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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR. INTERVIEW
OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Henry Louis "Skip" Gates, Jr.
Professor
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Interviewed by: Peter Kunhardt
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START TC: 01:00:00:00

MATTHEW HENDERSON:

Professor Skip Gates interview, take one. Marker.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
Professor

Obama's presidency in historical context

01:00:10:22

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

It's a truism, but we write history in retrospect. We write it backwards, you know? We look backwards to see what events mean and that struck me when I watched the funeral of President George H.W. Bush - Donald Trump made George H.W. Bush look like George Washington, and no one could have imagined that during the presidency of President George H.W. Bush. So, I think one of the ironies of history is that Donald Trump following Barack Obama is

destined to make President Obama [laughter] look as great as he could possibly be, though I think he was certainly a great president.

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

But by comparison, in contrast with President Trump, Barack Obama has the glow of Abraham Lincoln compared to Andrew Johnson, who by the way was impeached. Why's that relevant? It's relevant because Andrew Johnson opposed slavery, which is why Lincoln put him on his ticket. But he didn't, as it were, oppose slaves. He was no friend of black people. And one of the things that Andrew Johnson did after the end of the civil war was unleash a wave of white supremacy that we are still living with today. The country under reconstruction could have gone this way, could have gone that way, but Johnson was no fan of black people.

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

In fact, he met once with Frederick Douglass and wrote a note about it and used the n-word to describe Frederick Douglass. When President Obama was elected, it was such a shock after all these years of dreaming and fantasy and wishing and hoping. It was so dramatic to have a black man in the White House and so many commentators, normally sober, very intelligent, very reasonable commentators, started writing about the end of racism, that we're in a raceless society, that the Obamas were a new kind of black people, and that their election indicated a fundamental change in the history of race relations in the United States.

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HENRY LOUIS “SKIP” GATES, JR.:

Many scholars who have studied the issue of racism are skeptical right away, but willing—let’s suspend disbelief, let’s see what does it mean to have a black man and a black woman, so brilliant, so charming as President Obama and first lady Michelle Obama in the White House with these two lovely children. Would this be—would this image that Americans would see every day on their televisions, would this transform race relations? Would this interrupt the long history of white supremacy? So, we were willing to suspend disbelief. And we all realized one day after one press conference that that long stream of white supremacy, not only was flowing under the floorboards of American culture but had just erupted. And that was during his press conference when he spoke about my arrest.

Obama’s response to Skip Gates arrest

01:03:49:07

HENRY LOUIS “SKIP” GATES, JR.:

I watched that press conference, and my immediate response was, I felt gratified. I felt touched that he spoke of us as friends and he said what he did. But within minutes, my office was flooded with hate phone calls and hate email, which only increased from a mountain into an avalanche over the next couple weeks. And you could see it in the media the way he was attacked. Oh, so Barack Obama, who we thought was raceless, is a race man after all. And I realized, no matter how I felt personally, the most important thing I could do would be support this man whom I admired and from a distance loved and who

I would—wished with all of my being would be the fifth guy added to Mt. Rushmore.

01:04:51:04

HENRY LOUIS “SKIP” GATES, JR.:

There are four guys on Mt. Rushmore, right? (Laughs) With all of my being, yeah, I thought, man, maybe they could carve a fifth space for the first brother to make it into the White House. He will always be remembered for time immemorial for several wonderful things, but number one would be that he miraculously pulled off the impossible and became the first black man elected as president of the United States. This wave of white supremacist hatred focused on the White House and focused on my office and my house. It was very, very dangerous. Death threats and—not that I ever felt that anybody would actually do it. My father used to tell me that the people—when the mafia planned to kill somebody, they don’t send ‘em an email about it.

