

Gates's writing then shifted to address larger, more mainstream, audiences, as exemplified by the essays collected in *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (1992), which includes "Talking Black." In 1994 he published an informative autobiography focusing on his childhood, *Colored People: A Memoir*. He next published a dialogue with the African American philosopher and critic Cornel West, *The Future of the Race* (1996), which examines the social possibilities for African Americans in the late twentieth century. *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (1997) gathers a series of Gates's essays on significant contemporary African American figures, such as Harry Belafonte and General Colin Powell. In 1999 he wrote and narrated the six-part television series *Wonders of the African World*, which was accompanied by a book of the same title (1999).

One of Gates's major goals is to increase the institutional presence of African American writers; thus he and Nellie Y. McKay were general editors of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997). He is the editor of the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, the Amistad Critical Studies in African American Literature (with K. Anthony Appiah), and the Black Periodical Literature Project, and he has edited or co-edited more than twenty volumes of African American writing and criticism on African American literature and culture. He also oversaw the rebirth of the pioneering journal *Transition*.

Joyce A. Joyce's "Who the Cap Fit? Unconsciousness and Unconscionableness in the Criticism of Houston A. Baker, Jr., and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.," *New Literary History* 18 (1987), charges Gates with elitism; it drew a sharp answer from Gates, distinguishing the different voices he uses in academic and public forums and contending that Joyce exhibits what de Man labeled "the resistance to theory." In "Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and African American Literary Discourse," *New England Quarterly* 62 (1989), Wahneema Lubiano offers a balanced assessment of Gates's theory, which she defines as "precisely a theory of literary history" and argues against the charge that it is apolitical. Kenneth W. Warren's "Delimiting America: The Legacy of Du Bois," *American Literary History* 1 (1989), criticizes Gates's reliance on the image of professionalistic pluralism "to establish some non-political notion of black unity." Ronald Judy, in *(Dis)forming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular* (1993), revises Gates's concept of "signifyin(g)," rerouting the tradition through Arabic and other sources. Sandra Adell, in *Double-Consciousness/Double Bind: Theoretical Issues in Twentieth-Century Black Literature* (1994), relevantly compares Gates and Baker. A severe political critique comes from Adolph Reed, in *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* (1997); Reed castigates Gates, especially in his later work, as a center-right apologist and a "representative Negro" in the manner of Booker T. Washington.

Talking Black: Critical Signs of the Times

For a language acts in diverse ways, upon the spirit of a people; even as the spirit of a people acts with a creative and spiritualizing force upon a language.

—ALEXANDER CRUMMELL,¹ 1860

A new vision began gradually to replace the dream of political power—a powerful movement, the rise of another ideal to guide the unguided, another pillar of fire by night after a clouded day. It was the ideal of "book-learning"; the curiosity, born of compulsory ignorance, to know and test the power of the cabalistic letters of the white man, the longing to know. Here at last seemed to have been

discovered the mountain path to Canaan; longer than the highway of Emancipation and law, steep and rugged, but straight, leading to heights high enough to overlook life.

—W. E. B. DU BOIS,² 1903

The knowledge which would teach the white world was Greek to his own flesh and blood . . . and he could not articulate the message of another people.

—W. E. B. DU BOIS, 1903

Alexander Crummell, a pioneering nineteenth-century Pan-Africanist,³ statesman, and missionary who spent the bulk of his creative years as an Anglican minister in Liberia, was also a pioneering intellectual and philosopher of language, founding the American Negro Academy⁴ in 1897 and serving as the intellectual godfather of W. E. B. Du Bois. For his first annual address as president of the academy, delivered on December 28, 1897, Crummell selected as his topic "The Attitude of the American Mind Toward the Negro Intellect." Given the occasion of the first annual meeting of the great intellectuals of the race, he could not have chosen a more timely or appropriate subject.

Crummell wished to attack, he said, "the denial of intellectuality in the Negro; the assertion that he was not a human being, that he did not belong to the human race." He argued that the desire "to becloud and stamp out the intellect of the Negro" had led to the enactment of "laws and Statutes, closing the pages of every book printed to the eyes of Negroes; barring the doors of every school-room against them!" This, he concluded, "was the systematized method of the intellect of the South, to stamp out the brains of the Negro!"—a program that created an "almost Egyptian darkness⁵ [which] fell upon the mind of the race, throughout the whole land."

