

## University of Washington School of Law

### Transcript: Q&A with Henry Louis Gates Jr.

January 16, 2009

**Greg Hicks:** Everyone welcome, this is a very special moment for us and we really want this to be just as informal as possible. We have the great privilege of having Professor Henry Louis Gates, of Harvard University, the Director of the W.B. Du Bois Center there at Harvard, one of our nation's leading public intellectuals, just...

**Henry Louis Gates Jr.:** I thought you were going to say Harvard, one of our nation's leading public schools. [laughter]

**Greg:** I might have said that but my manners have been improving over the years. Skip just gave a really glorious address at the King County Bar Association's annual Martin Luther King Day celebration lunch, downtown. We had a ballroom filled and everyone's faces were just glowing and shining. It was just a great moment, a very happy time. And Dr. Gates, in the middle of a very busy time, if you have been following the media at all you may have some sense of how much he has been on call to comment on this stupendous fact of Obama's election and of the inauguration that is going to be occurring on Tuesday.

He has been traveling, very busy, very much in demand, so just a very huge thank you and shout out for taking the time to be with us for just this gathering that we have here.

So I don't want to intrude on the time at all. He has a glittering resume, of course, a McArthur Genius Grant recipient, a PhD in English Literature from Cambridge University in England, my classmate as undergraduates at Yale, a summa graduate there.

And just the work that he has done in discovering manuscripts, bringing stories to light and giving people the capacity to tell their own stories, and to engage their experience from a much more meaning filled place. It is just a huge contribution to our public life, to our shared understanding of what you might call the American project.

So, without more, Skip, I am going to turn it over to you. We would ask that if people do have questions if they could please come to the mic stand here so that we can get those questions, so that we can tape this and give people that listen to it a real sense of the dialog that we are having here today.

**Henry Louis Gates Jr.:** Great, thank you. Thank you very much Greg. It is nice to be here. [applause]

**Henry:** I told all the lawyers and the Bar Association that, actually it is not often reported on my biography, but I did go to law school, I went to Yale Law School. I was frustrated at Cambridge after two years of graduate school and I thought, well, they are never going to approve my dissertation, I will never finish, I want to be rich, so I'll go to law school. [laughter]

**Henry:** So I applied to Harvard and Yale Law School and I was lucky enough to get in, and I chose to go to Yale. I attended the Yale Law School from September 1, 1975 until October 1, 1975. [laughter] At which point I took a leave of absence, and as I told the distinguished jurists today, the last time I checked I was still on leave. [laughter]

**Henry:** Maybe I'll go back one day, but not any time soon. It is great being here; it is great being with my buddy Greg. I hadn't seen him since senior year, his senior year. We were in the same class and I took a year off on a program and went to Tanzania. So I graduated in 73 and he was 72. I said goodbye to him outside of his dormitory with a very good friend of mine, my girlfriend, and he was off to get a Rhodes scholarship and I was so envious. You can always distinguish jealousy and envy. Envy is, "Oh, that is so wonderful for you and I hope it happens to me." Or, "I hope something that wonderful could happen to me." Jealousy is oh, that is so wonderful for you and I'm going to break your leg over it.

[laughter]

**Henry:** I thought, God, he was so subtle and poised and so bright and so literate and he was going to Oxford, and I wanted to do that to. So I went to Cambridge, I got a fellowship to go to Cambridge.

**Greg:** You did all right.

**Henry:** I did all right. [laughter]

**Henry:** Greg said that our format would be... I just gave a talk, so I can't do another one, but that I would just answer any question that you might want to address. So that would be a lot of fun for me. And, yes I am going to the inauguration. He and I are going to an inaugural ball on Sunday night. Oprah is going to be there. Her office called this morning to confirm. And Chris Tucker, and Will Smith and all the big Negroes.

[laughter]

**Henry:** And Bill Russell's daughter, you know Bill Russell, the basketball player, Karen was there, and she said, "Daddy and I want to be invited to the ball." Do you know theroot.com; do any of you look at theroot.com? Yeah, I founded that with Don Graham, who owns the Washington Post, and it is the root.com ball. So I am really real excited, so when you go back and you are on your computer look at theroot. Look at it every day, put it on your home page. But it is a good thing.

And lets see, I'll tell you something, today is Friday right? Monday morning look at the New York Times because Op Ed page piece in the Times, and I wrote it with one of my colleagues, James Stauffer, who is in the English Department. He wrote a book on Lincoln and Fredrick Douglass.

I don't know what it is going to be titled, but it is if Lincoln, Pygmalion like, if his statue came to life, and you said "This is your successor, the 44th President of the United States," what would he say?

He would be shocked. Lincoln was opposed to slavery on moral grounds, but it was really an opposition rooted in natural rights. Lincoln felt that slavery discriminated against poor white men by creating an unfair marketplace. White men like his father. His father left Kentucky and then went to Indiana because he couldn't compete with slave owners in Kentucky.

But he was no fan... one of my sentences is that abolition was part of his moral compass, but not equality. Lincoln thought black people were basically stupid. He was opposed to miscegenation, very famously and bitterly with a debate with Stephen Douglass in a debate in 1858. He was opposed to arming the black troops until he was losing.

