

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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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
Professor

Obama's 2004 DNC speech

01:00:35:02

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

I had the first party for him on Martha's Vineyard after his famous speech. I didn't know him, but Charles Ogletree, of course, our friend, was his mentor and Michelle's mentor and he called, "Now watch the speech," and I was riveted. And I said, "This speech—this is the speech that's made a candidacy." So, I'm watching the speech, and I was exhilarated. It was the perfect speech. Few times in American history has a speech made a person President, but that speech made Barack Obama President—there's absolutely no doubt about that.

Hosting a fundraiser for Obama

01:01:14:11

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

The next day, I got a phone call from my friend, Charles Ogletree, a professor at the Harvard Law school, who was Barack and Michelle's mentor.

And he said that a bunch of people on the Vineyard wanted to have a fundraiser for him—he was running for the Senate—but no one had a house big enough, and I was renting this beautiful white house with a huge lawn.

And they said, "Would you have the party there?" And I said, "Absolutely."

And I remember everybody on the Vineyard came, I mean, 400 people showed up—people I didn't even know showed up to meet the young prince.

And I had to make a welco—welcoming speech, and so I said, "Senator, welcome to the white house". And that's, indeed, what happened, and that's

when we first met. But I don't really know Barack Obama. I mean, I've seen him at a few parties and I've seen him at the White House fo—a few times, but I don't know him in the same way that I know the Clintons, for example.

But he's someone I admire, and I think he's very, very sharp—great instincts, intuitive, charming, smart enough to marry Michelle. So, you have to respect a guy like that. And a good father—a great family man. I watch the way his daughters look at him, and he loves them and they clearly love him. These are values that are very important to me.

Obama's oratory skills

01:02:46:02

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

He has a gift only rivaled by Ronald Reagan, and that's the capacity to read a speech as if he owns it, and that's a tough thing to do. I write drafts of speeches for people. I've been involved in political candidacies, you know, on the sidelines. I'd listen to oratory—I study oratory. I teach rhetoric and formal analysis of literature. And he can—he could read a phone book like Ro—like Ron... Ronald Reagan could read a phonebook as if it's from the heart, and Barack Obama can do the same thing. And it's—it's a talent.

Communicating to different audiences

01:03:34:00

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

I think that Barack Obama decided, or realized, that he had to be bilingual, bicultural. He had to appeal to multiple audiences, and he had to master multiple discourses. Speaking in the vernacular—speaking in the black vernacular sometimes to some audiences. Even the way he walks; he has a little black swagger—no, swagger. Even the way he walks sometimes—Michael Eric Dyson's hilarious about Obama's walk. I mean, he could be at the—getting the Nobel Prize and walks up, he's got that little black thing in—in there no matter what he sounds like. And, I think growing up, he was a multiracial kid, in an overwhelmingly non-black society, and he had to learn how—how to communicate across apparent racial divisions, and I think he's a master at that.

Supporting Hillary Clinton

01:04:33:15

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

Oh, I used to have arguments with my dear friend, Larry Bobo—now Dean of the Social Sciences at Harvard—he said, “What’s wrong with you? This guy’s going to be President—the first black President.” But one of my principal values is loyalty. And I’ve known the Clintons for a long, long time. We have an easy, warm relationship. I had many small dinners on Martha’s Vineyard, introduced to them by and through Vernon Jordan. I’ve been with them at moments of great triumph and moments of great challenge, shall we say. I thought Bill Clinton was one of the greatest presidents in the history of the United States, and I think Hillary would have been one of the smartest, most effective presidents in the history of the United States. And I thought it was her turn, and I wasn’t gonna turn my back on my friends. Though, if she was going to lose, I wanted her to lose the black guy, you know? I wanted him to win. So, but I wasn’t gonna pretend or be—and I wasn’t gonna be a hypocrite about it, you know, I’m a—a friend of the Clintons, like John Lewis. And John and I made the move toward Barack Obama at the same time. I was watching the Iowa Primaries from a friend’s house in Woodlawn, Silicon Valley, and I couldn’t believe it. Barack Obama took Iowa; that this overwhelmingly white constituency saw him as the next President of the United States. They didn’t think that it was unimaginable anymore. And if he could win in Iowa,—Iowa played the same role for Barack Obama that West Virginia played for John Kennedy in the 1960 campaign. You have to remember in 1960, no one thought a Roman Catholic could be President of the United States. So, the pivotal primary was the state of West Virginia, which is overwhelmingly religious—Christian and Protestant.

