

Vice Chancellor, I have the honour to present, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Literature, honoris causa, Henry Louis Gates Jr.

“Everybody I knew as a child wanted to have “good hair”. You could be as ugly as homemade sin dipped in misery and still be thought attractive if you had “good hair” Because Daddy had straight hair, I would have done *anything* to have straight hair – and I used to try everything to make it straight, short of getting a process, which only ruffraff were dumb enough to do.... When I was about three, I tried to stick a wad of Bazooka bubble gum to that straight hair of his...” [1]

This young boy, lashing out around identity, is the same Henry Louis Gates Jr.: cultural critic, journalist, literary scholar, Alphonse Fletcher Professor at Harvard, award-winning film-maker, and fund raiser extraordinaire. He is immersed in his Grand Design of compiling and building the scholarly basis of African-American literature, history, and culture. The kind of effort that would resonate with the South African project of reclaiming lost histories.

At a time when African American culture and cultural product was promoted through “ethnic cheerleaders”^[2], Gates determined that what was needed was evidence in the form of foundational texts^[3].

He began with the Black Periodical Literature Project, to uncover lost literary works published in the 1800s, and, with extraordinary vision, undertook to resurrect the lived experiences of 4000 ordinary and notable African Americans in the eight volume African American National Biography^[4]; moving on to the ten volume “Image of the Black in Western Art” and a plethora of books, the most notable of which is *The Signifying Monkey*. This is an ongoing project of insisting on the place of the African American in the literary canons.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. is somebody who gets bored easily and who confesses that his mind moves at a mile a minute^[2]. *There were clearly more platforms to promote the project*. He has branched out into popular culture, writing for the New York Times and Time, editing a daily online magazine and hosting a regular TV series called: *Finding your Roots*. He also wrote, executive produced and hosted the documentary series: *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross* (which has just won the Emmy and Peabody Awards) and was the historical consultant on the movie: *12 Years A Slave*.

As the Director of the Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research, he was instrumental in setting up the Harvard Mandela Fellowships at the Du Bois Institute. These have supported numerous fortunate UCT academics on their sabbaticals at Harvard.

He says “I’ve been lucky”; I’m blessed with ideas” and “I’m just an intellectual entrepreneur”, but it’s clearly far more than just luck and ideas that have taken Henry Louis Gates Jr. from Piedmont, West Virginia, to the BA summa cum laude at Yale.

And its completely unsurprising that he ended up in the colleges of Cambridge, where he was the first African American to receive a PhD.

It’s clearly more than luck and ideas that have taken Henry Louis Gates Jr. from the battle for “good hair” with Bazooka bubble gum to being one of America’s foremost public intellectuals.

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Strictly embargoed until 15h00 on Wednesday 17 December 2014

1. Gates, H.L., 2011. *Colored People*: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
2. Henry Louis Gates., J., *Personal Communication*, 17 November 2014
3. Gates., H.L.J. (2014). "The Biography.com website." Retrieved 18 November 2014, from <http://www.biography.com/people/henry-louis-gates-jr-9307556-synopsis>.
4. Oxford African American Studies Centre. (2014). "African American National Biography." Retrieved 18 November 2014, from <http://www.oxfordaasc.com/public/books/t0001/>.