 'tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.¹²

Hume's opinion on the subject, as we might expect, became prescriptive.

In his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), Kant elaborates on Hume's essay in section 4, entitled "Of National Characteristics, So Far as They Depend upon the Distinct Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime." Kant first claims that "so fundamental is the difference between [the black and white] races of man, . . . it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color."¹³ Kant, moreover, is one of the earliest major European philosophers to conflate color with intelligence, a determining relation he posits with dictatorial surety:

Father Labat reports that a Negro carpenter, whom he reproached for haughty treatment toward his wives, answered: "You whites are indeed fools, for first you make great concessions to your wives, and afterward you complain when they drive you mad." And it might be that there were something in this which perhaps deserved

to be considered; but in short, this fellow was *quite black* from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid.¹⁴

The correlation of “black” and “stupid” Kant posits as if it were self-evident.

Hegel, echoing Hume and Kant, claimed that Africans had no history, because they had developed no systems of writing and had not mastered the art of writing in European languages. In judging civilizations, Hegel’s strictures with respect to the absence of written history presume a crucial role for *memory*, a collective, cultural memory. Metaphors of the childlike nature of the slaves, of the masked, puppetlike personality of the black, all share this assumption about the absence of memory. Mary Langdon, in her novel *Ida May: A Story of Things Actual and Possible* (1854), writes that “they *are* mere children. . . . You seldom hear them say much about anything that’s past, if they only get enough to eat and drink at the present moment.”¹⁵ Without writing, no *repeatable* sign of the workings of reason, of mind, could exist. Without memory or mind, no history could exist. Without history, no humanity, as defined consistently from Vico to Hegel, could exist.

5

Ironically, Anglo-African writing arose as a response to allegations of its absence. Black people responded to these profoundly serious allegations about their “nature” as directly as they could: they wrote books, poetry, autobiographical narratives. Political and philosophical discourse were the predominant forms of writing. Among these, autobiographical “deliverance” narratives were the most common and the most accomplished. Accused of lacking a formal and collective history, blacks published individual histories which, taken together, were intended to narrate in segments the larger yet fragmented history of blacks in Africa, now dispersed throughout a cold New World. The narrated, descriptive “eye” was put into service as a literary form to posit both the individual “I” of the black author as well as the collective “I” of the race. Text created author; and black authors, it was hoped, would create, or re-create, the image of the race in European discourse. The very *face* of the race was contingent upon the recording of the black *voice*. Voice presupposed a face, but also seems to have been thought to determine the very contours of the black face.

The recording of an authentic black voice—a voice of deliverance from the deafening discursive silence which an enlightened Europe cited to prove the absence of the African’s humanity—was the millennial instrument of transformation through which the African would become the European, the slave become the ex-slave, brute animal become the

human being. So central was this idea to the birth of the black literary tradition in the eighteenth century that five of the earliest slave narratives draw upon the figure of the voice in the text—of the talking book—as crucial “scenes of instruction” in the development of the slave on the road to freedom.¹⁶

These five authors, linked by revision of a trope into the very first chain of black signifiers, implicitly signify upon another chain, the metaphorical great chain of being. Blacks were most commonly represented on the chain either as the lowest of the human races or as first cousin to the ape. Because writing, according to Hume, was the ultimate sign of difference between animal and human, these writers implicitly were signifyin(g) upon the figure of the chain itself. Simply by publishing autobiographies, they indicted the received order of Western culture, of which slavery was to them the most salient sign. The writings of James Gronniosaw, John Marrant, Olaudah Equiano, Ottobah Cugoana, and John Jea served to criticize the sign of the chain of being and the black person’s figurative “place” on the chain. This chain of black signifiers, regardless of their intent or desire, made the first political gesture in the Anglo-African literary tradition “simply” by the act of writing. Their collective act gave birth to the black literary tradition and defined it as the “Other’s chain,” the chain of black being as black people themselves would have it. Making the book speak, then, constituted a motivated and political engagement with and condemnation of Europe’s fundamental sign of domination, the commodity of writing, the text and technology of reason. We are justified, however, in wondering aloud if the sort of subjectivity which these writers seek through the act of writing can be realized through a process which is so very ironic from the outset: how can the black subject posit a full and sufficient self in a language in which blackness is a sign of absence? Can writing, with the very difference it makes and marks, mask the blackness of the black face that addresses the text of Western letters, in a voice that speaks English through an idiom which contains the irreducible element of cultural difference that will always separate the white voice from the black? Black people, we know, have not been liberated from racism by our writings. We accepted a false premise by assuming that racism would be destroyed once white racists became convinced that we were human, too. Writing stood as a complex “certificate of humanity,” as Paulin Hountondji put it. Black writing, and especially the literature of the slave, served not to obliterate the difference of race; rather, the inscription of the black voice in Western literatures has preserved those very cultural differences to be repeated, imitated, and revised in a separate Western literary tradition, a tradition of black difference.