Crummell next shared with his audience a conversation between two Boston lawyers which he had overheard when he was "an errand boy in the Anti-slavery office in New York City" in 1833 or 1834:

While at the Capitol they happened to dine in the company of the great John C. Calhoun,⁶ then senator from South Carolina. It was a period of great ferment upon the question of Slavery, States' Rights, and Nullification; and consequently the Negro was the topic of conversation at the table. One of the utterances of Mr. Calhoun was to this effect—"That if he could find a Negro who knew the Greek syntax, he would then believe that the Negro was a human being and should be treated as a man."

"Just think of the crude asininity," Crummell concluded rather generously, "of even a great man!"

The salient sign of the black person's humanity—indeed, the only sign for

2. African American historian and sociologist (1868–1963; see above), co-founder of the NAACP and the foremost voice of black protest in the early 20th century. Both his epigraphs are from chapter 1 of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

3. A believer in the innate unity of all black Africans and their overseas descendants; more especially, one active in the movement for the unity and independence of African states (as was Du Bois, beginning in 1900 with the Pan-African Congress in London).

4. A learned society for African Americans that promoted civil rights through scholarly work on African American culture and history.

5. An allusion to one of the plagues said to have been brought by God against the Egyptians who were holding the Israelites in slavery (Exodus 10.21–23).

6. Prominent American political leader (1782–1850) and the 7th U.S. vice president (1825–32); he was a strong advocate of states' rights and of slavery.

1. African American Episcopalian minister (1819–1898), who earned a degree from Cambridge University (1853) and cultivated scholarship among young blacks.

Calhoun—would be the mastering of the very essence of Western civilization, of the very foundation of the complex fiction upon which white Western culture had been constructed. It is likely that “Greek syntax,” for John C. Calhoun, was merely a hyperbolic figure of speech, a trope of virtual impossibility; he felt driven to the hyperbolic mode, perhaps, because of the long racist tradition in Western letters of demanding that black people *prove* their full humanity. We know this tradition all too well, dotted as it is with the names of the great intellectual Western racialists, such as Francis Bacon, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Thomas Jefferson, and G. W. F. Hegel.⁷ Whereas each of these figures demanded that blacks write poetry to prove their humanity, Calhoun—writing in a post-Phillis Wheatley⁸ era—took refuge in, yes, Greek syntax.

In typical African-American fashion, a brilliant black intellectual accepted Calhoun’s challenge. The anecdote Crummell shared with his fellow black academicians turned out to be his shaping scene of instruction. For Crummell himself jumped on a boat, sailed to England, and matriculated at Queens’ College, Cambridge, where he mastered the intricacies of Greek syntax. Calhoun, we suspect, was not impressed.

Crummell never stopped believing that mastering the master’s tongue was the sole path to civilization, intellectual freedom, and social equality for the black person. It was Western “culture,” he insisted, that the black person “must claim as his rightful heritage, as a man—not stinted training, not a caste education, not,” he concluded prophetically, “a Negro curriculum.” As he argued so passionately in his speech of 1860, “The English Language in Liberia,” the acquisition of the English language, along with Christianity, is the wonderful sign of God’s providence encoded in the nightmare of African enslavement in the racist wilderness of the New World. English, for Crummell, was “the speech of Chaucer and Shakespeare, of Milton and Wordsworth, of Bacon and Burke, of Franklin and Webster,”⁹ and its potential mastery was “this one item of compensation” that “the Almighty has bestowed upon us” in exchange for “the exile of our fathers from their African homes to America.” In the English language are embodied “the noblest theories of liberty” and “the grandest ideas of humanity.” If black people master the master’s tongue, these great and grand ideas will become African ideas, because “ideas conserve men, and keep alive the vitality of nations.”

In dark contrast to the splendors of the English language, Crummell set the African vernacular languages, which, he wrote, have “definite marks of inferiority connected with them all, which place them at the widest distances from civilized languages.” Any effort to render the master’s discourse in our own black tongue is an egregious error, for we cannot translate sublime utterances “in[to] broken English—a miserable caricature of their noble

tongue.” We must abandon forever both indigenous African vernacular languages and the neo-African vernacular languages that our people have produced in the New World:

All low, inferior, and barbarous tongues are, doubtless, but the lees and dregs of noble languages, which have gradually, as the soul of a nation has died out, sunk down to degradation and ruin. We must not suffer this decay on these shores, in this nation. We have been made, providentially, the deposit of a noble trust; and we should be proud to show our appreciation of it. Having come to the heritage of this language we must cherish its spirit, as well as retain its letter. We must cultivate it among ourselves; we must strive to infuse its spirit among our reclaimed and aspiring natives.