01:05:43:18

HENRY LOUIS “SKIP” GATES, JR.:

They just kick the—they just do it. It was quite traumatic for my family and for my staff, particularly my secretary who answered the phone who accumulated I think 129 death threats, which of course we had to pass along to the Harvard police and the FBI. Just voicemail. Overnight, people would call and just leave these long, nasty messages and—and I also realized that this attack was coordinated. That it wasn’t just a spontaneous outpouring of anger from individuals out in the provinces somewhere. So, I realized that it was important to support this president, whom—for whom I voted and for whom I had the greatest expectations.

Obama's proposal of a White House Beer Summit

01:06:26:20

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

So he called me and he said he had spoken to Officer Crowley, who I came to know and we became friends. And what did I think about the idea of having a beer at the White House. I'm not sure he used the word beer, but coming down to the White House and having a drink and sort of talking it through. And instinctively, I realized this wasn't about Officer Crowley and me. This was about addressing this wave of white supremacy that had erupted so unexpectedly at the embarkation of the era of racelessness, which we thought his election had inaugurated. And what we all had to do was figure out how to dampen that down. So I said, "I'm on board Mr. President, whatever you ask me to do I'll be happy to do." And so that's how the idea was born. I agreed. Within a few days the White House called, told me what the plan was.

01:07:44:22

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

And then basically, my family and I went into... taking enormous care to protect our privacy and our safety while we waited. I used to think that those countdown clocks that CNN patented, you know, 48 hours until Gorbachev meets Reagan. I thought they were so clever. They're not so clever, not so amusing when you see "48 hours until Henry Louise Gates meets Office Crowley at the Beer Summit." You know, it was like a nightmare. I'd wake up thinking, I can't believe this. You know, how'd I get in this situation? The President and I only spoke

about racial healing. How to make this moment—a phrase that’s now common in American culture, but which I think he coined, a quote unquote “teachable moment.”

01:08:39:10

HENRY LOUIS “SKIP” GATES, JR.:

And I’m a professor, that’s my day job. My job is not to exacerbate fears, it’s to attenuate. My job is to explain—I—I actually teach a course at Harvard, first with my colleague Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham and then with Professor Lawrence Bobo. It’s about the great debates in the history of black America. And the whole point of the course is to show that there are at least two points of view. There are two interpretations of an event. So when I spoke to him, I didn’t denounce the police, I didn’t denounce the police officer, I didn’t express a sense of being aggrieved. I talked about, what can I do to help you with your presidency, and what can we do to lower the anxiety level? What can we do to minimize any exacerbation of white supremacy?

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HENRY LOUIS “SKIP” GATES, JR.:

Which as a scholar I knew had not disappeared when miraculously he was elected president. It was all about that. It was all about the long history of race relations in America. The historical moment which we had reached with—with his election, and the role that this event in which bizarrely I had become one of the two principled actors, the role this event might play in making things worse or making things better. I’m not—no one’s ever accused me of being—no one’s ever accused me of being what my Uncle David used to call a fiery black

nationalist when everytime he would see Malcolm X. I'm a race man. I love my people; I love my culture. My enemy is anti-black racism wherever it manifests itself; I will always speak against that. I knew that if I went on the stump and tried to make myself into a victim of quote unquote "police brutality," this would be counterproductive. Besides, I'm a professor at Harvard. I'm an upper middle-class person. I have a fabulously stable life. I've been blessed in so many ways with success.

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

I felt that what happened to me was an aberration and particularly after I talked to Officer Crowley, I thought it was an aberration. The reason I've never spoken out about it is that when you think of the things that have happened to victims of police brutality or victims of ill judgment by individual police persons white or black, how can you compare what happened to me to what happened to Michael Brown, let's say? I thought it would be unethical and dishonest for what happened to me to be grouped with the horrible things that ha— happened afterwards which led to the Black Lives Matter movement, which I think is one of the most important political movements to have emerged since Dr. King's modern civil rights movement.

