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Entry on Henry Louis Gates Jr_.pdf

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Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1950-)

Babacar M'Baye (Kent State University)

Cultural Theorist/ Critic; Literary Critic/ Historian; Literary Theorist; Teacher/ Professor.
Active 1981- in United States

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., is one of the most prolific American scholars of his generation. He has helped many blacks in the United States appreciate the richness of their African and African American roots and their contributions to American history and society. Through exploration of both the successes and trials of African Americans from slavery to the present, Gates has revived the confidence of many blacks in the United States who continue to suffer from the legacies of a brutal past. Gates has explored these legacies in both American history and literature in inclusive ways that reveal the complex meaning of blackness in American multiracialism and multiculturalism.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., is the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor of Harvard University where he serves as the Director of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research and a distinctive professor in the Department of African and African American Studies. “Graduating summa cum laude in 1973 in the field of history, he was to return briefly to Yale as an assistant professor in both the English and African American Studies departments after completing his PhD in English at Cambridge University on a Mellon Fellowship” (Hamilton 502-503). Gates’s academic success contrasted with his family’s humble socio-economic status in a small town in Piedmont, West Virginia, where he was born on September 16, 1950. In The Future of the Race (1996), Gates describes how his father “worked two jobs—loading trucks at a paper mill, plus a night shift as a janitor for the phone company—to keep” his family “well fed and well clothed” (3). These are vivid memories of sacrifice that Gates’ family, like those of many African Americans of his adolescent years, made to help their children achieve the American dream despite racism.

Scholars and students are familiar with Gates’s works of literary criticism which reflect the complex trajectories of African American literature and culture from their inception in African traditions to their hybridization in the Americas. These works include Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the “Racial” Self (1987), The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism (1988), Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars (Oxford 1992), Thirteen Ways of Looking at A Black Man (1997), The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America’s First Black Poet and Her Encounters With the Founding Fathers (2003), and In Search of Our Roots (Crown, 2009) among others.

Gates’s memoirs include Colored People (1994) and The Future of the Race (1996), the second being a book that he co-wrote with Cornel West. These two works trace Gates’s experiences from his childhood years in 1950s Mineral County, West Virginia, to his adolescent and adult years in the 1960s and 1970s in many American cities. In Colored People Gates represents his desire to teach young blacks about the world as the foundation that
“nurtured and sustained” him during serious times when he witnessed “the civil rights movement” (xi) and the transformations of African Americans who were consecutively identified as “African Americans”, “people of color”, and “colored people” (xvi). One of these changes is the rise of an African American class of professionals, such as professors, doctors, scientists, actors, and artists that Gates interviewed in his well-known documentary African American Lives that was shown by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and was produced by Thirteen/WNET New York. In this multi-part series, Gates talks with successful African Americans, such as Oprah Winfrey, Ben Carson, Whoopi Goldberg, Morgan Freeman, Bishop T.D. Jakes, Mae Jemison, Quincy Jones, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, Kathleen Henderson, and Chris Tucker about their experiences in America.

African American Lives achieved the same goal that Gates had reached in his earlier PBS documentary Wonders of the African World, which was to expose mainstream America to the success, hope, dignity, joys, fears, and desperations of African Americans. Like his writings, Gates’s films attempt to counter the racist and condescending stereotypes that the American media develops about blacks who were and continue to be victims of racial injustice and socio-economic inequalities. The injustice is apparent in The Future of the Race in which Gates laments the drastic poverty of black families in the 1950s and 60s when “only 3 percent of blacks had a college degree. And more than half of blacks fell below the poverty line” (9). In this book, Gates also writes: “In the year I graduated from high school. Almost half of black households took in less than fifteen thousand dollars” (9). Gates notices a similar predicament among many African American families in 1993 when the median net worth of blacks was “zero” while those of Whites was “ten thousand dollars” (25). To these bleak statistics, Gates adds: “In 1993, 2.3 million black men were sent to jail or prison while 23,000 received college diploma—a ration of a hundred to one” (25). Ironically, Gates was sent to jail on July 16, 2009 by Cambridge police officer James Crowley, who arrested him in his own home near Harvard Square after he allegedly refused to step outside when he asked him to do so. The police were reportedly told by a white female caller that two black men had broken into a home. In the wake of instant fury and accusations of racial profiling from prominent African Americans such as Al Sharpton and Tom Joyner, the Cambridge police dismissed their charge of disorderly conduct. During his ordeal, Gates was represented by his friend and Harvard Law School professor Charles Ogletree. Though he received an apology from the Mayor of Cambridge (E. Denise Simmons), Gate demanded a request for forgiveness from James Crowley. Moreover, Gates did not rule out a lawsuit against the city of Cambridge and he intended to use the incident as a means to educate Americans about the endurance of racism in the United States. In one of his interviews about the incident, Gates said: “There are 1 million black men in the prison system, and on Thursday I became one of them . . . I would sooner have believed the sky was going to fall from the heavens than I would have believed this could happen to me. It shouldn’t have happened to me, and it shouldn’t happen to anyone” (Trujillo).

Henry Louis Gates Jr., has made significant contributions to the study of African American literature and history. He has produced numerous works of literary criticism, anthologies, documentaries, and encyclopedia about the past and current struggles of African Americans. A tireless scholar, Gates continues to write and speak at national and international forums, enlightening people in both the United States and the rest of the world about the past and present conditions of African Americans.

Works cited:

Trujillo, Melissa. “Charge dropped against black Harvard scholar.”