I cite the examples of John C. Calhoun and Alexander Crummell as metaphors for the relation between the critic of black writing and the broader, larger institution of literature. Learning the master’s tongue, for our generation of critics, has been an act of empowerment, whether that tongue be New Criticism, humanism, structuralism, Marxism, poststructuralism, feminism, new historicism,¹ or any other “ism.” Each of these critical discourses arises from a specific set of texts within the Western tradition. At least for the past decade, many of us have busied ourselves with the necessary task of learning about these movements in criticism, drawing upon their modes of reading to explicate the texts in our own tradition.

This is an exciting time for critics of Afro-American literature. More critical essays and books are being produced than ever before, and there have never been more jobs available teaching Afro-American literature in white colleges and universities. In a few years, we shall at last have our very own Norton anthology,² a sure sign that the teaching of Afro-American literature is being institutionalized. Our pressing question now becomes this. In what languages shall we choose to speak, and write, our own criticisms? What are we now to do with the enabling masks of empowerment that we have donned as we have practiced one mode of formal criticism or another?

There is a long history of resistance to (white) theory in the (black) tradition. Unlike almost every other, the Afro-American literary tradition was generated as a response to allegations that its authors did not, and *could not* create literature, considered the signal measure of a race’s innate “humanity.” The African living in Europe or in the New World seems to have felt compelled to create a literature not only to demonstrate that blacks did indeed possess the intellectual ability to create a written art, but also to indict the several social and economic institutions that delimited the “humanity” of all black people in Western cultures.

So insistent did these racist allegations prove to be, at least from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, that it is fair to describe the subtext of the history of black letters in terms of the urge to refute them. Even as late as 1911, when J. E. Casely-Hayford³ published *Ethiopia Unbound* (the “first” African novel), he felt it necessary to address this matter in the first two

7. Major thinkers who generally (save the slave-holding Jefferson) are not thought of as “racialist”: Bacon (1561–1626), English philosopher, scientist, and statesman; HUME (1711–1776), Scottish philosopher and historian; KANT (1724–1804), German idealist philosopher; Jefferson (1743–1826), drafter of the Declaration of Independence, Founding Father, and 3d president (1801–09) of the United States; HEGEL (1770–1831), German idealist philosopher.

8. The first black American woman poet in the United States (ca. 1753–1784), born probably in

Senegal and sold as a slave to a Boston family.

9. Crummell names English and American men famed for their skill with words: the English poet Geoffrey Chaucer (ca. 1343–1400) and the poet/dramatist William Shakespeare (1564–1616); two poets, John Milton (1608–1674) and WILLIAM WORDSWORTH (1770–1850); two philosopher/statesmen, Bacon and EDMUND BURKE (1727–1797); and two American politicians, the popular author, inventor, and ambassador Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) and the great orator Daniel Webster (1782–1852).

1. Major critical schools of 20th-century U.S. literary studies.

2. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997), whose general editors were Gates

and Nellie Y. McKay.

3. Ghanaian lawyer, writer, and advocate of African nationalism (1866–1930).

paragraphs of this text. "At the dawn of the twentieth century," the novel opens, "men of light and leading both in Europe and in America had not yet made up their minds as to what place to assign to the spiritual aspirations of the black man." Few literary traditions have begun with such a complex and curious relation to criticism: allegations of an absence led directly to a presence, a literature often inextricably bound in a dialogue with its harshest critics.

Black literature and its criticism, then, have been put to uses that were not primarily aesthetic; rather, they have formed part of a larger discourse on the nature of the black, and of his or her role in the order of things. The relation among theory, tradition, and integrity within black culture has not been, and perhaps cannot be, a straightforward matter.

Despite the fact that critics of black literature are often attacked for using theory and that some black readers respond to their work by remarking that it's all Greek to them, it is probably true that critics of Afro-American literature are more concerned with the complex relation between literature and theory than ever before. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which is our increasingly central role in "the profession" precisely when our colleagues are engulfed in their own extensive debates about the intellectual merit of so much theorizing. Theory, as a second-order reflection upon a primary gesture, has *always* been viewed with suspicion by scholars who find it presumptuous and even decadent when criticism claims the right to stand on its own: theoretical texts breed equally "decadent" theoretical responses in a creative process that can be very far removed from a poem or a novel.