The Beer Summit

01:12:20:05

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

I was in this situation in order to speak to the fears of white Americans— who had developed a primal anxiety about the fact that a

black man, even one as elegant, and as eloquent and as brilliant as Barack Hussein Obama had been elected to the White House. That long history of white supremacy in America had not disappeared. It was just flowing quietly waiting to erupt, and erupt it did. So we all were actors in a larger drama, but speaking to a subject with a long, pernicious history in our country. We all wanted the president's election—not to obliterate white supremacists feeling about black people, but certainly to diminish it. And all of a sudden, it was in danger of growing. And so I thought that's what my mandate was, my mission.

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

And it turned out it wasn't hard, I wasn't acting. I met Officer Crowley. Actually, when we met at the White House and we had a wonderful exchange, our families met, they had had Officer Crowley's family enter one wing of the White House and—and my friends and family enter another wing of the White House, and they gave us all a tour of the White House. And then we met in the Roosevelt Room. So you look up the last time I had seen him, he had put handcuffs on me, you know? And his wife, I remember his children smiled at me and I smiled at him and I walked over, shook his hand, asked if we could talk, and we had a very warm exchange. And I wanted to let him know there was nothing personal and I knew that events had been enormously complicated and that we were here to move beyond it.

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

And then later he and I met alone for a beer at my favorite pub, the River Cab—and later, after the beer summit, he and I met at my favorite pub at the time, the River God’s Café on River Street in Cambridge one on one to talk about how we felt, our interpretation of the events. He explained to me his motivation. I explained mine. And then he reached into his pocket and pulled out something as a gift, and it was the handcuffs that he had used to arrest me. And I—I don’t know what the tradition of an officer presenting the handcuffs to another person might be, but I took it as a marvelous gesture of healing. And I asked Oprah Winfrey, a dear friend and confidant, “What should I do?”

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HENRY LOUIS “SKIP” GATES, JR.:

And I was thinking about giving them to the new National African American Museum as a symbol and she said it was a great idea and so last time I was at the museum, there they were. (Laughs) A remnant of racial healing at a time of strife.

Recollections of the arrest

01:15:57:01

HENRY LOUIS “SKIP” GATES, JR.:

Frankly, I spent a lot of time trying to forget the details of that day. But I learned something. I learned that being locked in a cage no matter how short a time is one of the worst nightmares any human being could ever experience. And I also realized that part of my mission moving forward would be prison reform. I think, unfortunately, that our generation will be remembered for among other things of being a

people who insensitively locked other human beings in cages for decades and decades and decades and I think it's—it's inhumane. I had been to a jail before. I had filmed for a documentary for PBS. But there's nothing quite like the sense of finality.

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

Someone puts you in a cage and slams the door behind you and you hear that clank. And you have no idea how long you're gonna be there. And then after 15 minutes, some—another incarcerated person came in and he was on drugs or drunk or something, so then I didn't know—I was more afraid of him at that point than I was of—of anyone else. I think that we need massive prison reform in this country, and there are signs that even under Donald Trump that that might be happening.

Stoking vs. smoothing white supremacist fears

01:17:47:07

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

I think that one of the... most unsettling things about Donald Trump's election was that part of his campaign was based on stoking the fears of people who are victims of white supremacy. Making it if not popular to voice these opinions, at least creating an atmosphere in which voicing those opinions felt comfortable to them. And that's not what we need in this country and it is a—it is a bizarre turn of events for a president who campaigned so consciously in that manner to follow Barack Obama as President. Why? Because President Obama went to great lengths to speak to those fears, to address those fears,

hoping that drip by drip by drip over an eight year period—how can we put it, the measure of anti-black racism in the country, if one could measure it with a meter would be significantly lower eight years after he was elected than the day it was before he was elected.

The Obamas' stress from living under the microscope

01:19:14:14

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

I was so deeply moved by Michelle Obama's autobiography, but one passage struck me particularly. And it was the moment when she and the President got on the helicopter to leave the White House for the last time, and she turned to him and she started to cry and said, "Do you know how hard to achieve what we've just experienced?"

