

**Henry Louis Gates Jr.**  
**Speaker and Honorary Degree Recipient**

Chronicling the stories and tales of African Americans, from African roots to American soil, has become a lifetime passion for Harvard University Professor Henry Louis “Skip” Gates Jr., a prolific author and one of the nation’s foremost academicians.

Gates, who earned his bachelor’s degree in history from Yale University, began his ascent in academia when he became the first African American to receive a doctorate from Cambridge University. Over the years, he has built an international reputation for his extensive research of African American history and literature—editing such influential anthologies as *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* and the *Schomburg Library of Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers*, and co-editing many others, including *The Civitas Anthology of African American Slave Narratives*.

Gates, who is currently the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor and director of the W.E.B. DuBois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard, is credited with developing and expanding the African American studies program at the renowned institution. In fact, it was under his leadership that other household names in black intelligentsia were recruited to Harvard, including Cornel West and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham.

His rediscovery and re-publication in 1983 of Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig*, the first novel published in the United States by a black person, placed Gates at the forefront of black scholars. The novel was originally published in 1859, but was immediately ignored, only to later be labeled the work of a white man. Gates's almost archeological approach in verifying the original author helped extend the African American literary tradition by more than 30 years. Gates's Black Periodical Literature Project, begun in 1980, also benefited from the acclaim of *Our Nig*'s re-publication. More money was consequently infused into the project, which exhumed 19<sup>th</sup> Century black literary works buried in periodicals.

In 2001, while recuperating after complication from hip surgery, Gates pursued yet another literary hunt when he purchased a mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century manuscript relating the story of an escaped female slave, known in the manuscript as Hannah Crafts. From his bedside, he coordinated the search for evidence that would prove that the narrative was the only novel ever written by a slave and the first ever written by an African American woman.

His literary detective work continued with the *African American Lives* series of television specials and books that delved into the ancestries of several prominent African Americans. The project led to a number of discoveries about his own ancestry, including that much of his genetic profile matched people in Ireland, and that one of his ancestors was a free Negro who fought in the American Revolutionary War. As a result of this last discovery, Gates was inducted into the Sons of the American Revolution in 2006.

*The African American Lives* series spawned a host of other projects, including 2007's *Oprah's Roots*, in which Gates examined the genealogy of perhaps his most famous subject, Oprah Winfrey. The second series, *African American Lives 2*, followed, airing on PBS in February 2008. It also resulted in more diverse endeavors, such as editing the *African American National Biography*, which contained many of the stories gathered as part of Gates's genealogical research, and Gates's co-founding of AfricanDNA, a service that enables private citizens to get the same genetic testing, matching and genealogical research that was done for his *African American Lives* subjects. AfricanDNA's genealogy services are also incorporated in *The Root*, an online magazine that Gates serves as editor-in-chief.

Gates's recent books are *America Behind the Color Line: Dialogues with African Americans* (Warner Books, 2004), *African American Lives*, co-edited with Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (Oxford, 2004), and *The Annotated Uncle Tom's Cabin*, edited with Hollis Robbins (W. W. Norton, 2006). Gates also is editor-in-chief of the Oxford African American Studies Center, the first comprehensive scholarly online resource in the field of African American Studies and Africana Studies.

Gates is the recipient of 50 honorary degrees, as well as numerous other honors and grants, including the MacArthur Foundation "genius grant" (1981), the Jay B. Hubbell Award for Lifetime Achievement in American Literary Studies from the Modern Language Association (2006), and the Cultures of Peace Award from the City of the Cultures of Peace (2007).