A Feminist Analysis of President Obama’s “Teachable Moment”

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 2009 a black man was arrested. There is nothing surprising about that statement, except that this black man was a distinguished professor at Harvard University, a wealthy man, and a friend of the President of the United States. To make the story even more interesting, the black man was arrested by a white police officer who responded to a 911 call about a potential “break in” in a home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The black man provided documents to the police officer to certify that he was in his own home, but stories by both men about what occurred inside the home remain arguable and inconclusive.¹ A loud argument followed, and in the heat of the moment outside on the porch of the house, the black man was officially slammed with a “disorderly conduct rap” by the white police officer; the charge was quickly dropped by the local prosecutor’s office.²

Racial profiling is not a new phenomenon in the United States, but most Americans view this problem as a black or Latino male problem. Of course, there is considerable justification for this view: (1) the huge percentages of black and Latino males in prison;³ (2) the disparate racial impact of the war on drugs,⁴ and (3) in support of Obama’s attention to this issue, the huge

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outpouring of testimonies of racial profiling by prominent, middle and upper class black men, in
the news media during the two week period that led to the “beer summit.”\(^5\) For this particular
news event, questions have been raised about whether both of these men, one white, one black,
were both racially profiled according to previously held racial stereotypes or racial mythologies.\(^6\)

Importantly, discussions about racial profiling in the media are dominated by men, no
matter what their race. Women’s voices are generally marginalized in the media,\(^7\) when there is
an incident that has been historically viewed as race or male gendered, women are left out of the
conversation. In this paper, we will use feminist perspectives to examine three specific
moments in the media that moved President Obama to exploit a racial, class, and gendered
conflict between two United States citizens. Based on these perspectives, we will argue how
feminist intervention would have allowed more arguments from marginal discourses to be
included, instead of reaffirming the dominant discourses of whiteness and masculinity in the
media.

President Obama created quite a media storm at his press conference on July 22, 2009, by
addressing a question about the arrest of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. He answered by saying that,
from what he knew of the circumstances for the arrest, the white cop “acted stupidly,”\(^8\) and

\(^{5}\) Richard Fausset & P.J. Huffstutter, *Black Males’ Fear of Racial Profiling Very Real, Regardless of Class*, L.A.
Obama said the incident was related to a history of racial profiling in this country.\(^9\) But two days after that press conference, Obama told the media that both the white police officer and the black professor overreacted.\(^10\) This new statement helped to neutralize the media’s response to his previous inflammatory comments and was decidedly more agreeable in the American media, to Sergeant Crowley, and the Cambridge police. But this new move in the media also, effectively, deflated Obama’s original claim about the topic of racial profiling. Feminist perspectives of the issue were largely marginalized in the media; instead, the dominance of masculinity in the media revealed its ugly head, and male pundits described it as a simple fight and a testosterone event, rather than a real “challenge to the status quo.”\(^11\) Later Obama described the issue as a “teachable moment” in the media on July 24, 2009, and invited the two men to the White House for a beer. The importance of racial profiling in his earlier press conference literally fell flat. But what feminists can observe in the media testosterone fight is what Patricia Williams eloquently described about the real nature of “objective truth” when it is reported in the media: “what is spoken in so-called objective, unmediated voices is in fact mired in hidden subjectivities and unexamined claims that make property of others beyond the self, all the while denying such connections.”\(^12\)

### II. THE GATES-CROWLEY INCIDENT

On July 16, 2009, Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. returned, exhausted and with a mild bronchial infection from a trip to China to discover that the front door to his home in

\(^9\) Id.


Cambridge, Massachusetts was jammed. Eventually he used his key to enter the back door of his home, and with the help of his driver forced the front door open. A woman walking by, later identified as Lucia Whalen called 911 to a report possible break-in. Cambridge Massachusetts’s police officer, Sergeant James Crowley, responded to the broadcast of “a possible break in.” According to Crowley’s police report, he asked Gates, upon arrival, to step out of the house, and Gates refused. Crowley informed Gates that he was responding to a call about a possible break-in to which Gates replied, “why, because I’m a Black man in America” and accused Crowley of being a racist police officer. In addition, Gates supposedly stated that Crowley had “no idea who he was messing with.” After additional exchanges, Crowley informed Gates that he was exiting the home and if Gates had further questions he “would speak with him outside of the residence.” Gates supposedly continued to yell at Crowley outside of his residence in front of a crowd; Crowley warned Gates to stop yelling at him, and he eventually arrested Gates for disorderly conduct.