Two factors contributed to his change of opinion. First, surprise, surprise, the Confederates brought their slaves to war with them. I don't know what these guys in the North thought, but that is what they did. And secondly, they let blacks fight. So there were free Negroes, I mention this briefly, but there were free Negroes who enlisted.

There were more free Negroes living in the Confederacy and the border states, the slave states, than living in the north, throughout the Civil War, by a considerable margin. And many of them voluntary enlisted and fought for the Confederacy.

Think about it, what would you do? Why were there more free Negroes in the South? Because when you were freed you were given land, according to some statutes. What are you going to do, leave it and go to New York? For what?

My family, I am descended from, on my mother's side, two lines of black people who were freed by 1776. They are my fourth great grandparents. One of them fought in the American Revolution, these were black people. And on my father's mother's side, Joe and Sarah Bruce were freed in 1823. We have the Will of Abraham Van Meter, who freed them.

This is all research, not done by me, but done by the Mormons, from my "African American Live" series. It has been a great gift to me. They restored three sets of my fourth great grandparents, which is extraordinary for a black family really. And for me, more than I ever dreamed I would know about my family. But they all lived in Virginia until 1863, which became West Virginia, but they never moved.

You take the Bruce's, since you all are lawyers; they were freed upon the death of Abraham Van Meter in Hardy County, Virginia. They had to petition for the right to remain in the state. Every year they had to file a petition with the Legislature. And it was granted until his widow, Elizabeth Van Meter died a few years later, and then they refused to authorize their right to remain in the state.

Remember Nat Turner's rebellion is 1831, so these free Negroes walking around. But they didn't move, and none of the white people who lived in Hardy county ever turned them in.

I find that fascinating. They managed to survive until 1863 when that part of Virginia became West Virginia. They thrived. They had plenty of land. They were given 1,000 acres of land and a saw mill by Elizabeth Van Meter.

I don't know how I got into this version of my family. How did I get here? I am trying to remember. Huh?

**Audience member:** Roots.

**Henry:** Roots, yeah. Just roots. Anyway, that is my family. I had a larger point. It will pop up in a minute, but I can't think of what it was. Anyway, you want to ask anything?

**Man 2:** Does anyone want to ask questions or have thoughts about really just anything?

**Henry:** Anything!

**Man 2:** The election, history, geography...

**Henry:** Oh I know what it was. It was the Lincoln thing. I was in the middle of telling you about Lincoln and then I got sidetracked. [laughter]

**Henry:** They were free Negroes and they ended up fighting in the US Color Troops; my great uncle J.R. Clifford and his father and his brother were all in the US Color Troops. But Lincoln only authorized them...Part of the Emancipation Proclamation, which was issued January 1st, 1863, authorizes black men to fight for the United States military. But he came to that position reluctantly.

A month before he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, he urged Congress, in his annual message, to pass a Constitutional amendment funding the Negroes he was about to free to emigrate to either Panama or Haiti, and if they wanted, to go back to Liberia.

He had three different colonization schemes. So the Lincoln that we were raised on is a myth. He is much more complicated. He was an early ardent passionate foe of slavery, but he was not an ardent, passionate friend of black people.

His intimate experience with black people didn't amount to more than 24 hours. A black person wasn't one of his servants or his barber. Frederick Douglass he met three times and he loved Frederick Douglass.

So my piece on Monday is about he would come back to live, he would look at Barack, and he would think of Frederick Douglass. But the punch line is it turns out that Douglass is very prophetic and dogmatic, the true believer; abolish slavery now.

Lincoln was the pragmatist, right? His support of the Emancipation was opportunistic completely. It doesn't mean it was a bad thing. It certainly had a good outcome, but it was pragmatic.

I said the punch line of the piece is he would look at Barack and think he was like Douglass, but after talking to him, he would realize he was like him, because there is nothing radical about Barack Obama except that he is black.

He, like Lincoln, is a centrist and a pragmatist. They both had the genius for improvisatory pragmatism. They do. I think a lot of people will be disappointed with Barack for that reason, but I think that is who he is. I think he will be a great president like Lincoln was because of it.

You see, it would have bothered me so much on that flight down to San Francisco. When I got over Oregon, I would have said, "Oh Shit! I remember what I was trying to say!"

[laughter]

Now you can ask me questions. I am finished. Law school is fun man! I might go back!

[laughter]

**Man 3:** First, let me say that we are very honored to have you here at the law school, Dr. Gates.

**Henry:** Thank you.

**Man 3:** It is a great pleasure to talk with you. I wanted to follow up about the Frederick Douglass/Lincoln point.

**Henry:** OK.

**Man 3:** Lincoln sort of perceived black people as sub-human and not very smart.

**Henry:** He even used the N word.

**Man 3:** But yet you say the person with whom he had the most contact was Frederick Douglass, who was this brilliant thinker and orator. It seems like there would be this cognitive dissonance there. How can he think that people were stupid when the example that he met with the most was this brilliant man?