For the critic of Afro-American literature, this process is even more perilous because most of the contemporary literary theory derives from critics of Western European languages and literatures. Is the use of theory to write about Afro-American literature merely another form of intellectual indenture, a mental servitude as pernicious in its intellectual implications as any other kind of enslavement? The key word implied in this panel discussion⁴ is *integrity*. To quote the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of the word, does theorizing about a text or a literary tradition "mar," "violate," "impair," or "corrupt" the "soundness" of an "original perfect state" of a black text or of the black tradition? To argue that it does is to align oneself with the New Critics⁵—who often seem not to have cared particularly for, or about, the writing of Afro-Americans—and with their view that texts are "organic wholes" in the first place. This is a critical error. *why?*

The sense of "integrity" as it seems to arise in the Afro-American tradition is more akin to the notion of "ringing true," or to Houston Baker's⁶ concept of "sounding." (One of the most frequently used critical judgments in the African-American tradition is "That just don't sound right," or, as Alice Walker puts it in *The Color Purple*,⁷ "Look like to me only a fool would want to talk in a way that feel peculiar to your mind.") That is the sense that black nationalists⁸ call on here, without understanding how problematic this can

be. Doubtless, alienation, equivocality—since the turn of the century at least, these have been recurrent tropes for the black tradition.

To be sure, this matter of criticism and "integrity" has a long and rather tortured history in black letters. It was David Hume, after all, who called Francis Williams,⁹ the Jamaican poet of Latin verse, "a parrot who merely speaks a few words plainly." Phillis Wheatley, too, has long suffered from the spurious attacks of black and white critics alike for being the *rara avis*¹ of a school of so-called mockingbird poets, whose use of European and American literary conventions has been considered a corruption of a "pure" black expression, found in forms such as the blues, signifying, spirituals, and Afro-American dance. Can we, as critics, escape a "mockingbird" relation to theory? And can we escape the racism of so many critical theorists, from Hume and Kant through the Southern Agrarians and the Frankfurt school?²

Only recently have some scholars attempted to convince critics of black literature that we can. Perhaps predictably, a number of these attempts share a concern with that which has been most repressed in the received tradition of Afro-American criticism: close readings of the texts themselves. My advocacy of theory's value for such readings is meant as a prelude to the definition of critical principles peculiar to the black literary traditions, related to contemporary theory generally and yet, as Robert Farris Thompson³ puts it, "indelibly black." I have tried to work through contemporary theories of literature not to "apply" them to black texts, but to transform by translating them into a new rhetorical realm—to re-create, through revision, the critical theory at hand. As our familiarity with the black tradition and with literary theory expands, we shall invent our own black, text-specific theories, as some of us have begun to do. We must learn to read a black text within a black formal cultural matrix, as well as its "white" matrix.

This is necessary because the existence of a black canon is a historically contingent phenomenon; it is not inherent in the nature of "blackness," not vouchsafed by the metaphysics of some racial essence. The black tradition exists only insofar as black artists enact it. Only because black writers have read and responded to other black writers with a sense of recognition and acknowledgment can we speak of a black literary inheritance, with all the burdens and ironies that has entailed. Race is a text (an array of discursive practices), not an essence. It must be *read* with painstaking care and suspicion, not imbibed.

I have tried to employ contemporary theory to defamiliarize⁴ the texts of the black tradition: ironically, it is necessary to create distance between reader and texts in order to go beyond reflexive responses and achieve critical insight into and intimacy with their formal workings, I have done this to respect the "integrity" of these texts, by trying to avoid confusing my experience as an Afro-American with the act of language that defines a black text.

what is it?

9. Jamaican poet (1700–1770).

1. Rare bird (Latin).

2. German social and aesthetic theorists who gathered at Frankfurt's Institute for Social Research (founded in 1923); prominent members include THEODOR ADORNO and MAX HORKHEIMER.

Southern Agrarians; also known as the Fugitives, a group of Southern poets and critics (many, including JOHN CROWE RANSOM, were associated with Vanderbilt University in the 1920s) who were politically conservative and viewed works of liter-

4. The panel "Integrity and the Black Tradition," where this essay was originally presented at the 1987 convention of the Modern Language Association (the primary North American professional organization for scholars in English and foreign languages and literatures).