We black people tried to write ourselves out of slavery, a slavery even more profound than mere physical bondage. Accepting the challenge

of the great white Western tradition, black writers wrote as if their lives depended upon it—and, in a curious sense, their lives did, the “life of the race” in Western discourse. But if blacks accepted this challenge, we also accepted its premises, premises which perhaps concealed a trap. What trap might this be? Let us recall the curious case of M. Edmond Laforest.

In 1915, Edmond Laforest, a prominent member of the Haitian literary movement called *La Ronde*, made his death a symbolic, if ironic, statement of the curious relation of the marginalized writer to the act of writing in a modern language. Laforest, with an inimitable, if fatal, flair for the grand gesture, stood upon a bridge, calmly tied a Larousse dictionary around his neck, then leapt to his death. While other black writers, before and after Laforest, have been drowned artistically by the weight of various modern languages, Laforest chose to make his death an emblem of this relation of overwhelming indenture.

It is the challenge of the black tradition to critique this relation of indenture, an indenture that obtains for our writers and for our critics. We must master, as Jacques Derrida writes in his essay in this collection, how “to speak the other’s language without renouncing [our] own” (p. 294). When we attempt to appropriate, by inversion, “race” as a term for an essence—as did the *négritude* movement, for example (“We feel, therefore we are,” as Léopold Senghor argued of the African)—we yield too much: the basis of a shared humanity. Such gestures, as Anthony Appiah observes in his essay, are futile and dangerous because of their further inscription of new and bizarre stereotypes. How do we meet Derrida’s challenge in the discourse of criticism? The Western critical tradition has a canon, as the Western literary tradition does. I once thought it our most important gesture to *master* the canon of criticism, to *imitate* and *apply* it, but I now believe that we must turn to the black tradition itself to develop theories of criticism indigenous to our literatures. Alice Walker’s revision of Rebecca Cox Jackson’s parable of white interpretation (written in 1836) makes this point most tellingly. Jackson, a Shaker eldress and black visionary, claimed like Jeaneé to have been taught to read by the Lord. She writes in her autobiography that she dreamed a white man came to her house to teach her how to *interpret* and understand the word of God, now that God had taught her to read:

A white man took me by my right hand and led me on the north side of the room, where sat a square table. On it lay a book open. And he said to me. “Thou shall be instructed in this book, from Genesis to Revelations.” And then he took me on the west side, where stood a table. And it looked like the first. And said, “Yea, thou shall be instructed from the beginning of creation to the end of time.” And then he took me on the east side of the room

also, where stood a table and book like the two first, and said, "I will instruct thee—yea, thou shall be instructed from the beginning of all things to the end of all things. Yea, thou shall be well instructed. I will instruct."

And then I awoke, and I saw him as plain as I did in my dream. And after that he taught me daily. And when I would be reading and come to a hard word, I would see him standing by my side and he would teach me the word right. And often, when I would be in meditation and looking into things which was hard to understand, I would find him by me, teaching and giving me understanding. And oh, his labor and care which he had with me often caused me to weep bitterly, when I would see my great ignorance and the great trouble he had to make me understand eternal things. For I was so buried in the depth of the tradition of my forefathers, that it did seem as if I never could be dug up.¹⁷

In response to Jackson's relation of interpretive indenture to "a white man," Walker, in *The Color Purple*, records an exchange between Celie and Shug about turning away from "the old white man" which soon turns into a conversation about the elimination of "man" as a mediator between a woman and "everything":

You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a'tall.

Man corrupt everything, say Shug. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug.¹⁸

Celie and Shug's omnipresent "man," of course, echoes the black tradition's epithet for the white power structure, "the man."