The interaction between Gates and Crowley could be viewed as a masculinity contest. Both men flexed their muscles: Gates’s very educated and wealthy muscle versus Crowley’s demand for respect for his badge muscle. Masculinity “the socially generated consensus of

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14 Id.
15 Cnn.com, The Caller in Gates Case says She’d do it Again, available at http://www.cnn.com/2009/US/07/29/gates.arrest/index.html (last visited Feb. 12, 2010). Ms. Whalen stated that she was on her way to lunch when an older woman told her that someone was trying to break into the house.
16 Id.
17 Police Report, supra note 1.
18 Id.
19 Id.
20 Id.
21 Police Report, supra note 1.
22 See Frank Rudy Cooper, “Who’s the Man?”: Masculinities Studies, Terry Stops, and Police Training, 18 COLUM. J. GENDER & L.671, 674 (2009) (explaining that [a]another expression of masculinity that is thought to be central to
what it means to be a man, to be ‘manly’ or to display such behavior at one time” 23 has been studied with criminal procedure to determine how it affects policing. 24 Linking the two indicates that interactions between a male police officer and a male civilian no matter the race can turn into a masculinity contest, usually facilitated by the male officer. 25 This contest “is a face-off between men where one party is able to bolster his masculine esteem by dominating the other.” 26 Gender studies on the relationship between masculinity and police officers suggest that a masculinity contest could have been an underlying aspect of the tension between Gates and Crowley. This was the most dominant tone in the media about the event.

A. President Obama’s Reaction

On July 22, 2009, six days after Gates’s arrest, President Obama held a press conference. 27 According to Lynn Sweet, a reporter for the Chicago Sun-Times, the press conference did not have a specific focus, but President Obama used most of the time to address questions about his pending health care reforms. 28 Sweet posed the last question of the evening. 29 Instead of continuing the line of questions about health care, she asked President Obama the following question: “[r]ecently Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. was arrested at his home in Cambridge. What does that incident say to you and what does it say about race relations in America?” 30 President Obama’s response was, inter alia

23 Deborah Kerfoot & David Knights, The Best is Yet to Come?: The Quest for Embodiment in Managerial Work, in MEN AS MANAGERS, MANAGERS AS MEN 86 (1996).
24 Cooper, supra note 21 at 674.
25 Id.
26 Id.
29 Id.
30 Id.
I don’t know, not having been there and not seeing all the facts, what role race played in that, but I think it’s fair to say, number one, any of us would be pretty angry; number two, that the Cambridge Police acted stupidly in arresting somebody when there was already proof that they were in their own home; and number three, what I think we know separate and apart from this incident is that there is a long history in this country of African Americans and Latinos being stopped by law enforcement disproportionately. . . . And even when there are honest misunderstandings, the fact that blacks and Hispanics are picked up more frequently and oftentimes for no cause casts suspicion even when there is good cause. And that’s why I think the more that we’re working with local law enforcement to improve policing techniques so that we’re eliminating potential bias, the safer everybody is going to be.  

President Obama’s response, specifically when he said the police “acted stupidly” created a media frenzy about racial profiling and masculinity in America, rather than on health care reform. Covering the press conference, media veteran Chris Matthews raised a question with his viewers asking if “President Obama step[ed] on his own headline tonight, with his comments about the arrest of Harvard professor, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. I think he made a headline news story tonight, and I’m not sure he want[ed] to.”