5. Those literary interpreters (CLEANTH BROOKS, WILLIAM K. WIMSATT JR., etc.) who emphasize close reading of the text as an autonomous ("organic") whole; they dominated Anglo-American

criticism in the mid-20th century.

6. A leading African American literary theorist (b. 1943; see above).

7. A 1982 novel by Walker (b. 1944), African American novelist and poet.

8. Those who advocate a separatist black culture and political organization, a stance associated with the black power and Black Arts movements of the 1960s through mid-1970s.

ature as autonomous verbal structures; their manifesto was *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition by Twelve Southerners* (1930).

3. African American art historian (b. 1932).

4. A term from the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky (1893–1984); defamiliarization is the process through which an object of art "makes strange" what is familiar, so our response to it is not routine and it can be appreciated not as imitative but as an independent work.

This is the challenge of the critic of black literature in the 1980s: not to shy away from white power—that is, literary theory—but to translate it into the black idiom, *renaming* principles of criticism where appropriate, but especially *naming* indigenous black principles of criticism and applying them to our own texts. Any tool that enables the critic to explain the complex workings of the language of a text is appropriate here. For it is language, the black language of black texts, that expresses the distinctive quality of our literary tradition. Once it may have seemed that the only critical implements black critics needed were the pom-pom and the twirled baton; in fact, there is no deeper form of literary disrespect. We will not protect the “integrity” of our tradition by remaining afraid of, or naive about, literary theory; rather, we will inflict upon it the violation of reflexive, stereotypical readings—or non-reading. We are the keepers of the black literary tradition. No matter what theories we embrace, we have more in common with each other than we do with any other critic of any other literature. We write for each other, and for our own contemporary writers. This relation is a critical trust.

It is also *political* trust. How can the demonstration that our texts sustain ever closer and more sophisticated readings *not* be political at a time when all sorts of so-called canonical critics *mediate* their racism through calls for “purity” of the “tradition,” demands as implicitly racist as anything the Southern Agrarians said? How can the deconstruction of the forms of racism itself not be political? How can the use of literary analysis to explicate the racist social text in which we still find ourselves be anything *but* political? To be political, however, does not mean that I have to write at the level of a Marvel comic book. My task, as I see it, is to help guarantee that black and so-called Third World literature⁵ is taught to black and Third World and white students by black and Third World and white professors in heretofore white mainstream departments of literature, and to train students to think, to read, and to write clearly, to expose false uses of language, fraudulent claims, and muddled arguments, propaganda, and vicious lies—from all of which our people have suffered just as surely as we have from an economic order in which we were zeros and a metaphysical order in which we were absences. These are the “values” which should be transmitted through critical theory.

In the December 1986 issue of the *Voice Literary Supplement*, in an essay entitled “Cult-Nats Meet Freaky-Deke,” Greg Tate⁶ argued cogently and compellingly that “black aestheticians need to develop a coherent criticism to communicate the complexities of our culture. There’s no periodical on black cultural phenomena equivalent to *The Village Voice* or *Artforum*, no publication that provides journalism on black visual art, philosophy, politics, economics, media, literature, linguistics, psychology, sexuality, spirituality, and pop culture. Though there are certainly black editors, journalists, and academics capable of producing such a journal, the disintegration of the black cultural nationalist movement and the brain-drain of black intellectuals to white institutions have destroyed the vociferous public dialogue that used to exist between them.” While I would argue that *Sage*, *Callaloo*, and *Black American Literature Forum* (BALF) are indeed fulfilling that function for academic critics, I am afraid that the truth of Tate’s claim is irresistible.

5. Literature from the “underdeveloped” countries, many of them former colonies, now dominated by highly industrialized “first world” (largely

Western) nations in a global economy.

6. African American cultural critic and journalist.

But his most important contribution to the future of black criticism is to be found in his most damning allegation. “What’s unfortunate,” he writes, “is that while black artists have opened up the entire ‘text of blackness’ for fun and games, not many black critics have produced writing as fecund, eclectic, and freaky-deke as the art, let alone the culture, itself. . . . For those who prefer *exegesis* with a *polemical* bent, just imagine how critics as fluent in black and Western culture as the postliberated artists could strike terror into that bastion of white supremacist thinking, the Western art [and literary] world[s].” To which I can only say, echoing Shug in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, “Amen. Amen.”