For non-Western, so-called noncanonical critics, getting the "man off your eyeball" means using the most sophisticated critical theories and methods available to reappropriate and to define our own "colonial" discourses. We must use these theories and methods insofar as they are relevant to the study of our own literatures. The danger in doing so, however, is best put by Anthony Appiah in his definition of what he calls "the Naipaul fallacy":

It is not necessary to show that African literature is fundamentally the same as European literature in order to show that it can be treated with the same tools; . . . nor should we endorse a more sinister line . . . : the post-colonial legacy which requires us to show that African literature is worthy of study precisely (but only) because it is fundamentally the same as European literature.¹⁹

We *must* not, Appiah concludes, ask “the reader to understand Africa by embedding it in European culture” (“S,” p. 146).

We must, I believe, analyze the ways in which writing relates to race, how attitudes toward 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, color-blind, apolitical, or neutral. Whereas some critics wonder aloud, as Appiah notes, about such matters as whether or not “a structuralist poetics is inapplicable in Africa because structuralism is European” (“S,” p. 145), the concern of the Third World critic should properly be to understand the ideological subtext which any critical theory reflects and embodies, and the relation which this subtext bears to the production of meaning. No critical theory—be it Marxist, feminist, post-structuralist, Kwame Nkrumah’s “consciencism,” or whatever—escapes the specificity of value and ideology, no matter how mediated these may be. To attempt to appropriate our own discourses by using Western critical theory uncritically is to substitute one mode of neocolonialism for another. To begin to do this in my own tradition, theorists have turned to the black vernacular tradition—to paraphrase Jackson, they have begun to dig into the depths of the tradition of our foreparents—to isolate the signifying black difference through which to theorize about the so-called discourse of the Other.

6

“Race,” Writing, and Difference is not a manifesto composed by several essayists who share one agenda. Rather, the essays collected here manifest the wide variety of critical approaches through which one may discuss the complex interplay among race, writing, and difference.

In “The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race,” Appiah charts the changes in Du Bois’ ideas about race. Using the most sophisticated biological theories of race, morphology, and difference, Appiah shows how race functions in Western culture as a metonym for muddled thinking about the relation among genetics, intention, meaning, and culture. “An Ideology of Difference” by Edward Said serves as a response to Appiah’s reminder that our obsession with structure, relations, and concepts “under Saussurian hegemony” has led us to ignore or suspend “reality” (pp. 35–36). Said discusses the ideological foundations of abstract categories of Otherness which depend for their effectiveness upon fictions of a fundamental and constitutive difference.

The other essayists in this collection read specific verbal and visual texts against complex cultural codes of power, assertion, and domination which these texts both reflect and, indeed, reinforce. As Abdul Jan-Mohamed puts this relation, "A rigorous subconscious logic defines the relations . . . between . . . material and discursive practices" (p. 62). Using Jacques Lacan's categories of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, Jan-Mohamed shows how racial difference, raised to the level of moral and even metaphysical difference, is a central perceptual category not only of British colonial policy and practice but also of its general and literary discourse.

In a pioneering consideration of a virtually unknown group of poets, Bernard Lewis discusses the several ways in which *aghribat al-Arab* (the crows, or ravens, of the Arabs) represented their own black African heritage in Arabic poetry between the seventh and ninth centuries. Israel Burshatin's essay on the image of the Moor in classical Spanish literature shows how the Moor, whether stereotyped positively or negatively, functioned as metaphor and emblem within fictions of the historical relation between conqueror and conquered; then Burshatin shows how authors who were Moors created a self-reflexive parodic discourse which sought to reinterpret history at its origins. Mary Louise Pratt's reading of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European travel literature shows how seemingly innocent or neutral "descriptions" in travel accounts textualize and naturalize received cultural or character traits that underscore "the Other's amenability to domination and potential as a labor pool" (p. 120). If Pratt is concerned to analyze the subtle but persistent ways in which the discourse of travel variously represented the Other and then transformed itself into "the canonical story about Africa—the fall from the sun-drenched prospect into the heart of darkness," then Homi Bhabha's essay is concerned with the book as an emblem itself—that is, with the discovery of the very concept of "book" by the Other of color. Bhabha, more specifically, reveals how the emblem of the English book—"signs taken for wonders"—became an "insignia of colonial authority and a signifier of colonial desire and discipline" (p. 144). Similarly, Patrick Brantlinger explicates in fascinating detail the origins and transformations of the metaphor of the Dark Continent throughout a wide variety of Victorian texts to show how Europeans inscribed this myth onto distant terrain as a prelude to "the imperialist partitioning of Africa which dominated the final quarter of the nineteenth century" (p. 166). The Dark Continent would figure as a larger metaphor for Otherness; it was Freud who conflated images of racial and sexual difference. "But we need not feel ashamed of this distinction [that we know less about the sexual life of little girls than boys]," Freud wrote, "after all, the sexual life of adult women is a 'dark continent' for psychology."²⁰ Sander Gilman's essay establishes an iconography of female sexuality in late nineteenth-century