Meaning, every moment in those eight years, the race was on display. One wrong move could set back race relations decades. Everybody wanted to know who were these black people? What are they—what is their relationship to the larger black community? What does their presence mean about race? What—what—all their comments, all their behavior, what does it say about the nature of black people?

01:20:14:20

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

Can you imagine that stress? No privacy. They were under a microscope, but the microscope of race relations with the subtext of white supremacy in the background looking for them to make a mistake.

Impact of the Beer Summit

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Here's why I know how effective that gesture was. Because the day after, Officer Crowley and I met at the White House, all the phone calls, all the hate mails, and all the people picketing outside my house in Harvard Square, poof, disappeared like magic. Now that doesn't mean that white racism disappeared, it doesn't mean white supremacy disappeared. But that particular manifestation just went away as if by magic.

01:21:11:04

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

And I understood that I'd—I'd been engaged in one of the perhaps small but meaningful contributions to racial healing and racial understanding, and it was orchestrated by the genius of President Barack Obama

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

I think you would have to ask President Obama what that moment meant in terms of his internal sensor about speaking directly to anti-black racism. But many commentators certainly have made that point, that it wasn't—again, if I'm remembering correctly, until Trayvon Martin that he spoke directly or as honestly and as openly as he appeared to be doing when he spoke about his feelings, which I—I think were genuine about my arrest.

Support and advice he received after the Beer Summit

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

We met in the oval office, but frankly, I can't remember if it was one on one or if it was with Officer Crowley, but we were totally in tuned. I mean, you didn't need—I mean, we had intermediaries. Charles Ogletree, it was—who had been a professor for both the Obamas at Harvard Law School was advising me. My dear friend Glenn Hutchins, who had been in the Carter administration, I had many friends in the Obama administration along with Larry Bobo and Evelyn Higginbotham, they were the people keeping me sane and protecting me. Glenn would call me every morning at eight o'clock and he'd say, "I don't think you should read the papers today." Larry—I'd see Larry Bobo when we were on Martha's Vineyard, we would ride our bicycle—mine was a trike, every day for 16 miles, and he would talk about everything but the news coverage.

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

These were people who're taking care of me, so they would give me advice. And I knew that if Charles Ogletree gave me a particular opinion or piece of advice, or if Glenn Hutchins did, most probably that had been in discussion—not directly with President Obama, and I'm sure of that, but indirectly with people in the cabinet or with one of his advisers. But it wasn't stage—it wasn't stage-managed. I think they knew who I was and the kind of person that I am. I mean, to me, it's one of the biggest ironies in history that some of my attitudes about race relations in America would be put in that position. As I said, no one's ever accused me of being a black nationalist, but there I was. I—I think it wasn't hard to figure out that I would comport myself in a certain way.

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

I wasn't gonna be an angry black man walking in the White House and calling this guy a racist or holding a press conference and denouncing him. In fact, we agreed after the beer summit that I wouldn't make a public statement at all, which I didn't. And this is, if not the first time, certainly one of the first times that I've talked about it. The first thing I learned after I was released was that had I not stepped out onto my front porch, I wouldn't have been arrested. So note to self, never again step out on my front porch if it's full of 50 policemen. Why'd I do that? So I tried to make humor about it. But I also tried not to allow myself to generalize about what had happened to me and the relationship between members of the black community and the police force.

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

Because even then I knew that it was exceptional, it was bizarre, it was like once in a lifetime experience. This was untypical. Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Alton Sterling, typical. What happened to me was atypical. It was bizarre. It was sui generis. It's a once in a lifetime kind of experience. So, I was never tempted to generalize or to try to make myself a martyr or a symbol of the excesses of the police force or poor relations between the police and the African American community, because I didn't think that that was typical.

One-on-one meeting between Gates and Crowley

01:26:01:11

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

When I later met with Officer Crowley one on one, not at the White House but at the River God's Café, he said to me, "Look, all that was on my mind was getting home to my wife and kids at the end of the day." And he was under the impression because of the way my purported burglary of my own house had been phoned in, that there was a second black man who was upstairs, you know, plundering some white person's house and that that person put him in harm's way. So he was nervous and he was scared. I've been scared. Once he told me that, we were fine. I understood.