B. The “Teachable Moment”

Two days after President Obama “ratcheted up” the media, he made a surprise appearance at the daily White House briefing room. He told Americans that he hoped “that as a consequence of the [Gates-Crowley] event this ends up being what’s called a ‘teachable moment,’ where all of us instead of pumping up the volume spend a little more time listening to each other and try to focus on how we can generally improve relations between police officers and minority communities . . .” At his surprise appearance, President Obama also hinted that, based on the conversation he had with Sergeant Crowley, that he, Gates, and Crowley would

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31 *Id.*
34 *Id.*
continue their conversation at the White House over a beer.\textsuperscript{35} The meeting quickly dubbed “the beer summit” was held on July 30, 2009,\textsuperscript{36} two weeks after Gates’s arrest.

\textbf{C. The “Beer Summit”}

In effect Obama downplayed the teachable moment with the beer summit. Admittedly the meeting between Gates, Crowley, and President Obama was dubbed the “Beer Summit” by the media. But during a press conference, Obama stated that the meeting was “not a summit” it was “three folks having a drink at the end of the day and hopefully giving people an opportunity to listen to each other.”\textsuperscript{37} But there was someone missing from the conversation, the woman who called 911, Lucia Whalen.

1. Was the Teachable Moment for Men Only?

The President’s teachable moment expands beyond race into issues of feminism, gender, and class as well. One would expect that a U.S. President, who is a racial minority, would lead to greater equality and access for women in America.\textsuperscript{38} Obama has been criticized for not including women in the beer summit. Wendy Murphy, the attorney for Lucia Whalen stated it

\textsuperscript{35} Id.


was ironic “that the three people who ‘reacted badly’ will sit down together while the ‘one person who did not overreact’ will be at work . . . ‘maybe it’s a guy thing.’”

Whalen was vilified by the public—labeled a racist—for allegedly telling the 911 operator that two black men were breaking into the Cambridge, Massachusetts home. But after the 911 recording was released, it was clear that Whalen did not identify either of the men as black. Ignoring the woman who called the police to report a break in dismisses the fact that women can be guilty of racial profiling as well. There are many stories of white women crossing the street or switching their purse to the other arm while passing a black man on the street.

What if a white female officer, or a white male officer arrested Lani Guinier, a prominent African-American professor, also at Harvard? Would Lynn Sweet have posed her same question to President Obama, and if so would he have given a similar response? Moreover, would Guinier have been invited to the White House for a beer or would she have been invited for a glass of wine, coffee, or tea. The answer is purely speculative, of course, but our answer is probably not. Or as one author opined “nuh-uh.” Why, because “discussions of racial profiling too frequently ignore the fact that Black women are also its victims.” Both authors of this paper


41 Caller in Gates Case, supra note 38, follow link “Listen to the entire 911 call.” Only after the 911 operator asked Whalen the race of the two men did she “there were two larger men, one looked kind of Hispanic, but [she was] not really sure.”


are African-American women who have experienced being followed around in Bloomingdale’s and other stores not soon after arriving.

Many could wonder about the role that gender played in this famous response. Would Lynn Sweet have asked the President for his reaction to Gates’s arrest had the President not been black? For example, if John McCain had won, would Sweet have asked him for his opinion if a similar racial issue had occurred? If this incident occurred a year earlier would she have asked then-President Bush a similar racial question? She said, on her blog, that she would have asked those questions of those presidents. Better yet, would the question have been asked if Hillary had won the Democratic nomination and became the first woman President?

III. CRITICAL THINKING ABOUT THE REAL TEACHABLE MOMENT VERSUS THE TESTOSTERONE CIRCUS IN THE MEDIA.

Feminist scholars created real critical thinking about the “teachable moment” versus the circus created by the male dominated media. However, let us not lose sight that President Obama encouraged the media circus, unknowingly, when he asserted rather confidently and with some humor, that Sergeant Crowley “acted stupidly.” More Americans were introduced to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. the evening of that press conference. But at the time that the event happened, there was probably an extremely small percentage of American television viewers who knew what Gates looked like, even though he was an academic celebrity.

It is tough to defend Gates who, as the Director of the African and African American Studies Department at Harvard, was very slow to hire any females in his department. But at the time of this event, Gates was a 5’ 8” tall, 58-year old black man who is almost entirely dependent

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on walking with a cane.\textsuperscript{45} Obama also described Gates, physically and empathetically, at his first press conference.

