

What's in a Name

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

(1989)

Background on the civil right movement

In the mid-1950s, the first stirrings of the civil rights movement were underway, and in 1954 and 1955, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down decisions declaring racial segregation unconstitutional in public schools. Still, much of the country — particularly the South — remained largely segregated until Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, or national origin in businesses (such as restaurants and theaters) covered by interstate commerce laws, as well as in employment. This was followed by Voting Rights Act of 1965, which guaranteed equal access to the polls, and the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which prohibited discrimination in housing and real estate. At the time of the experience, Gates recalls here — before these laws were enacted — prejudice and discrimination against African Ameri-

cans were the norm in many communities, including those outside the South.

The question of color takes up much space in these pages, but The question of color, especially in this country, operates to hide The graver questions of the self.

— JAMES BALDWIN, 1961

... blood, darky, Tar Baby, Kaffir, shine ... moor, blackamoor, Jim Crow, spook ... quadroon, meriney, red bone, high Yellow ... Mammy, porch mondy, home, homeboy, George ... Spear chucker, schwarze, Leroy, Smokey ... mouli, buck. Ethiopian, brother, sistah. ...

— TREY ELLIS, 1989

I had forgotten the incident completely, until I read Trey Ellis's essay, "Remember My Name," in a recent issue of the Village Voice (June 13, 1989). But there, in the middle of an extended italicized list of the by-names 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, brooding, silent manner seemed designed to scare off any overtures of friendship, even from white people. He was Irish, as was

one-third of our village (another third being Italian), the more affluent among whom sent their children to “Catholic School” across the bridge in Maryland. He had white straight hair, like my Uncle Joe, whom he uncannily resembled, and he carried a black worn metal lunch pail, the kind that Riley¹ 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.

35

40

“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.”

45

“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.

50

“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 curtain, at another world that we could not affect but that affected us. There would be a

55

painful moment of silence, and you would wait for it to give way to a discussion of a black superstar such as Sugar Ray or Jackie Robinson.

60

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

“That’s right. Nobody.”

I never again looked Mr. Wilson in the eye.

65

¹ The lead character in the 1950s television program *The Life of Riley*, about a white working-class family and their neighbors.

Note on Copyright Restrictions This content is made available for this course in accordance with the TEACH Act of 2002, and Copyright Act of 1976 §110(2) and §112(f). This content must not be printed, copied, or redistributed. It is solely intended for use during the classroom sessions.