Tate’s challenge is a serious one because neither ideology nor criticism nor blackness can exist as entities of themselves, outside the forms of their texts. This is the central theme of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*,⁷ for example. But how can we write or read the text of “Black Theory”? What language(s) do black people use to represent their critical or ideological positions? In what forms of language do we speak or write? Can we derive a valid, integral “black” text or criticism or ideology from borrowed or appropriate forms? Can a black woman’s text emerge “authentically” as borrowed, or “liberated,” or revised, from the patriarchal forms of the slave narratives, on the one hand, or from the white matriarchal forms of the sentimental novel, on the other, as Harriet Jacobs and Harriet Wilson attempted to do in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and *Our Nig* (1859)?⁸ Where lies the liberation in revision, the ideological integrity of defining freedom in the modes and forms of difference charted so cogently by so many poststructural critics of black literature?

For it is in these spaces of difference that black literature has dwelled. And while it is crucial to read these patterns of difference closely, we must understand as well that the quest was lost, in a major sense, before it had even begun, simply because the terms of our own self-representation have been provided by the master. It is not enough for us to show that refutation, negation, and revision exist, and to define them as satisfactory gestures of ideological independence. Our next concern must be to address the black political signified, that is, the cultural vision and the critical language that underpin the search through literature and art for a profound reordering and humanizing of everyday existence. We must urge our writers and critics to undertake the fullest and most ironic exploration of the manner and matter, the content and form, the structure and sensibility so familiar and poignant to us in our most sublime form of art, black music, where ideology and art are one, whether we listen to Bessie Smith or to postmodern and poststructural John Coltrane.⁹ *Did Mumbo Jumbo try it in 1933?*

Just as we must urge our writers to meet this challenge, we as critics must turn to our own peculiarly black structures of thought and feeling to develop our own languages of criticism. We must do so by drawing on the black vernacular, the language we use to speak to each other when no outsiders are around. Unless we look to the vernacular to ground our theories and

7. The best-known novel (1972) by Reed (b. 1938), African American novelist and poet. *Invisible Man* (1952) is the masterpiece of Ellison (1914–1994), African American writer of fiction, essays, and criticism.

8. Accounts of slave life by Jacobs (1813–1877)

and Wilson (1808–ca. 1870). Jacobs writes of hiding for nearly 7 years in a small, cramped attic; this is the “garret” to which Gates later refers.

9. American jazz saxophonist and composer (1926–1967). Smith (ca. 1898–1937), American blues singer.

modes of reading, we will surely sink in the mire of Nella Larsen's quicksand,¹ remain alienated in the isolation of Harriet Jacob's garret, or masked in the received stereotype of the Black Other helping Huck to return to the raft, singing "China Gate" with Nat King Cole under the Da Nang moon, or reflecting our bald heads in the shining flash of Mr. T's² signifying gold chains.

We must redefine theory itself from within our own black cultures, refusing to grant the racist premise that theory is something that white people do, so that we are doomed to imitate our white colleagues, like reverse black minstrel critics done up in whiteface. We are all heirs to critical theory, but critics are also heir to the black vernacular critical tradition as well. We must not succumb, as did Alexander Crummell, to the tragic lure of white power, the mistake of accepting the empowering language of white critical theory as "universal" or as our only language, the mistake of confusing the enabling mask of theory with our own black faces. Each of us has, in some literal or figurative manner, boarded a ship and sailed to a metaphorical Cambridge, seeking to master the master's tools. (I myself, being quite literal-minded, booked passage some fourteen years ago on the *QE2*.³) Now we must at last don the empowering mask of blackness and talk *that* talk, the language of black difference. While it is true that we must, as Du Bois said so long ago, "know and test the power of the cabalistic letters of the white man," we must also know and test the dark secrets of a black discursive universe that awaits its disclosure through the black arts of interpretation. For the future of theory, in the remainder of this century, is black indeed.

1988

1. *Quicksand* (1928) was the first novel by the African American writer Larsen (1891–1964).

2. Lawrence Tureaud (b. 1952), popular African American television and film actor of the 1980s, generally seen in a Mohawk haircut and copious gold jewelry. Huck: title character of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), who is helped by the runaway slave Jim back to the raft traveling down the Mississippi River. Cole (1919–1965), innovative African American pianist and leading popular singer of the 1950s and 1960s,

who had a small role (and sang the title song) in the 1957 film *China Gate* (dir. Samuel Fuller), which was set in the last days of the French war in Vietnam; Da Nang, in central Vietnam, later became a major American military base.