A. Feminist Analyses Missing from the Main Stream Media

Was the Gates-Crowley incident really about racial profiling? Racial profiling became a surface conversation in the media instead of the central topic of President Obama’s “teachable moment.” Consistent with media research, women and feminists were relatively absent during the two-week coverage of this event from the press conference to the beer summit, both at the White House.

But what feminists had to say about Obama’s teachable moment shows them seizing the opportunity to defend those discourses that were marginalized by the media, namely the discourses of racial profiling and the historical underpinnings of racism and sexism in America. Zillah Eisenstein, for example, wrote about \textit{Obama’s Teachable Moment or Male Egos and Their Class in Black and White} because it was the “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 their process of understanding it.”\textsuperscript{47} Like many viewers she observed the lack of any real analysis in the media about the significance of


\textsuperscript{46} http://www.demotix.com/blog/110688/exclusive-citizen-journalist-photographs-henry-louis-gates-handcuffs

racial profiling, and she knows that white privilege, “always present, implicitly or explicitly,” is the basis for it. She also observed the absence of black women in the media coverage. She wrote that it was not totally clear “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.” Eisenstein believes that if one or both of these individuals were women, they would have found “some middle ground.”

A political activist, Eisenstein has described herself as an antiracist feminist. In her view, she insists that “[g]iven white privilege, the apology, the generosity of spirit, the willingness to avert a confrontation was Crowley’s responsibility.”

Although the case involving Professor Gates’s arrest was not the central topic of her pedagogical research, Darmer addressed the case briefly in the introduction to her article and linked it to the problem of racial profiling. She wrote that “the reality of racial profiling was recently illustrated in the high-profile arrest of a prominent Harvard professor.” Her article argues that the issue of racial profiling in the event exposes as a fraud, the “post-racial mythologizing” that we as a society need to engage outside of the classroom, including in our media. Her argument is consistent with other feminists who work to analyze the discourses of marginalized topics beyond the simple, surface, commercial yet dominant interests of the media.

Often, the feminist resistance to the dominance of masculinity in the televsual media is found in literacy. bell hooks insists that the act of literacy must be linked with feminist politics (or any form of liberatory politics). Perhaps there is no wonder, then, that Lani Guinier’s

48 Id. at 1.
49 Id. at 2.
50 Id.
51 Id.
52 Id. at 3.
53 Darmer, supra note 43.
54 Id. at 109.
55 Id.
56 See generally bell hooks, FEMINISM IS FOR EVERYBODY: PASSIONATE POLITICS (2000).
specific response to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s arrest was to plea for a racial literacy: “we need to become racially literate, not postracially blind. Racial literacy is the capacity to conjugate the grammar of race in different contexts and circumstances.” 57 Effectively, Obama’s teachable moment would become more than an opportunity for a simplified media dominance or a photo opportunity. Instead, American citizens would demand a real teachable moment, addressing “underlying structural problems” and “historical challenges” and finally address “an American legacy that affects us all.” 58

Literacy versus the cacophony and the “vitriolic public commentary that ensued” also underlies Patricia Williams’ response to both the arrest of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and the “unjust hearings” that became the “farce” in the Senate hearing on the nomination of the first Hispanic Supreme Court justice and only the third female, Sonya Sotomayor. 59 The link between these two events—one week separated them—exposed the shameful nature of the lingering racial prejudice in the United States. 60 These moments always offer a new occasion in the media to argue “that affirmative action increases diversity by discriminating against white men.” 61

IV. CONCLUSION

Our brief examination of the feminist perspectives on the implications of Gates’s arrest reflects, in some ways, old news in feminist politics. But we can be hopeful that the timing is right, and that we can use Obama’s “teachable moment” to practice applied feminism and

58 Id.
60 Id.
61 Id.
empower the discourses of marginality. The feminist and legal scholars that we have briefly examined are great models of the kind of commitment to feminist politics that will finally achieve true equality for all. “Imagine living in a world where there is no domination, where females and males are not alike or even always equal, but where a vision of mutuality is the ethos shaping [our] interaction.”62

62 hooks, supra note 56 at x.