art, medicine, and literature by exploring the similarities in visual representations of black and white women in both “aesthetic” and “scientific” texts.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Hazel Carby, and Barbara Johnson share a concern about the curious interrelationships between figures for sexual and racial Otherness. Spivak explores these questions in a sustained reading of *Jane Eyre* (“a cult text of feminism”), *The Wide Sargasso Sea* (*Jane Eyre*’s “reinscription”), and *Frankenstein* (which analyzes the “worlding” posited by *Jane Eyre*) (p. 244). Spivak reveals how the much-praised individualism of the female protagonist in *Jane Eyre* coincides with the exclusion of the “native female” as such from any meaningful subjectivity at all (p. 245). Whereas Spivak analyzes the exclusion of the female subject of color from both Western literature and criticism, Carby explores the turn-of-the-century writings of Afro-American women intellectuals for what these reveal about the theoretical analysis of race, gender, and patriarchal power. Carby concludes that the theoretical legacy of these writers is their exposition of a process that simultaneously led to the “colonization of the black female body by white male power and the destruction of black males who attempted to exercise any oppositional patriarchal control” (p. 276).

Barbara Johnson discusses the various ways in which “strategies and structures of problematic address” reflect and comment on “thresholds of difference,” or “the dynamics of any encounter between an inside and an outside, any attempt to make a statement about difference” (pp. 278, 279). Johnson’s essay, by focusing upon the manner in which Zora Neale Hurston “suspends the certainty of reference,” stands as a fitting commentary on the attempts of the essayists gathered here to draw upon the sophisticated theories and methodologies of Marxist, psychoanalytic, and post-structuralist literary criticism to address issues that affect actual human beings in an actual world in the most immediate and compelling ways. Accordingly, the collection ends with Jacques Derrida’s “Racism’s Last Word,” written originally for the catalog of the exhibition “Art contre/ against Apartheid” and appearing here in English translation by Peggy Kamuf. “Racism’s Last Word” addresses the complexities and ironies of the word itself: “apartheid” is “the archival record of the unnameable,” the untranslated and perhaps untranslatable name of “a racism par excellence” (p. 291). Derrida, whom one critic nicknamed “Monsieur Texte,” demonstrates how his method of close reading can be employed in a most illuminating manner to analyze the heinous sociopolitical reality of white racism in black South Africa.²¹ If the contributors, in all their diversity, might agree on one matter, it would be this: one important benefit of the development of subtle and searching modes of “reading” is that these can indeed be brought to bear upon relationships that extend far beyond the confined boundaries of a text.

A collective publishing project of this kind depends for its realization upon the generous efforts of many people. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mary Caraway encouraged me with their enthusiasm and energy when I first approached *Critical Inquiry* about editing a special issue that could bring critical theory to bear upon ideas of race. Without their initial positive reception and their subsequent unflagging support, my project would have remained an unfulfilled fantasy.

I also wish to express my appreciation to the coeditors of *Critical Inquiry*, who invited me to Chicago to discuss the purpose and shape of this special issue and whose commitment to my proposal has, I hope, been responsibly addressed by the writers whose essays are collected here. Mary Caraway and Susan Olin's remarkable editorial commentary directed each of us to a cleaner and fuller understanding of our own meanings. These two stellar editors also established a productive timetable that enabled me to undertake research in Africa as planned.

I would also like to thank Houston A. Baker, Jr., Sander L. Gilman, Arnold Rampersad, and Nancy Stepan for their respective responses to my prospectus and for their fruitful suggestions, which helped determine the ultimate shape of this issue. Candy Ruck, my administrative assistant, and Nicola Shilliam, my research assistant, combined their considerable talents for efficiency and innovation, enabling me to coordinate the editing of this issue while commuting for a semester between New Haven and Ithaca.

