

“Black in Latin America”: An Interview with Dr. Henry Louis Gates

by

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Henry Louis Gates

Professor Henry Louis Gates dominated the national news for much of the summer of 2009 after being mistaken for a burglar and handcuffed for breaking into his own home. President Obama eventually intervened to defuse the tension by inviting both the professor and the arresting officer to the White House for a glass of beer by Rose Garden.

But prior to the media circus surrounding that “Beer Summit,” Dr. Gates was already well known as a tenured Professor at Harvard University, as well as director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African-American Research. He is the author of *Faces of America*, which expands on interviews he conducted for his critically acclaimed PBS documentary series of the same name, and *Tradition and the Black Atlantic: Criticism in the African Diaspora*.

In addition, Professor Gates is the author of several works of literary criticism, including *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the ‘Racial’ Self*; *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism*, winner of the 1989 American Book Award; and *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars*.

He is the author of *Colored People: A Memoir*, which traces his childhood experiences in a small West Virginia town in the 1950s and 1960s; *The Future of the Race*, co-authored with Cornel West; *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*; and *In Search of Our Roots: How Nineteen Extraordinary African-Americans Reclaimed Their Past*, which won an NAACP Image Award in 2010.

An influential cultural critic, Professor Gates' publications include a 1994 cover story for *Time* magazine on the new black Renaissance in art, as well as numerous articles for *The New Yorker*. In addition, he has edited several anthologies, including *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, and *The Oxford-Schomburg Library of Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers*, and is the co-editor of *Transition* magazine.

For PBS, Professor Gates produced and hosted *Wonders of the African World* (1999), *America Beyond the Color Line* (2004), *African American Lives* (2006), *Oprah's Roots* (2007), *African American Lives 2* (2008), *Looking for Lincoln* (2009) and *Faces of America* (2010). Here, he talks about his latest PBS series, *Black in Latin America* (www.pbs.org/wnet/black-in-latin-america/).

Kam Williams: Hi Dr. Gates, thanks for the time.

Henry Louis Gates: Thank you, Kam.

KW: I know that your father, Henry, Sr., passed away since we last spoke, so I'd like to express my sincerest condolences on your loss.

HLG: Oh, thank you, man. We just had his memorial service this past Saturday back home in Cumberland, Maryland. All his friends turned out. It was a two-hour service. I spoke, my brother spoke, and our cousin Eddie spoke. Then we buried his ashes next to my mom's. I loved him.

KW: I almost feel like I knew him because he played such a prominent role in *African American Lives*. In terms of your new series, Boston-based children's author Irene Smalls asks: What do you hope to accomplish with *Black in Latin America*?

HLG: Between 1502 and 1866, 11.2 million Africans arrived in the New World. And of that 11.2 million, only 450 thousand came to the United States. So, in other words, the real African-American experience unfolded south of our borders. And most of us don't know anything about that. It's an extension of what scholars call "American Exceptionalism." We think that everything revolves around the continental United States, including when we think about the slave experience and about race and racism.

But obviously, over 10.5 million black people landed in countries throughout the Caribbean and South America. My goal with the series was to unveil that world to the average American. Did you know that the first black president of a multi-racial society was not Barack Obama but Vicente Guerrero, who became president of Mexico in 1829? How come we don't know that? It's incredible!

KW: I was a Black Studies major as an undergrad, and after watching all the episodes of *Black in Latin America*, I felt like I had never learned so much from a TV series about black folks.

HLG: Oh, you couldn't have given me a nicer compliment than that. I was hoping viewers might experience that aura of discovery.

KW: Teresa Emerson asks: How did you settle on the countries which would be the subject of the series? Which one has the largest presence of Africans outside of Africa: Brazil or Colombia?

HLG: We picked the countries strategically, because we couldn't cover everything in a 4-hour series. We had different categories, and one was size. For instance, we passed on Columbia, the second largest, because we went with Brazil, the largest. Brazil is also Portuguese, which we wanted to contrast with the Hispanic experience. We picked Cuba, because it's so fascinating and mysterious to Americans. So, I wanted to bring that country to the fore. The island of Hispaniola was interesting because it's divided into Haiti, where the people are very proud to be black and they speak Creole and French, and the Dominican Republic, where the national motto was that the country was Catholic, Spanish and white. Finally, we chose Mexico and Peru. Why? Because nobody thinks about their ever having sizable black populations. All anybody remembers are the Aztecs and the Incas. But they had 700 thousand slaves combined, compared to America's 450 thousand. That's astonishing! So, the series was designed to offer some amazing revelations and to reeducate the American people.

KW: I found the episode about Haiti very informative, particularly about how President Thomas Jefferson tried to sabotage its independence movement.

HLG: Yeah, America systematically attempted to undermine it. Jefferson called it a terrible republic and referred to the people as cannibals. Man, that's cold. But Haiti has a long and noble history as a free civilization.