**Henry:** Right. Well that is an excellent question. I think that Douglass disappointed his expectations; Douglass refuted the stereotype. Douglass is the smartest black man alive, right? So he is meeting with the Albert Einstein of black people. It moved him to...This is the irony of Lincoln's story. He was no fan of black people, but he is remembered as freeing the slaves. But in his last speech, which was delivered from the balcony of the White House on April 11th, 1865, he became the first American president to endorse suffrage, the right to vote, for any black man.

Now it was limited. He endorsed the right to vote for the 200,000 black men who fought in the Civil War, whom he called his black warriors. He was crazy about these guys because he was convinced they won the war. And he said, "The very intelligent Negros."

Now there are 4.4 million black people in the 1860 Census and counting, including 3.9 million slaves. The rest were free Negros. So how many people is that? 200,000 troops and the very intelligent Negros-Frederick Douglass, Mark Delaney, Henry Highland Garnett.

OK. Maybe the literate free Negros. So he endorsed the right to vote for maybe 250, 000 people. But John Wilkes Booth is in the audience at the White House listening to this speech.

He turned to his friend and said, "I am going to kill him," because he just ended the white man's charter with the Constitution. John Wilkes Booth, by his own admission, kills Lincoln because he endorsed this limited right to vote for this handful of black people.

So he moved from none of them should vote to 200 plus thousand should vote. Maybe he would have moved incrementally to what became the 15th Amendment. But he wasn't the day he died, and I find that fascinating in a good way and a bad way. It is very curious to me.

All these historians who write about Lincoln say, "What a wonderful thing!" Frederick Douglass thought it was disgusting because they don't say only very intelligent white people could vote. White men all had the right to vote.

But Lincoln said, "No, that is too much." So he is nuanced and complicated. Douglass, for his part, gives a speech right after Lincoln's in December of 1865. He says, "Lincoln is the black man's president."

In 1876, the year that Reconstruction ends, the first memorial to Abraham Lincoln was paid for largely by the pennies of freed slaves. It is in Lincoln Park in Washington, and it is called the Freed Man's Memorial Monument. It is famous. You have all seen it. It is a tall Abraham Lincoln and a crouching slave.

It really pissed Frederick Douglass off when then unveiled it because it is that standard motif of the crouching slave saying thank you, and Lincoln is there with the Emancipation Proclamation all big and tall. Douglass said, "They should have had a tall black man like me right next to him looking him eye to eye!"

[laughter]

Who was in the audience that day? Who was chosen to give the dedicatory address? Frederick Douglass. Who was in the audience? The president of the United States, U.S. Grant. The Vice President of the United States. The entire Supreme Court. The entire Cabinet and Congress, all the Senators and members of the House.

These guys almost had a heart attack. Frederick Douglass, in his speech, said, "You are the children of Lincoln. We are, at best, his step children. Abraham Lincoln was first and last the white man's president."

He breaks it down and says, "Look. He was against slavery because it discriminated against white men. He came reluctantly to support us." He said, "He will only be remembered, not by the Negro, but by the white man's memorials." That is his exact phrase.

What is curious is of course that is not what happened. Black people, by the turn of the century, had seized upon Lincoln as the great emancipator, led by Booker T. Washington.

Booker T. Washington made Lincoln his absent white father. So he printed all these lithographs with Frederick Douglass on the right, Lincoln in ovals, and then their son, Booker T. Washington.

Then of course, black people needed a pure white man from whose model subsequent white people had departed. So they ignored all of Lincoln's flaws, and Marion Anderson when she can't sing at the Carnegie Hall, prevented by the Daughters of the American Confederacy -- no. Oh, my god. Daughters of the American Revolution. That's a Freudian slip. [laughs] Constitution Hall, right. Thank you.

I was thinking they both began with C. But why would Carnegie Hall, yeah. Constitution Hall. She goes to the Lincoln Memorial. Where's Martin Luther King speak? The Lincoln Memorial. So when we were growing up, there was Jesus -- if you had a Black home and there was a white man, A. It was Jesus. B. If you had two, it was a Lincoln, until John Kennedy was martyred, then John Kennedy replaced Lincoln.

So it was, ironically, if Frederick Douglass came back from the grave, he would be amazed that Black people memorialize Lincoln in the way that they did, too. And Douglass, of course, was an Abolitionist. For him, the Abolitionists freed the slaves, it wasn't Lincoln who freed the slaves.

So that historical narrative is enormously complex and fascinating. And I look at it in some detail in a new documentary, "Looking for Lincoln," that airs on February 11th on all PBS stations.

And I went to -- oh, you can stand there. I went to the annual convention of the Sons of the American Confederacy. And nobody, they told me, I thought they were going to say no Black journalists had ever been there, they said no journalist had ever come. I brought a film crew last July. And I interviewed the officers. Now I thought these guys -- and I was frightened. I thought they would be bikers, big Ku Klux Klan guys and stuff.

The president grew up in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, which is where DuBois is from, and went to Amherst College, and is a corporate lawyer in Atlanta. These guys are well heeled, and they hate Abraham Lincoln. You'll see in the interview.

I said, "Well, my god, you think he should be on Mount Rushmore, right?"

They go, "Hell, no. They should chisel him off Mount Rushmore." They said, "He is the biggest war criminal in the history of the United States who should be tried under the Nuremberg Convention for all of the murders and rapes and Sherman's march to the sea."

