



**RACE, RIGHTS, POLICE AND PRESIDENT:
TRANSGRESSING THE GATES OF HARVARD**

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We do not have to be weathermen or women to know that the winds of transformation and struggle don't always blow the way we want, do not always rush and roar, but often go slow, die down, become breezes, change direction and even blow back in the opposite way. However, last week, when Professor Henry Louis Gates of Harvard was humiliated, handcuffed and arrested for disorderly conduct at his own home and carted off to be fingerprinted, photographed and forced to post bail in a "post-racial" America, it seemed to offer a reality check and reason for reconsideration of race and racism in police practice and in society as a whole.

This incident seemed an instructive and teachable moment in which America might once again, even reluctantly, engage the reality of race and racism, put aside at least some of its most cherished illusions about the subject and itself and perhaps, come to terms in some meaningful way with the terrible impact and effect it has on our lives and relations. Even President Obama had at first suggested such an approach.

The discussion would, of course, have to move beyond middle- and upper-class episodic anger and ongoing angst about personal insult and injury in high places to an inclusive and depthful discussion of the life-and-death issues of African people and the role race and racism play in these. For it is not about Gates, as he early conceded, but about larger, more fundamental and far-reaching issues. Such a discussion would include ending established police practices which demonstrate reckless and deadly disregard for the life and rights of African people; and a broad conversation on justice with regard to profiling; unequal sentencing, especially in drug use and low-level possession; trying juveniles as adults; three-strikes law; unequal

application of the death penalty; and the racial reality of 2/3 of America's 2 million prisoners/captives being African American and Latino, and 25% of African American males (18-25) being tragically trapped in the prison, parole and probation system with little hope and less help than needed to break free.

The incident reaffirms the continuing presence and power of racialized thought and practice in U.S. society, in spite of post-racial claims, aspirations and illusions. The arresting officer, James Crowley, although touted as a teacher of diversity in his department and free from the disorders and defects of racism, nevertheless claimed he felt "threatened" by an elderly professor walking with a cane, called for reinforcements from city and campus police, and reported that a neighbor described the two "suspects" possibly breaking in Gates' house as Black even though the 911 tapes and she contradict this.

Previously, Gates had championed post-racial notions, but when the reality of race came rolling thru his door, he gained additional and altered insight on the issue. Indeed, he said after the incident, "I thought the whole idea that America was post-racial and post-Black was laughable from the beginning". However, he concedes, showing this is a recent revelation, that "I would have sooner believed the sky was going to fall from the heavens than I would have believed this could happen to me". There is on one hand a class "shock and awe" at rough police encounters of the first kind in confrontation and consequences. But deep down where it is hidden and hurts, every Black middle- or upper-class claimant knows that what saves them from this and more severe, even savage, police practice is not income, age, education, or honored places at Ivy League schools, but rather the good fortune of their absence.

Indeed, President Obama intervened on behalf of his friend, Gates, based on his sense of rightness and remembrance of his own experience and work to end profiling in Illinois.

President Obama also said, that the incident is “a sign of how race remains a factor in this society”. But it’s not really simply about race, but about racism, not only about color, but the conditions imposed on persons and people because of color, and it’s not just about racial prejudice, rightfully requiring change, but rather about this prejudice being infused and encoded in public policy and social protocol. For this produces grossly unequal and unjust racial differences in wealth, power and status between peoples of color and Whites and a resultant practice of dominance and expected deference. Indeed, racial dominance and deference are so deeply embedded in the system and social relations, they seem “normal”, almost “natural” and thus often go unnoticed, even by the most sensitive and sincere of liberals. In other words, White and power are so linked, that it’s difficult to separate them. After all, the ruling class and race of this country are White, as are the overwhelming majority of positions of power in politics, economics, funding sources, the academy, the media, information technology and other areas of critical social space. Even when a person of color is high-placed, titled and visible, the Cabinet, board or other structures of power and the decision-makers are predominantly White. And this is the reason people of color cater to them, even kow-tow or are constantly concerned with

making them comfortable whether as voters, employers, funders or police.

As the weeks wear on, the once promising winds of transformation and struggle are lightening up, dying down and turning back on themselves. Already there are signs and sounds of retreat and retrenchment to safer and more familiar zones. Instead of police abuse and rightfully-angered citizens, we are told from the highest levels, we now must talk about “two good men” unable to resolve what is newly billed as macho and ego issues. And so there are accompanying calls for lunch, tea and toning-down, for cold beer and warm embraces at the White House, and acceptance of shared blame for the incident and aftermath, including the President.

The customary call is to move on and put these untidy and unsettling things behind us. This speaks not only to America’s inability to deal with this vital issue in all its brutal meaning and messiness, but also the tendency to approach things in detached and undepthful ways and to call for quick funerals and forgetfulness of the unpleasant, disturbing, difficult and demanding. But the issues of racial dominance and difference in life-conditions and life-chances remain, and cannot be wished away. Moreover, there are no secure privileged places in oppression, no dignity in self-denial of one’s cultural identity or in willful deference to domination. And in the struggle to end racism and achieve justice, freedom and human flourishing, as Robeson reminds intellectuals, artists and all of us, “the battlefield is everywhere; there’s no sheltered rear”.

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