KW: I received more questions from readers than we have time for, so I'm going to have to ask you to keep your answer brief so that we can get to as many as possible.

HLG: Sorry, I'm a professor. I'm used to giving 50-minute lectures, man.

KW: Attorney Bernadette Beekman asks: Do you think Brazil has an opportunity, given the upcoming Olympics, to show the world that it is making progress in the area of the disparate treatment in society based on the color of one's skin?

HLG: Yeah, I think it has an opportunity, but we have to remember that it takes a long time to make profound social changes. What I fear is that any quick fix will just be cosmetic and designed to pretend to racial democracy. We're talking about the transformation of the identity of the working and middle classes. I want to see black doctors, black lawyers and other black professionals in much greater proportion than exists today.

KW: Dr. Karanja Ajanaku, editor of the *Memphis Tri-State Defender*, says: You seem to be making the point that in the U.S., we are mostly unaware, substantively, of "blacks" in Latin America. Would you speak to how aware or unaware, substantively, "blacks" in Latin America are of African-Americans?

HLG: Blacks in Latin America are keenly aware of African-American popular culture, entertainers, athletes, Oprah Winfrey, movie stars and musicians. The whole world is enthralled with hip-hop. They're listening to the same music as our kids. And then there's Obama! Good Lord! But in terms of a more profound understanding of the black experience in America, I'm not sure. I'd guess that they would have a long way to go.

KW: Dr. Ajanaku also asks: Did you encounter any signs and/or reasons to be hopeful that blacks in Latin America and Africa-Americans could transcend the boundaries of country and culture and forge an economic union of sorts that would be uplifting to both?

HLG: No, I didn't see any sign of that, because most of those folks' first identity is a national one, as a Brazilian or a Cuban, not as a black person. For instance, in the Dominican Republic episode, Juan Rodriguez says he never even thought of himself as black until he visited New York. One of the points of the series is that identity is a very complex and ever-shifting matter. We might think that these people are obviously black, but they might not identify themselves that way. During this whole trip, I never met anybody who said they were black first and their nationality second, in the way that African-Americans tend to say, "We're black first." That's another important lesson of the series.

KW: Rod Williams asks: What was the single most common similarity between the blacks in Latin America and those in North America?

HLG: That's an easy question. The poorest people in each of these societies have the kinkiest hair, the thickest lips, the flattest noses and the darkest skin. Poverty has been socially constructed around degree of obvious Africanity. And that's quite sad.

KW: Rod's first follow-up is: What was the most noticeable difference between the blacks in Latin America and those here?

HLG: That no Latin American society has simple black and white categories which is very difficult for Americans to understand. Rather, they have many gradations between who's black and who's white. So, race signifies differently there than it does in the United States.

KW: Rod's other follow-up is: Did the colonizer have a role in these similarities and differences?

HLG: Absolutely! Most of these countries engaged for a period of time in a practice specifically called "Whitening" when they encouraged European immigration in order to dilute the black element. Brazil subsidized 4 million white people to move there because it felt that the country was too black. That's cold, man. Mexico, Cuba and the Dominican Republic took similar measures. It was a conscious attempt to dilute the influence of black people and black culture.

KW: Irene says: There has reportedly been a great deal of tension between African-Americans and Latino immigrants. Can blacks and Latinos find a common ground to work together in this country?

HLG: Yes, I believe so. I think that all Americans should speak Spanish, just as I also think that all Americans should speak English. If blacks and Latinos begin to form alliances across ethnicity and realize that they should be voting as a bloc, they would have a tremendous amount of power. But we can't expect them to be like us. Just because their skin is dark and their hair is curly doesn't mean they're going to approach issues of race and racism in the same way as someone born in the continental United States.

KW: Judyth Piazza asks: If you were a student getting ready to attend college for the first time, what would you do differently, knowing what you know now?

HLG: That's interesting. Me? I'd take a lot of classes in math, science and computers, but I'd also take more courses about Africa, Latin America and other Third World cultures, as well as Western Civilization, which is very important, too.

KW: Judyth has another question: What key quality do you believe all successful people share?

HLG: A belief that they can make a difference in the world. All successful people have to believe in themselves and in the future. That's a very subtle point. You have to believe in deferred gratification, that, "If I do this today, it might not reap a benefit until the next generation, or the generation after that, but it's still worth it." Too many black people today have lost the capacity to defer gratification which was one of the qualities which made our ancestors so great. You know what? My father supported us by working at two jobs for 37 years. He worked hard and saved so Paul and Henry, Jr. could become whatever they dreamed they wanted to do. He never bought a Cadillac. In fact, my parents never even owned a car. So, I say don't be fooled by appearances. Instead, penetrate and try to appreciate what really matters and to understand how things really work. Unfortunately, I gotta go, Kam.

KW: I understand. Thanks again, Dr. Gates.

HLG: It's been a pleasure, buddy.