These guys, man, I went like, "Wow. Check this out." So that was surprise number one. Surprise number two, they go, "OK, Dr. Gates, we're having our award ceremony. We really want you to see it."

I go, "OK." So we schlep on over to the tent, and we sit there. And the guy gives a speech about the beauty of the Confederate Flag, and how unconstitutional it is that they won't let this flag shown except on private property. So they bought an acre in Atlanta, I think -- or no, it's somewhere in Florida.

And they have the biggest flag, man, this flag is as big as this room. And that flag flies 24-hours a day, and nobody -- and they do the rebel yell, "Ye-haw," and all this other kind of stuff.

Then the present an annual award -- it's like the Silver Star or something. I don't know what it's called, Purple Heart. But whatever the Confederate equivalent is. And they go, "This year's recipient is Wiley Clyburn."

And this little drum and fife corps comes in there doing "Dixie, " and I look up, and it's a bunch of African Americans, an African American family. Three generations. The oldest one is 90 years old, and then the mother is, you know, in her 60s, and then the daughter. I interviewed the daughter. She is a Masters Degree, she teaches in New Jersey.

It's a very well-educated Black family, and they are descendents of this Black man who ran away from the plantation twice to join his young master on the front lines, and saved his young master's life twice.

And they gave him, the family, their greatest -- the descendents of Wiley Clyburn. Isn't that wild? That's amazing. So it's all in my thing, man. It's bad. It's complicated. It was a complicated world back there. And I can see all the Black people in the audience think, that brother needed to go down. You know, Wiley Clyburn saving his master? Ha, ha, ha. Should have let the master go: Bye, Masser. [laughs]

**Woman:** Dr. Gates, thanks again for including our community, here. I was fascinated to hear about your research in ancestry and genealogy, especially using DNA technology. I was wondering if -- you mentioned earlier that you were able to do 19 studies for individuals insurance.

**Henry:** Yeah.

**Woman:** I was just wondering if you had any examples about how they have been able to use that information or how they've used it, or maybe you, specifically, if you'd be willing to share an experience about how you've used information you've learned about yourself and your ancestry.

**Henry:** Yeah. And I have a new book that's being published, what's the date? 16th? Next week, I guess. It's called, "In Search of our Roots," from Crown Books, and it's a chapter on each of the people in African American lives and African, and one and two. So Chris Rock and Chris Tucker and Oprah and Quincy Jones and Morgan Freeman, all these people. And it's the results of our family, our genealogical research, and then our genetic research. Where they're from and what their mixtures are. It's got a lot of pictures, and, you know. I like it. I like this book. I don't know how it's affected them. Very few of them I see, I talk to Oprah all the time, or I email, we email each other.

Oprah wanted to be descended from the Zulus. She's descended from a tribe in Liberia. Didn't make her go to that tribe. She told me she still feels spiritually she's a Zulu, and that's fine with me. She can be whatever she wants.

I took Chris Tucker back to the tribe that his father's side is descended from at the end of African American Lives One, but he hasn't been back to Angola. None of them has "gone native." Some people go crazy.

Isaiah Washington, the guy that expressed the homophobic comments on "Grey's Anatomy." He emails me all the time. He just got citizenship in Sierra Leone because he's Mende, descended from the Mende people. And all of this philanthropic activities are concentrated on Sierra Leone. And he started a foundation dedicated to Sierra Leone, and he's building a hospital. And why not?

I think that if someone felt that culture was biological, and that somehow this is all in your genes, then they're lunatics. [laughs] I haven't done my job, but they also are crazy, because it doesn't work that way, of course. You're identity is socially constructed.

I tell my classes, I have two daughters. If they had been raised in China from birth, and the Chinese people treated them like Chinese people, which is crucial, they'd be Chinese. What else are they going to be? They going to have a fried chicken gene and [laughing] watermelon gene? No, it just doesn't happen.

But for us, just having knowledge that we thought was permanently lost, partially restored is a miracle. And it's exhilarating. For me, I look every day, I like Ethiopian beans. I'm a romantic bourgeois cultural nationalist left over from the 60s, so I want African coffee. That's the form my cultural nationalism takes. And I like Ethiopia, any way. I made a film about Ethiopia once. And it's a very special place.

So every day I grind my coffee beans, right, and then use my little filter. And while that coffee drips through, every day, I have to look at my family tree. Picture my great-great grandmother who was a slave, in my family tree frame, right there in my kitchen. Along with, now, several other things, like my DNA results.

So I have to think about it. Even if I don't think about it, it's there, and I can take it for granted. And sometimes I look at it. It's very difficult to explain the effect it has on me. It doesn't make me a different person.

But my mother used to say, "You come from people." And I do come from people. But I just didn't know who the people were until I did these series, and the Mormans gave me, on my family tree, my family tree would have looked -- I would have been able to go back to my great-great-grandmother on my father's side, and my great-grandmothers on a couple lines of my mother's side.

But I can go back to three sets of fourth grade grandparents and a whole bunch of sets of third grade, you know, great-great-great and great-great-great-great. Now, these are all black people, people born 1750, 1760 - the oldest people on any branch of my family tree.

