



Life Upon These Shores: Looking at African American History, 1513-2008

By Henry Louis Gates Jr.

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Henry Louis Gates, Jr., gives us a sumptuously illustrated landmark book tracing African American history from the arrival of the conquistadors to the election of Barack Obama.

Informed by the latest, sometimes provocative scholarship and including more than seven hundred images—ancient maps, fine art, documents, photographs, cartoons, posters—*Life Upon These Shores* focuses on defining events, debates, and controversies, as well as the signal achievements of people famous and obscure. Gates takes us from the sixteenth century through the ordeal of slavery, from the Civil War and Reconstruction through the Jim Crow era and the Great Migration; from the civil rights and black nationalist movements through the age of hip-hop to the Joshua generation. By documenting and illuminating the sheer diversity of African American involvement in American history, society, politics, and culture, Gates bracingly disabuses us of the presumption of a single “black experience.”

Life Upon These Shores is a book of major importance, a breathtaking tour de force of the historical imagination.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Henry Louis Gates's *Life Upon These Shores*

“A distinguished scholar surveys, with lavish illustrations, 500 years of the African-American experience. . . . From the conquistadors and the origins of slavery, through the Revolutionary period, the rise of abolitionism, the Civil War and Reconstruction, the Jim Crow era, the Great Migration, both World Wars and the 20th century civil-rights movement, up to President Obama’s election, the supremely qualified Gates guides us through centuries of history . . . stunning illustrations . . . striking, comprehensive.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“You can’t beat the fresh and heady scholarship of *Life Upon These Shores*...Challenging the notion of a single ‘Black Experience,’ Gates contextualizes his narrative with more than 800 images and doesn’t duck controversy.” —*Library Journal*

“Gates documents the famous, the obscure, and the long forgotten...[A] chronicle of the pressing issues and events of each generation and the incredible diversity covered by the appellation African American. A tour de force.” —*Booklist*

“Meticulously researched...a book that truly celebrates the resilience and achievements of African-Americans.” —*BlackAmericaWeb.com*

“Gates avoids cliché, meticulously illuminating the influence and contributions of Blacks in America: from African conquistadors to the election of President Barack Obama. This ambitious title redefines the relevancy of the past to our lives.” —*Uptown Magazine*

“[*Life Upon These Shores*] would make an excellent addition to a home or school. In fact, if you’re feeling generous this season, pick one up and donate it to the middle school library nearest you.” —*Journal Sentinel*

“Compiled with rigorous ambition and scholarship by Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., this book weaves nearly 900 images and reams of clear-eyed storytelling into an extraordinary chronology. Not only does a breathtaking range of African-American expression and experience emerge, a portrait of independence, fortitude and deep faith—the essence of *American* life—comes shining through.” —*NPR* (Best Gift Books of 2012)

“an excellent example of Gates’s ability to maintain high standards of scholarship while making a broad, dense subject accessible to a modern audience...A remarkable accomplishment that should endure through many editions. Highly recommended.” —*Choice*

“Reading *Life Upon These Shores* is like walking through history one day at a time. The rich content of this book pulls the reader in many different directions, and yet Mr. Gates keeps the direction focused...With each new story we sit at Mr. Gate’s feet, rest our chin in our hands, and listen and learn...Mr. Gates makes us richer with the knowledge of what went before—and what can be in the future.” —*New York Journal of Books*

“This is not a book to plunk down on the coffee table and flip through on occasion. It deserves to be read and read closely, short essay by short essay.” –*Philly Online*

“[Gates] tells things the way they were, not the way we would like them to be...This book pulls together a valuable account of the African-American experience upon these shores. It is worth a read by all Americans who want to learn where we have been as a nation.” –*Houston Chronicle*

“A stupendous undertaking...a cornucopia of riches...conceptualized and executed with loving care and rigorous intellectual grounding.” –*Counterpunch*

“An amazing compendium of information...it is enlightening to have a wide-angle lens turned on this epic, to see a picture of the whole.” –*Arts Critic Atlanta*

About the Author

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., is the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor and the director of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University. He is editor in chief of the Oxford African American Studies Center and of the daily online magazine *The Root*. He has received more than forty honorary degrees from institutions the world over.

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INTRODUCTION

Before the pen of Jefferson etched the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence across the pages of history, we were here. For more than two centuries our forebears labored without wages; they made cotton king . . .—and yet out of a bottomless vitality, they continued to thrive and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail . . . because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America’s destiny.

—Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963

In *Life Upon These Shores*, I set out to picture African American history, to find a new way of looking at its full sweep. I imagined a book with an abundance of images of the great and small events and of the significant individuals who shaped the heritage of the African American people and the history of our nation. *Life Upon These Shores: Looking at African American History* draws upon a treasury of illustrations at once to visualize and to write the history of black people in America, which begins as early as 1513, when the free black conquistador Juan Garrido accompanied Ponce de León on his first expedition to Florida. So the book ranges from the exploration of the New World and the long ordeal of slavery through Emancipation and the Civil War; from the era of Reconstruction through Jim Crow and World War I; from the Great Migration of 1910 to 1930—including the Harlem Renaissance and the Jazz Age—through the Great Depression and World War II; from the civil rights movement and its aftermath, and the Black Power resurgence, on to the age of hip-hop and the rise of the Joshua Generation, leading to the election of the first African American president of the United States. *Life Upon These Shores* illustrates the richness of this history through ancient maps, manuscripts and documents, portraits, postcards, posters, sheet music, cartoons, drawings and photographs, and even film stills.

We have combed through more than four hundred years of public records and private collections for the names, stories, and images of not only well-known African Americans but also others who have been consigned to oblivion even as they too were instrumental in shaping African American history day to day. To

be sure, here are the transcendent personalities: among many, Phillis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth, Henry Highland Garnet, Harriet Tubman, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, Madam C. J. Walker, Jack Johnson and Joe Louis, W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Josephine Baker, George Schulyer, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Althea Gibson and Arthur Ashe, Charles Hamilton Houston, Thurgood Marshall, Constance Baker Motley, Elijah Muhammad and Muhammad Ali, Adam Clayton Powell, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, John Lewis, James Meredith, Charlayne Hunter-Gault, James Baldwin, Eldridge Cleaver, Huey P. Newton, Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, James Brown, Amiri Baraka, Shirley Chisholm, Jesse Jackson, Michael Jackson and Prince, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, and Barack Obama. Their vaunted contributions to politics, sports, literature, the arts, religion, and education have indelibly colored the canvas of American culture and society. But this book also aims in part to restore to the historical record the names and achievements of significant men and women long forgotten: among them Onesimus, the slave who taught Cotton Mather to inoculate the Massachusetts colony against smallpox; the pre–Civil War, wildly popular black ventriloquist and magician Richard Potter; Stagecoach Mary, a post– Civil War driver for Wells Fargo; and the famous cowboy Deadwood Dick.

As I have studied the remarkable visual depictions collected in *Life Upon These Shores*, I have been struck by the sheer diversity of African American expression throughout our nation’s history— how there has never been only one way to be black, religiously, politically, socially, artistically, professionally, sexually, or stylistically. I have tried to showcase the multiplicity of cultural institutions, political strategies, and religious and social perspectives defining black culture and society from slavery to freedom, from the plantation to the White House. Although, for example, debates between such central figures as Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, or Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., are familiar in the academy, they remain largely unknown to the general public, as do controversies involving their lesser-known peers; the latter too have a place at the table. These and all the other images and stories in this book help us to understand the complexity of the African American people, the rich and honest diversity of opinion that has always characterized the black experience in America.

Life Upon These Shores seeks not only to elucidate the pressing issues faced by each generation of African Americans but also to evoke the limitless variety of African American life: for instance, the experience of slavery in the North as opposed to slavery on a Southern plantation or in the West; the experience of being a freedperson as opposed to a slave; the experience of being a sharecropper in the South in the early twentieth century as opposed to a dockworker in Oakland or an autoworker in Detroit; the experience of being a black woman as opposed to a black man. Here are images of African Americans from different African ethnic groups dragged into slavery, forced to imagine new identities upon these shores; images of free blacks alongside their enslaved brethren in the South, forming their own religious, social, and cultural institutions in the North; images documenting the myriad ways in which some resisted slavery and segregation even as others sought accommodation, all the while forging family ties and communal bonds “behind the veil,” as W. E. B. Du Bois put it.

The illustrations also offer a glimpse at how global affairs influenced African American history. So it was that the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) sparked demands for the abolition of slavery and for equal rights up through the Civil War, while inspiring slave rebellions in America. A century and a half or so later, African movements for independence from colonialism informed the American civil rights movement, which in turn was to have a profound influence on the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa.

A collective visual history of persons of African descent in America since their arrival in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, *Life Upon These Shores*— by examining defining issues, controversies and debates,

and the achievements of people who shaped the history day to day for more than four hundred years—reveals, in all its human glory, the generally unacknowledged multifaceted nature of the black experience in these United States.

This is a general history for a general audience and relies on an enormous body of scholarly literature. The book stands on the shoulders of true giants. To retain its appeal, I have limited intrusive scholarly apparatus and identified sources only for direct quotes or for information not readily accessible. For those seeking verification of facts or additional information, one should consult the extended bibliography, which lists all of the major works used in this study.

Henry Louis Gates , Jr.
Oak Bluffs, Massachusetts
August 31, 2010

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