By allowing me to dedicate *"Race," Writing, and Difference* to Dominique de Menil, *Critical Inquiry* gracefully departs from previous practice. It does so for good reason. Dominique de Menil, born in Paris in 1908, has been for over five decades a central influence in the development of contemporary art. As the guiding force in assembling one of the world's great collections of art (soon to be housed in its own museum in Houston), as a highly regarded professor of the history of art, and as a patron of artists and scholars, Dominique de Menil has shaped, as much as has any individual, the direction of modern art and the lives of those who make it.

I wish to dedicate this special issue of *Critical Inquiry* to her, however, for still another reason. As the president of the Menil Foundation, for the past twenty-five years she has funded a project entitled "The Image of the Black in Western Art." This project, nearing completion, has produced three copious volumes of color reproduction and sophisticated historical commentary addressing the figure of the black person in Western art from 2500 B.C. to the twentieth century. Among other startling conclusions about the representation of the black Other in Western culture are the facts that black people and Europeans seem to have remained in fairly constant contact since Greco-Roman antiquity and that blacks were depicted in formal art in extraordinarily various ways—from gods, saints, and kings to devils, heathens, and slaves. Her support of liberal

political causes, her early stand against racism and de jure segregation in the South, her antipathy toward apartheid, and her creation of the Truth and Freedom Awards for those whose humanitarian politics often led to imprisonment and death—all these are fitting analogues to her commitment to art.

It is for her consistent stand against those who would limit the human mind and spirit, for her concomitant affirmation of the nobility of the human spirit, for her philanthropic generosity, and for her example of the life of the mind well-lived that I dedicate *"Race," Writing, and Difference* to Dominique de Menil.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

1. Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine, intro. to *The History of English Literature*, in *Criticism: The Major Texts*, ed. Walter Jackson Bate, enlarged ed. (New York, 1970), pp. 503–4.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 504, 505.
3. Abraham Lincoln, quoted in Michael P. Banton, *The Idea of Race* (Boulder, Colo., 1978), p. 1.
4. See the special issue *Canons*, *Critical Inquiry* 10 (Sept. 1983).
5. See I. A. Richards, intro. to Claude McKay, *"Spring in New Hampshire" and Other Poems* (London, 1920), and Allen Tate, intro. to Melvin B. Tolson, *The Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (New York, 1953).
6. The "grandfather clause" was a provision in several southern state constitutions designed to enfranchise poor whites and disfranchise blacks by waiving high voting requirements for descendants of men voting before 1867.
7. Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*, 2d ed. (Urbana, Ill., 1984), p. 326.
8. *New York Times*, 9 Aug. 1985, p. A3; *New York Times*, 14 Aug. 1985, p. A3; *Ithaca Journal*, 9 Aug. 1985, p. 9; *Ithaca Journal*, 10 Aug. 1985, p. 8.
9. Phillis Wheatley, preface to *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (New York, 1985), p. vii.
10. *Ibid.*
11. William Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea* (1705; London, 1967), pp. 146, 147.
12. David Hume, "Of National Characters," *The Philosophical Works*, ed. Thomas Hill Green and Thomas Hodge Grose, 4 vols. (Darmstadt, 1964), 3:252 n. 1; my emphasis.
13. Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1960), p. 111.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 113; my emphasis.
15. Mary Langdon, *Ida May: A Story of Things Actual and Possible* (Boston, 1854), p. 116.
16. See James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars of the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince* (Bath, 1770); John Marrant, *Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, A Black* (London, 1785); Ottobah Cugoana, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (London, 1787); Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African. Written by Himself* (London, 1789); and John Jea, *The Life and Sufferings of John Jea, An African Preacher* (Swansea, 1806).
17. Rebecca Cox Jackson, "A Dream of Three Books and a Holy One," *Gifts of Power*:

The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress, ed. Jean McMahon Humez (Amherst, Mass., 1981), pp. 146, 147.

18. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York, 1982), p. 179.

19. Anthony Appiah, "Strictures on Structures: The Prospects for a Structuralist Poetics of African Fiction," in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York, 1984), pp. 146, 145; all further references to this work, abbreviated "S," will be included in the text.

20. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1953–74), 20:212.

21. See Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Monsieur Texte," *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* (Baltimore, 1981), pp. 1–83.