That's... As I said, it's difficult to explain the affect that it has, but it makes me feel... It's cliché, what I was about to say, which makes me feel rooted which, of course is obvious.

There's something very satisfying about it. Last Christmas, not this Christmas, I gave my daughters framed copies of their family tree. It was like, they unwrapped them and they go, "Oh, that's great. What did you get me for Christmas?"

[laughter]

I'm like, "You little ungrateful snots. It's your family."

They go, "Yeah Daddy, now break out the sweaters. Get the iPhone, iPod." But they can take it for granted. No one will ever have to do this search again. That's wonderful.

My new series, and I can't believe this happened, but I just got funding for a new series - six million bucks - to do the same frame, but for immigrants. So I'm doing two Asian Americans, two Arab Americans, two Latino Americans, whose left? Two Catholic Americans, one Irish, one Italian. Two West Indian Americans. So far, this is the guest list, the people who have accepted. Steven Colbert, Yoyo Ma, Frank Gehry - you know, the architect, Malcolm Gladwell whose half Jamaican, and Mike Nichols - you know, Mike Nichols married to Diane Sawyer and did the Graduate.

He's Jewish. His great-grandfather was assassinated by the SS, or whatever, the father of SS in Germany. He's a German Jew - German Jew on one side and Russian Jew. Sarah Jessica Parker said that she would do it, but she's in a new TV series that's a spin-off of "African American Llife." Iit's called, "Who Do You Think You Are," which started in England. So I don't know if I'll be able to do her.

And then we're picking five more women. Elizabeth Alexander, who was my student at Yale, and whose reading the poem for Barack is descended from a Jamaican. Clifford Alexander who was Secretary of the Army under Clinton, and who promoted Colin Powell to general. So she's deciding if she's going to be in it. If not, I'll give Sicily Tyson to be my other West Indian.

It's fun. Everybody's, I mean, these people, when I called them, they just said, "Yes, I'll be in it." And we're going to map their genome. We're going to sequence their genome. We going to take it to the nth degree. Their entire genome, for 10 people and me.

Read Steven Pinker, if you still have the "Times Magazine" from last Sunday. My colleague Steven Pinker wrote an essay on having his genome sequenced. Read that, and that's what we're going to do for everybody. We'll be able to talk about their ancestry, how they cluster, what your percentage of this and that is.

It's amazing when you get that DNA report. It's called the admixture test. First of all, we give all the women two tests and all the men three. The men three, because men have a Y-DNA which women don't have. That's your father's father's father's line.

They'll tell you how many people match your DNA, exactly, on your markers on your Y-DNA or your mitochondrial DNA. And you get a map, and it has big dots on it and the bigger the dot the more people you match. It is really curious.

We combine an ancestry by name, that is, your actual family tree with you at the bottom and your branches proliferating, because you double at each generation - you have two parents and four grandparents and eight great-grandparents, et cetera.

Then we supplement that with your anonymous ancestors. Your ancestors whose names you'll never know, but you only know through dots on a map through there DNA, which is wonderful.

And this crazy idea - I didn't want to say it this morning because we had kids - but I got up to pee in the middle of the night and I got the idea. It's a true story, man. I was just standing there and it was like a bolt of lightning. I was so excited I almost jumped around. I couldn't do that, it would be quite disastrous.

And then I had to raise all that money, and I was able to do it. So it's been a real ride for me. Quite something.

I'm in love with the Mormons. Is anybody here a Mormon? The president of the Mormon Church in 1839 had a revelation, and that was that baptizing ancestors of anybody was possible. So they have the records of three billion human beings, or else three billion records - I can't remember, probably three billion records.

All, you all, if you join SSU.com, you'd find yourself in there, you'd find your ancestors in there. It's astonishing, it really is. If you go to the family history library, it is packed right now. It is packed. It's packed from the moment, the second it opens until they force people out of there. Isn't that curious?

I told the audience today that my colleagues and I are developing a curriculum to try to transform the way we teach science and history to inner city kids, using ancestry tracing. Having them do their family trees to learn archival, historical research methods. And tracing their DNA to understand how DNA works.

Who wouldn't be interested in that? Your ultimate favorite subject is yourself. So everybody's going to be interested in that. Then we'll have them do reports on the tribe that they're from and teach them what was happening in the chronological periods when their grandmother was born or something. Infinite possibilities really for real. Yes ma'am?

**Henry:** Thank you so much for coming.

**Henry:** It's fun.

**Henry:** I was wondering how do you think that having a black president will change, if any, the discussion of race in the...

**Henry:** I think... I read the "Times." I had that Boston to Denver, Denver to Seattle flight so I read every word in the "New York Times," yes I did. Which I really like doing. I love flights because then I can actually read the paper. You know, with getting the "New York Times" you have that guilt thing like, "Well, I should read it. I will read it. I can look at it. I didn't read it." You know, that...

**Henry:** I can't throw it away.

**Henry:** Yeah, can't throw it away. But the recycle bin helps. I'll just go put it in the recycle bin. Then the cleaning lady throws it away so that's cool. But there was an article about - one more article - I'm going to write about this, which is how Barack's election has changed - makes it possible for people across the other race, that's what I'm going to call this piece, The Other Race, because it's like there's only two ethnic groups in America which is the way it was when we were growing up.

