

Obama's Teachable Moment:  
or *Male Egos and their class, in black and white*

Zillah Eisenstein  
Professor of Politics  
Ithaca College  
July 19, 2009

Author of the forthcoming: The Audacity of Races and Genders, A personal and global story of the Obama Election, Zed Press, and Palgrave, 2009. See: [www.ithaca.edu/zillah](http://www.ithaca.edu/zillah) for a listing of her many books and political activism.

With the school year beginning soon and thoughts about my new honors seminar entitled "New Races/New Sexes/New Genders looming, I decided to jot down some notes on the "racial profiling" incident of black professor Henry Louis Gates, by the white police officer James Crowley. The endless media attention of this not-so-rare event seemed like a perfect instance in which to examine the troubled and shifting meanings of race, better described as "white privilege", and how economic class and gender are too readily silenced as part of the process of understanding it.

The story is (too) well known by now. A possible break-in in progress was reported to the police by a neighbor. The police arrive and assume the worst even though Henry Louis Gates, professor extraordinaire of Harvard University, is the assumed culprit. The major hitch is that Gates lives in the house that he jimmed the door of. He was already inside when the police arrived. He also had identification to prove who he was. Being black, all these other points are compromised in their effect.

But this is not the whole story. Gates is not just black but he is wealthy and well educated. Crowley is not just white, but fourth generation working/middle class. And both, besides being defined by race and class, are male, as in gendered as "men". But the Gates-Crowley affair is narrated usually as one of race, rarely of class, but never as gender, even though all eyes are focused on black men. Race is not a static thing. The meaning of white privilege shifts and changes depending on economic class and gender while each intersects with the other, so a black male has different gender privilege than a white privileged male; and this gets more complex alongside class. Meanwhile the discussion of "race" seems to exclude black women who are altogether absent in this incident.

If you are black, you may be readily associated with crime, and drugs, and even the slave trade long past its relevance or validity. Professor Gates is a long way from the slave ship, or the ghetto, and yet not. He got angry because he knows all this and knows how unfair and debilitating this racist history is. As the media story evolves plenty of blacks are asking where Gates has been all his life. Gates himself admits he has lived a privileged and protected existence.

Skip Gates got angry, and rightly so. But he is also awfully lucky to have thought that the world has changed more than it has. He was made to feel vulnerable in a way that he usually does feel. On NPR news he said the incident "made me realize" the depth

of his anger. Part of his anger was that his class privilege allowed him to forget what he absolutely already knows. Being humiliated and powerless, even if only momentarily, is different than knowing that others live with this reality all the time.

Gates is a fabulous scholar. His book [America Behind the Color Line](#) eloquently documents how black people's lives have become more segregated from each other over time. The middle class has quadrupled while the numbers of black children living in poverty has remained at 40 percent. In an interview with Amy Goodman on [Democracy Now](#) Gates says that race is also always about economics; that slavery was as much about economics, as race. He says: "It's easy to rally around obviously, blatantly racist incidents. It's much harder to figure out how to divvy up the pie, how to make structural adjustments in the American economy, at a time of scarcity, at a time when the pie is perceived to be shrinking".

President Obama weighed in at his prime time press conference devoted to the economy and health care when asked by a reporter what he thought of the Gates-Crowley incident. He said Gates is a friend and he does not have all the facts, but offers that the Cambridge police acted stupidly given how the incident unfolded.

Obama sounds elitist and condescending when he sums up the event as stupid. Obama, who is usually careful with his words makes a mistake to defend a rich Harvard professor while attributing stupidity to the not-rich police. Crowley said in a CNN interview that the minute Gates told him he was a professor at Harvard he knew this could get big and ugly.

As I said, race does not stand still. Obama usually focuses on how much has changed for the better in black people's lives and points to his own election as proof of this. He usually prefers to stay away from "racial" explanations. He chose to not run as a black candidate, even if in the end his race was made central to his campaign against his own predilections.

Despite all the above, Obama thought Gates was treated unfairly as a black man. The incident was racially defined because white privilege is always present, implicitly or explicitly. The fact that Gates is black colored the episode. Gates felt wounded, and angry, and outraged by this violation in his own home. The officer felt demeaned by what felt like a belligerent ungrateful black man. Each one's ego was slighted.

The recent incident bespeaks the racialized existence black people live in. But there is no easy clear read here, because color and race are always mediated through economic class and gender as well. Leon Lashley, a Black police officer that was with Crowley the night of the altercation and arrest says that the arrest was entirely justified. A multiracial group of police officers has also come forth with a statement of support for James Crowley. There is more than a bit of class solidarity here not to mention a bit of cross-racial male bonding.

This incident has brought forth much discussion of the black man's dilemma in white America. But there is also the black woman to consider here. It is not totally clear to me that if Gates were female, and/or if the officer was as well, that once it was clear that Gates belonged in the house, that there would have been an arrest. This is not to say that a black woman might not have been furious and angry at the unfolding events. There could have been screaming, and anger. But in the end, one or both of them would probably have found some middle ground.

Although race and class are at play, so is gender. Often, men get angry. They don't like to be put down. There is no forgiving or collaboration to avert a fist-fight or hissy fit of sorts. White men often are positioned to be able to get "even" as well, especially if they might be police. Given white privilege, the apology, the generosity of spirit, the willingness to avert a confrontation was Crowley's responsibility.

It is time to complicate the narrative: racial white privilege is always threaded through gender and class privilege as well. If we can learn this truth maybe we can actually move forward without using language that constrains, rather than informs. In sum: let us think about how black men and women are defined in both old and new ways by class, race and gender. Let us recognize that even when no females are present that the politics of gender is. Let us begin a conversation about these changing and complex relationships.

Such querying is what I love about the classroom—the possibility of finding new meanings—rather than the sound bites of the mainstream media. Hopefully Obama will take this teaching moment seriously especially if Gates and Crowley come for a beer at the White House.