

Reading the Whole: Building Vocabulary

“On Honoring Blackness”

Henry Louis Gates Jr.

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I was once walking in Washington, D.C., with my two young daughters, heading for the National Zoo, when one asked if I knew the man to whom I had just spoken. I said no. My daughter Liza volunteered that she found it embarrassing that I would speak to a complete stranger on the street. It called to mind a trip I'd made to Pittsburgh with my father. On the way, I heard Daddy speak to a colored man, then saw him tip his hat to the man's wife. It's just something that you do, he said, when I asked him if he had known those people and why had he spoken to them.

Last summer, I sat at a sidewalk café in Italy, and three or four “black” Italians walked casually by, as well as a dozen or more blacker Africans. Each nodded his head slightly or acknowledged me by a glance, ever so subtly. When I was growing up, we always did this with each other, passing boats in a sea of white folk.

Some Negroes distrust this reflex—the nod, the glance, the murmured greeting. One reason is a resentment at being lumped together with thirty million African Americans whom they don't know and most of whom they never will know. Completely by the accident of racism we have been bound together with people we may or may not have something in common with, just because we are “black.” Thirty million is a lot of people. One day you wonder: What do the misdeeds of a Mike Tyson have to do with me? So why do I feel implicated? And how can I not feel racial recrimination when I can feel racial pride?

Then, too, there are Negroes who are embarrassed about being Negroes, who didn't want to be bothered with race and with other black people. One of the more painful things about being colored is being colored in public around other colored people who are embarrassed to be colored and embarrassed that we both are colored and in public together. I used to reserve my special scorn for those Negroes, but have gradually stopped trying to tell others how to be black.

I wonder if my children will remember when their mother and I woke them up early on a Sunday morning, just to watch Nelson Mandela walk out of prison, and how it took a couple of hours for him to emerge, and how they both wanted to go back to bed and, then, to watch cartoons? And how we began to worry that something bad had happened to him on the way out, because the delay was so long? And how, when he finally walked out of that prison, we were so excited and teary-eyed at Mandela's nobility, his princeliness, his straight back and unbowed head? I think I felt that there walked the Negro, as Pop might have said; there walked the whole of the African people, as regal as any king. And that feeling I had, that gooseflesh sense of identity that I felt at seeing Nelson Mandela, listening to Mahalia Jackson sing, watching Muhammad Ali fight, or hearing Martin Luther King speak, is part of what I mean by being colored. I realize the sentiment may not be logical, but I want to have my cake and eat it too. Which is why I still nod or speak to black people on the street and why it felt so good to be acknowledged by the Afro-Italians who passed my table at the café in Milan.

I want to be able to take special pride in a Jessye Norman aria, a Michael Jordan dunk, a Spike Lee movie, a Thurgood Marshall opinion, a Toni Morrison novel, James Brown's Camel Walk. I enjoy the unselfconscious moments of shared cultural intimacy, whatever form it takes, when no white people are around. Like Joe Louis's fights, which my father still talks about as part of a fixed repertoire of stories. His eyes shine as he describes how Louis hit Max Schmeling so many times and so hard, and how some reporter asked him, after the fight: “Joe, what would you have done if that last punch hadn't knocked Schmeling out?” And how ole Joe responded, without missing a beat: “I'da run around behind him to see what was holdin' him up!”

Even so, I rebel at the notion that I can't be part of other groups, that I can't construct identities through elective affinity, that race must be the most important thing about me. Is that what I want on my gravestone: Here lies an African American? So I'm divided. I want to be black, to know black, to luxuriate in whatever I might be calling blackness at any particular time—but to do so in order to come out the other side, to experience a humanity that is neither colorless nor reducible to color. Bach and James Brown. Sushi and fried catfish. Part of me admires those people who can say with a straight face that they have transcended any attachment to a particular community or group . . . but I always want to run around behind them to see what holds them up.