You didn't know about Asians. You didn't know about Hispanic people, at least not in Piedmont, West Virginia, it's black people and white people. And race meant black / white, that's what race meant.

I think this is the biggest bullshit that all these people writing these articles, that somehow there's going to be miraculous change. I think subliminally, having a black man as the most powerful man or woman in the world, that's a big deal.

But I think more importantly, to me, is seeing a normal black family, a superior black family, but a normal organic nuclear family, with two little black girls running around the White House, that is a paradigm shift. I think that even the thickest, dumbest white person will understand that we are in a new world. And they'll begin to see black people in a different way, subliminally.

But I don't think it's going to... Greg and I were talking about the similarities and differences of our background. We both went to white schools and there were very few black people in my school. But mine was a public school. And it was a little paper mill town in West Virginia.

We had our 40th reunion and I couldn't go because I was out in California and I couldn't go. But we'd been emailing each other. One of my friends, a white woman, wrote to me and she said, "Skippy, most members of our class voted for McCain." I'm not surprised at that. They just... Two days before the election I said, "I hope you all vote because we're about to see history being made." And none of them emailed me back.

These are working class people in the hills of West Virginia and Barack did not carry West Virginia. I don't think they're going to stop... They're not going to fall in love... They loved me anyway, and the handful of black - we were all close. But they basically were racist.

Racism is more complicated than... Remember in *The Heat Of The Night* you'd see all these racist guys that had black lovers. It was always complicated. It was always crazy. These kids...

Racism was more complicated then.

Remember In the "Heat of the Night?" You'd see all these racist guys and the black lovers. You know, it was always complicated. It was always crazy.

And you know, these kids basically didn't think a black man, they didn't like Barack, or they weren't ready to vote for a black president. But if he would have been one of the five black kids in our class, they would have voted for them. They voted for me for class president for about eight years in a row.

So, do you know what I mean? It's just I'm rambling because I don't think that all this romantic idealism of a quick change and this is the millennium, I just, the percentage of black children living at the poverty line is about 33 percent. It was about 38 percent the day Dr. King was killed. I don't think that's going to change because Barack's in the White House.

You know, the unemployment rate is getting bigger every day because of the stupid things done in the financial markets. I don't think that you change the deleterious effects of centuries of slavery and then systematic Jim Crow discrimination for a century, and then the remnants of that

Jim Crow system over the last 50 years. I don't think that changes because a black man is president of the United States.

So on the one hand, I got tears in my eyes today. When I suffer a grief, I pull so far into myself to protect myself. You know, it's just how I cope. And, I haven't been able to celebrate Barack's victory for the flip side of the same coin because of all this exuberant exaggeration, which I think is rubbish.

But, I got tears in my eyes this morning just watching the "Today Show" thinking, Jesus, this man is going to put his hand on the Bible and defend the Constitution of the United States. And, it's a black man.

And that very same constitution, as you know, made us three fifths of a man. That's wild. You know, that's a good thing and I got a little emotional about that.

So, it's a long winded way of saying I don't know. I don't know. You know, did Colin Powell change things significantly being Chief of Staff or Secretary of State? Did the world change because flour black men were the CEOs of Fortune 500 companies? I don't think so. Two of them got fired, Stanley O'Neil and Frank Raines.

I don't know did the world change because a black woman was Secretary of State, you know, Condi? I think that as long as it's a barrier, we think, man, when a woman is the CEO. If only Hillary had won, you know, women would be...all of a sudden they become the thing. They become the job and you just see them and just move on.

Maybe I'm too cynical, I don't know.

**Woman:** Thank you again, Henry, for coming. My question is I started reading your memoir and got to the [Inaudible 40:10] of possible reading... [laughter]

**Henry:** Long as you bought, did you buy it?

**Woman:** Yes.

**Henry:** That's what I'm talking about. [laughter]

**Henry:** I don't care if you read it. [laughter]

**Woman:** Based upon what I have read, I just wanted to ask you what is blackness, or color, what does it mean to be a colored person in America and use the term color best out of all the terms they have for us?

**Henry:** Well, I call myself an African American. But as I say in that preface, when I hear the word colored, I think of a sepia period of American history, the 50's. You know, it was an all black world. I mean, I lived in this predominantly white little town but all the church was black, not the Episcopal Church, but the real churches were black, the mill picnic was black, the family reunion was black. You know, we lived in a black world. White people didn't intrude in our lives. Mr. Insurance Man would come by. And, that's what we called them. They were like

characters out of Dickens. You know, Mr. Insurance Man, Mr. Plumber Man, you know. So, I liked that colored world because it was very special and it was changing.

When Greg and I were four, Brown v. Board was announced, right? And, that was the beginning of profound changes in America. So our colored 50's were an end of a long period of American history. I mean, it didn't end dramatically, but it was the beginning of an end. All of a sudden there were new possibilities.

His parents, Wesley's parents, my parents could say, you know, maybe they'll go to Yale. Class of '66 at Yale had six black boys. Class that entered in '69 had 96 black men and women, right? So, that's a very profound change in a very short period of time.