3. *Queen Elizabeth 2*, a Cunard liner put into service in 1969; though now used primarily for cruises, it provides the only regularly scheduled luxury passenger service across the Atlantic. Gates pursued his graduate studies at Cambridge University.

EVE KOSOFKY SEDGWICK

b. 1950

In the 1992 preface to the second edition of *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), Eve Sedgwick writes about the emergence in the late 1980s and early 1990s of queer theory, a new paradigm of literary theory that owes its productivity to the "gorgeous generativity, the speculative generosity and daring, the permeability, and the activism that have long been lodged in the multiple histories of queer reading." In the aftermath of the famous Stonewall riots, when gay men and lesbians fought back against a police raid on a gay bar in New York City in the summer

of 1969, and often under the umbrella of feminist and then gender studies, increasingly vocal gay and lesbian liberation movements took shape. In the 1970s, the work of literary theorists such as ADRIENNE RICH, BONNIE ZIMMERMAN, BARBARA SMITH, GLORIA ANZALDÚA, Louie Crew, and Rictor Norton had begun to define a gay and lesbian studies movement in the academy based on the identity politics that had well served both feminists and civil rights activists. The 1980s, however, saw a reappraisal of political strategies and the emergence of a "highly productive queer community whose explicit basis [was] the criss-crossing of the lines of identification and desire among genders, races and sexual definitions." By the early 1990s, it was possible to talk about queer theory as a vital new area of literary theory, built on the pioneering work of theorists such as MICHEL FOUCAULT, JUDITH BUTLER, MONIQUE WITTIG, and Sedgwick herself; its aim was to expose incoherencies in the supposedly stable definitions of male and female sexuality, to include not only gay and lesbian but also transgendered subjects, and to explore topics such as cross-dressing, gender ambiguity, and transsexuality.

Born in Dayton, Ohio, Sedgwick received her B.A. from Cornell University and went on to earn an M.Phil. and in 1975 a Ph.D. from Yale University. She has taught at a number of colleges and universities; since 1998, she has been a Distinguished Professor of English at the Graduate Center at the City University of New York. She has held major fellowships from the Mellon Foundation (1976–78), the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College (1983–84), the Guggenheim Foundation (1987–88), and the National Humanities Center (1991–92).

In *Between Men* Sedgwick explores the phenomenon of *homosociality*, a term she applied to the social bonds formed between persons of the same sex. While these bonds can be distinguished from homosexuality—sexual desire between persons of the same sex—they exist on a continuum with it. The structures of male and female homosocial bonds are, Sedgwick argues, quite distinct. The continuum between male homosocial and homosexual desire is disrupted by the often intense homophobia (fear of homosexuality) that marks rituals of male bonding in our culture. But the opposition between homosocial and homosexual is much less pronounced, much less dichotomous, observes Sedgwick, for women than it is for men (see, for instance, Adrienne Rich's famous notion of a "lesbian continuum" in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," above). *Between Men* examines how male homosociality gets constructed and reflected in European literary texts from 1750 to 1850. In particular, Sedgwick is interested in the ways in which homosocial desire is constituted in Western literature between men whose bonding is forged through their rivalry over a woman who mediates their relationship and deflects any taint of homoeroticism. A popular example of this phenomenon might be the triangle formed between Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot in Arthurian literature.

In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Sedgwick points out that the versions of modern lesbian and gay history recounted by gay liberation movements following Stonewall were all based on a metaphor of "the closet," which created what she calls the regime of the "open secret" and has dominated lesbian and gay life for more than a century. She suggests that this regime, with its contradictory and constraining rules about privacy and disclosure, public and private, awareness and ignorance, has shaped the way in which many questions of value and epistemology (knowledge) have been conceived and addressed not only in gay subculture but in modern Western society as a whole. In her book's introduction, which she titles "Axiomatic," Sedgwick explores this problem through seven "axioms." The second axiom, included in our selection below, argues that while sexuality and gender may be implicated in one another, they constitute conceptually distinct realms. To treat sexuality as a part of gender perpetuates heterosexist assumptions about sexuality, foreclosing other as yet unarticulated ways of understanding. For Sedgwick, it follows that while lesbian, gay, and anti-homophobic scholarship have much to learn from feminism, one cannot assume that