Addressing the larger issue of police brutality

01:26:52:19

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

I often think of Officer Crowley's comment. I just want to go home to my wife and kids. But that's not enough. I think that we have to talk about the long history of anti-black racism, the presumption of guilt rather than innocence, the lack of adequate training in police academies about race relations, racial sensitivity.

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

The training within the black community of what to do—it's very important for our children to know what to do if you're pulled over and what not to do. Precisely because of this intricate web of forces at work when a policeman confronts someone he suspects of being guilty of an infraction or possibly the policeman thinks that his life's in danger. Black person knows their life is in danger. I think that relationship is over determined by the long history of racism in this

country. And let's face it, the police force doesn't have a lot to brag about in terms of its treatment of the black community. This—when I was an undergraduate, the black panthers, one of their principle planks of their ten-point platform was community control of the police.

01:28:25:04

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

How do you create a police force that looks like the community it's policing? How do you make one aware of one's own implicit bias, stereotype threat? All these things obtained. So you know, it's easy to oversimplify it but I think to address the problem adequately, we're talking about education, education, you know school's the history about race and racism. The history of slavery, the legacies of slavery, the rise of white supremacy during the rollback to reconstruction. How short? Slavery lasted a quarter of a millennium. Reconstruction lasted twelve years. The 13th amendment was ratified in December of 1865 about the time the Ku Klux Klan was formed in late 1865. For the good things that happened accompanying the abolition of slavery, there was always resistance, opposition.

01:29:28:08

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

Then this wave of stereotyping black people as monkeys, apes, ignorant, innate thieves, biologically prone to rape, to violence, to committing crime. And the beginning of wisdom for our society is to admit that it's there, admit that racism is a fundamental part of American history and that we have to speak to it. Whether it's in our

elementary schools or high schools, or public schools or private schools, in law schools or in police academies.

Historical connection between racial justice and economics

01:30:10:00

HENRY LOUIS “SKIP” GATES, JR.:

Rhetorically, citing over and over again as President Obama did that the arc of the moral uni- Rhetorically, citing over and over again as President Obama did that the arc of the moral universe is long and bends towards justice. I can only hear it in Martin Luther King’s voice though he didn’t actually coin that expression was certainly the right thing for the first black president to do. And that phrase, which is so resonant to us, and which President Obama used so often, “The arc of the moral universe is long and bends towards justice.” Martin Luther King actually got from the great abolitionist Theodore Parker. But with the election of Donald J. Trump, that arc just got a lot longer. You know, I think, God if only Hillary Clinton had followed Barack Obama, the history of race relations in retrospect generations from now people I think will speculate that race relations would have gotten much, much better. And now they’ve gotten worse obviously.

01:31:23:12

HENRY LOUIS “SKIP” GATES, JR.:

Martin Luther King called himself a drum major for justice. Barack Obama was a drum major for racial harmony, racial healing, and racial understanding. It was—he was using the bully pulpit of the White House. It was part of his larger rhetorical strategy. I don’t think he’d believe that he could just give a speech and racism would disappear,

but he knew he could say certain things to make it worse or certain things to make it better. He articulated an ideal of racial justice, an ideal of interracial understanding to which we could aspire. Donald Trump articulates the opposite. Donald Trump speaks to the worst fears in the history of the American people, things which we thought were buried.

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

But he has served, wittingly or unwittingly to give him the benefit of the doubt, things that he's done or said serve to unleash those forces, to exacerbate those feelings, to play on those tensions, those anxieties. Look at the long history of anti-Semitism or homophobia or sexism. If you trace them back far enough, if you analyze them deeply enough, the root's always about economics. It's about the size of the pie. If I have enough pie, here Peter, have some pie. But if I'm down to one piece of pie and I'm hungry, I'm afraid you're not gonna get any pie. And American people were frightened. It was easy under Lyndon Johnson when we had a full booming economy, guns and butter. Remember?