So, the whole world changed and I tried to capture, the last chapter is called the "Last Mill Picnic," and there were two picnics at the mill where my father worked. There was an all white Labor Day picnic and an all black. And I think in '69 or '70, the company announced that they were afraid of a lawsuit for discrimination, so they were merging the two picnics.

And, I'll never forget my mother's sister, Aunt Margarite just said, "Martin Luther King didn't die for this". They're ending the most precious thing. We live for this picnic. It was a homecoming they called it and all black people who had ever been in Piedmont, West Virginia, no matter where they were disbursed would, as long as they could afford it, they would come back to this picnic and eat corn on the cob and watermelon and do all this, play softball.

And, it was just a big deal, man. And now, it's gone because it was in violation of the equal protection of the, you know, whatever.

So, I wanted to, with a certain sense of nostalgia but not too much, capture that world that was disappearing.

If you want another example, the greatest book in the Harlem Renaissance is "Cane," in my opinion, by Jean Toomer. It's a very fragmented, modernist text and it captures the disappearance of an era. It was written in 1922. And, it was published in 1922 or '23, I always get that mixed up.

But remember, blacks are moving from the south to the north. The great migration starts about 1910. And, he said that he wanted to memorialize the time that was disappearing. He didn't say it was good or bad. And, I tried to do that with Colored People, too, about the 60's.

I don't know what it means to be African American. Look, I edited the North Anthology along with ten other people. And, all you had to do was have one black ancestor. If we found out that Shakespeare had a direct African ancestor, we'd put him in the Northern Anthology, you know.

But, the other thing that would happen is all these critics would say, you know, I've been reading Shakespeare and there's a lot of chiche's in that Hamlet, you know? [laughter] And, that's a very ridiculous, stupid definition of a literary tradition, right? If you have one drop of black blood you can be in the tradition. But, that's the definition that we use.

But, that's how American literature is defined, too, and how English literature is defined, or VS&I Paul and I taught in the English literature. Oh, it's because I'm tired, who wrote, you know,

the Polish, Joseph Conrad, you know. He's taught in the English literature before. So, they're all essentialist definitions of the cannon.

But, whether it's a combination of biology and culture, most people would probably say yes. But, how that combination plays itself out, I don't know.

I teach, along with Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Leon Higginbotham's widow, Judge Leon Higginbotham's widow. She's a very prominent historian. I teach the Intro to Afro course and it's a very popular course. And, it's built around, it's a big lecture course, and it's built around the great debates in the African American tradition.

When we were undergraduates, we were taught that there was one way to be black. We were not taught, but you know, there was Black Nationalist politics and there was Wavy Black and you had to conform and if not, you know, you weren't supposed to say white kids, you were supposed to be black and join the black, you know, let your hair grow in an afro and wear [Inaudible 45:53] and stuff.

And, I hate bullies and I hate being told how to function. So, I designed this course so that no black person will be intimidated the way our generation was about not conforming to someone else's ideal of blackness. If you like Picasso, ice hockey and sushi, you're still as black as somebody who likes fried catfish and James Brown and, you know, etc., etc.

And, my mantra is that 35 million African Americans means that there are 35 million ways to be black. And ideally, my definition of black would be inductive.

So if everybody in here was black, you'd take a survey. Then we'd add up all your responses, and put it in a big gumbo. That's what blackness was. It would be the sum total of our differences. It would be a posteriori rather than a priori.

Rather than starting with Greg and I sitting here and being the poobahs of blackness saying, this is our edict. This is blackness. You are not so you must be punished. That's ridiculous. [laughs] But that's what our experience was when we were undergraduates.

There were a lot of casualties because of that. My roommate, Eddie Jackson, God rest his soul, committed suicide years after we graduated. One of the reasons was that he was in love with this Irish girl, Mary Ellen. He thought that it wasn't right, that he had to find a black woman to marry.

He always loved Mary Ellen. He just did. I'm sure he loved her 'til the day he died. That might sound like a silly example, but it was a big deal. There were costs to the unity forged in the name of blackness or Black Nationalism. They were personal, whether you could be as idiosyncratic as you wanted to be.

What if you loved classical music? Could you be open about that in our time? I'm sure some people felt that they couldn't. Look, I was just so glad that any girl was interested in me that I figured there going to have to kick me out of the race [laughs] because I was going to go with it.

[laughter]

**Henry:** But a lot of people wouldn't. So I don't know, and I shy away from a priori definitions, is what I'm trying to say, because of all of the brow-beating. Mow-mowing. We mow-mowed each other. I joke with our students. You know when you have a change in computer code to access? That's the definition of blackness. [makes whirring sound] We would change the definition of blackness every month. They'd change the soul handshake to see if you were still black. Boom de boom de boom!

[laughter]

**Henry:** Nobody was ever black enough, nobody except Maulana Karenga and Amiri Baraka. They were black enough, but they were the only ones. You wanted to be them because they were running the kingdom. It was crazy. I'm writing about that now because it was funny and sad at the same time, and exhilarating. A lot of energy. There wouldn't be Black Studies if it hadn't been for a bunch of students taking over buildings and threatening to burn [laughs] down libraries and stuff. These kids had no more idea how to start an academic department. It's ridiculous.