01:33:10:22

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

That's when Affirmative Action's implemented. It's easy to say, let's dismantle these historic racist structures. Let's let some black people into the upper class and the upper middle class. Let's diversify the power elite. But as soon as economic expansion is called into question, people go whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Not enough resources. That's what happened in reconstruction. The first great depression, 1873.

It's called the great panic. Reconstruction really ended during that great panic. They said, we have to cut back government programs. We cannot afford to keep troops in the South any longer; these freed men and freed women are on their own.

01:33:55:07

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

It took four more years to formalize it, but reconstruction ended with that depression, and I've never ever forgotten that. When people are afraid, their worst fears come to the surface and they function, their motivations are determined by their worst fears rather than by the appeal to what's best in the American experience and what's best in them. Obama tried to regenerate hope, aspiration, the dream of racial harmony, and he tried to do it over and over again and he did it quite eloquently.

01:34:34:23

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

Unfortunately, the person who succeeded him in the White House, whose actions make Barack Obama Lincolnesque by comparison, is a person who wanted to undo the appeal to the best of the American people, and that is one of the great tragedies of our country.

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

I don't know what his reason for running was. But it's clear that he realized that there was a constituency, which he could stoke and that's his base. I know, I have friends I grew up with. White kids of Piedmont, West Virginia who voted for Donald Trump. They're not racist. He appealed to other things. He was gonna bring the paper mill

back, and that's a metaphor throughout the country. Ya know, Trumps gonna be elected and our town, that—that factory that's been burned out is gonna be revitalized —Donald Trump had a multi-layered platform, but one of those layers was speaking to the long history of anti-black racism and white supremacy, xenophobia. And we see it manifested through the metaphorical wall and his anti-immigrant attitudes. It's a miracle this guy got elected, it is a miracle. I don't think Barack Obama was done any favors by the chorus of voices saying, oh this means the end of racism. What in the world were these people thinking? I think they did great harm. Great harm. If this election had been seen as the beginning of healing, a moment of healing, but for his election to be seen as a cure of an illness, of a disease that was hundreds of years old, and it had been particularly virulent since the end of the civil war.

01:36:31:18

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

I think that kind of commentary would have been more helpful than the fantasy that we're at the end of race, that we're living in a raceless society. I mean, what were those people smoking?

Intellectual critiques against Obama

01:36:50:01

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

I always defended the right of black critics, particularly Cornel West to voice their opinion. I stated publicly. I was quoted saying, "Nobody, not even this president that I love is above criticism." And I think Cornel West's critique was very, very important because he—though

he was attacked a lot even in the black community. You know, we have a long thing. What will white people think if you say this in public? What will white people think about--? You'll make another black person look bad. No, no, no, no. Critique was important. Cornel West is a genius, and he's a man of enormous integrity and I thought that it was important that he continue to speak and be encouraged to speak and not to be ridiculed or shunned or mocked because of his propensity to—to critique. And I hope President Obama read those critiques, and I hope he profited from those critiques. Everybody needs—everybody needs a critic. What we're taught, I teach my students, bring your critic in. Ya know, learn from the inside.

01:38:04:01

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

Lyndon Johnson's maxim, "It's better to have the camel in the tent pissing out than outside the tent pissing in." I do not believe that President Obama and Professor West ever made it into the same tent at the same time.

Michelle Obama

01:38:22:23

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

Michelle Obama was so articulate, so poised, she—when I would look at Michelle Obama, I would think of Jackie Kennedy. I'm not a student of the first lady, the history of the first ladies of the White House, but it's hard for me to think of someone better educated, smarter, more articulate, better poised and more well-

spoken than Michelle Obama was. I mean, she was as far as I'm concerned, the queen of First Lady—tied with Jackie, I got a weakness for Jackie Kennedy. I put 'em in a tie.

END TC: 01:39:03:07