[laughter]

**Henry:** "Motherfucker, we want Black Studies." "What is it?"

"I don't know, but just allocate some money and give us a department. We're going to have courses on the black uncle and the black family reunion." [laughter] We had no more idea what we were talking about than the man in the moon.

I used to fantasize. I'll be honest with you. I took a Black Studies course just about every semester. If it wasn't in Afro, it had a black content because I was always fascinated by the race. But I never would have been caught dead majoring in Afro American Studies, and I tell my students that because it was like an embarrassment.

They bought me a car to drive up to Yale, a '69 Mustang. It was bad, too. I was cool. He walked me out to the car, and he said, [laughs] "Don't go up there Jim Crowing yourself." And he would always say that. Remember, Brown v. board in '54. My school system integrated in '55, and I started school in '56.

You know what we call now the Black Table? He still thinks, "That's disgusting. Don't be going there and hanging out. You're black at home. Get to know some white people."

[laughter]

**Henry:** He said the first thing, "If they don't treat you right, come on home." Now that's a really empowering thing. If they don't treat you right, come on home. I always tell my daughters that. You can always come home. Second thing: "Don't go up there Jim Crowing yourself." And third thing he said, "And for Christ's sake, don't major in no Goddamn Black Studies because your ass has been black for 18 years, and I ain't payin' for that."

[laughter]

**Henry:** He said, "Get some white roommates, and study chemistry or biology or something like that. Make a lot of money. Get to know some Jews. That's what he said. [laughter]

**Henry:** He said that, too. "The Jews are good to black people. Get to know some. You can trust them." [laughs] That's what he said. That was my advice. So I listened to it. I got there, and Yale assigned me to three black guys. [laughs] Not quite]. So I had nothing but black roommates. I took some Black Studies courses, but I wouldn't have majored in Black Studies because I found it embarrassing. When people asked me my major, I said American Political History, which is what it was. Ironically, I end up being a figure in Black Studies. But the blessing for me is that the Harvard department had completely fallen apart.

There was only one professor day I was hired, and he was a white guy from Germany. I used to fantasize. "If only I knew then what I knew now" after I'd become an academic. It sounds immodest, but I really thought that history had cheated me by not giving me an opportunity to build it. I get a call one day saying, "Do you want to build from scratch the department of African American Studies at Harvard?"

It was like a gift from God. It was like being in a fantasy. I did, too, man. It's been a great ride. It's like the Table had become a tableaux de raza. I could inscribe on it whatever I wanted, and that's what happened. And now I'm a big champion of African American Studies. We have time for one more quick question.

**Greg Hicks:** Just one more quick question, and then I've got to Dr. Gates and then to hustle him off to the airport.

**Henry:** And I'll stop giving these rambling Uncle Remus-like answers. [laughter]

**Woman:** Thank you for coming. I actually was hesitant to ask this question because I'm not really sure how to ask it. But the older I get the more I realize that we do have this true history. We know that Abraham Lincoln was [noise] and Washington, who was supposed to [noise] slaves on the street. All the highways and schools named after him. He wasn't a great man, either. What do you think it will take for us to change our history books to reflect a little bit more of the truth? And not have to be in college as a student to realize this mythology that we've been forced to believe, in a sense, that these are our heroes when they actually have heroes that were of different colors of different ethnicities? Why don't we have Chief Seattle as a person that's up on our...

**Henry:** Mount Rushmore.

**Woman:** Yeah. I just wanted to ask you what it would take to get some of that truth into our history books in the elementary schools.

**Henry:** I think it's an excellent question. I think that it's people like you and people like all of us who love the truth, insisting on a nuanced narrative and actually sitting down and doing the hard work of writing the books, too. Then going and fighting with your school board. There are lots of really good textbooks now that tell a more nuanced story than those kind of fantasies that we were raised with. Lincoln and Washington are still heroes, but they just were complicated. But ironically, I like Lincoln better knowing that he was a little bit bad, to paraphrase Shakespeare.

Do you know what I mean? It makes him more interesting to me, and it makes Washington more interesting to me.

So you want to knock them off the pedestal, but put them back up. Or just chisel them a little bit because I resent being lied to. I would rather know that the guy thought black people were stupid and wanted to ship them out, but freed them anyway. And then died defending the right of some at least to vote. That's an interesting story.

You go, "Wow. He's more interesting than I thought." It's not as if we find these suppressed aspects. He used the word "nigger" seven times in his speech at Hartford in 1860. When Sojourner Truth came to the White House, the first black woman to come on an official visit to the White House, he called her "Auntie." [laughs]

He talked about black people as Sambos and Cuffy, but still that makes him interesting. It doesn't make him like, "Oh, we're going to kick him out and make him head of the Klan." It just makes him complicated.

Generally, as you know studying the law, complexity is an interesting thing. You can't have a simplistic notion of law. You have to know how it works if you're going to be a good lawyer. I think that's true of history as well.

Thank you very much on a Friday afternoon for joining Greg Hicks and his old friend for an hour of conversation. I really appreciate it. Thank you.

[applause] [end]