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

If he could win West Virginia, if he could defeat Hubert Humphrey in the West Virginia Primary, then he could win the country. And no one thought he could pull it off. And he went down there, he never denied his religion, he never walked away from it, he embraced it, and people embraced him. He spoke from the heart, and my fellow West Virginians said, "He might Roman Catholic, but he's a good man in spite of that." And the same thing happened with Barack in—Iowa: he spoke from his heart, and people looked past what had been traditional obstacles to election—that is one's skin color—particularly to election at the White House, and said, "That's the man we want to see as the next President of the United States." And he did it. And right after that—it's not like John Lewis called me, but we came to the... the same decision at the same day: it was time to move. And, of course, Hillary won New Hampshire, but it—it was a rebound effect. And then, the next primary, Barack won. Then he went on to win South Carolina. Now, of course, Jesse Jackson won South Carolina, but the enthusiasm for his candidacy. Jesse's victory was symbolic and, let me be clear, I think most historians would agree that without Jesse Jackson in '84 and '88, there'd be no Barack Obama. We all have a tendency to think we created ourselves but we didn't—we're the result of a long set of historical factors, and Barack should always remember that Jesse was there and Jesse paved the way. But when he won South Carolina, so many black people came out so enthusiastically. I knew, just by the looks on their faces, that we were seeing a—a movement born: Iowa, close in New Hampshire, fabulous victory in— in South Carolina. It was

time to—to embrace him, and he called me. Michael Eric Dyson was an early Obama supporter and he made Obama—he kept saying, “You gotta call Skip Gates, you gotta call him.” So, I don’t know why. So, one day my phone rang and it was Barack Obama with Dyson sitting—Dyson probably dialed the phone. And I said, you know, “I’m very proud of you. Keep it up. If I can ever help, let me know.” And when he won, I was at Bobo’s house and—Larry Bobo and his wife Marcyliena Morgan, William Julius Wilson, a few other Harvard professors, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham—and we watched and we—we were afraid of that—the Wisconsin Effect. You know, Jesse went to bed one night and he was winning—gonna win Wisconsin, he woke up the next day and he had lost. So, none of us allowed ourselves to be happy. But when Wolf Blitzer called it, I mean, I cried just like everybody else.

Obama’s election and the Constitution

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

His election was an example of history overruling the abomination of the Three-Fifths Clause in the United States Constitution. Very few people think of it that way but, you know, the Founders, at least ideally, wanted to rid our country of heredity-based obstacles, like property ownership, religion—they weren’t so good about race, but we could debate about whether the Constitution was a pro-slavery document. Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison had that debate. Douglass initially thought so but then he changed his mind, he thought that there was enough room for maneuverability. Well, Barack Obama proved Frederick Douglass right. And

that abominable Three-Fifths clause bit the dust. No one said that that night in the coverage, but that's what I thought of: that that horrible compromise at the Constitutional Convention was now completely buried, just as the stigma or the obstacle of being a Roman Catholic was buried by John Kennedy's election in—in 1960. Black people, the enslaved black people in the South, were counted in the census not as a full human being, but as three-fifths of a human being. And that was to give the South certain a weight in the electoral college. So, many people have written about being defined as three-fifths of a man. Imagine if you were defined as three-fifths of a human being. That's how black people are inscribed in the Constitution—the word “slave” never appears in the Constitution, but “three-fifths of a human being” does appear in the Constitution. That's how slavery is inscribed, and that is a ra—and race, therefore, was inscribed as an hereditary obstacle toward holding office and toward voting. Even free negroes in the North by 1860 could only vote in five states. So, the relationship between race and the electorate was enormously vexed in this country, as—as you well know.

The Obamas and the conception of the ‘new negro’

01:12:22:14

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

One of the ways that black people fought back against the rise of white supremacy was to invent a concept of a new negro. Now, why would they do that? They did that because there were so many stereotypes, as part of white supremacy, about the old negro, the freed men, the freed women, the formerly enslaved. So, upper-class, well-educated black people, starting in

1894, invented a concept called “the new negro.” And, the history of the new negro goes through many iterations between 1894 and 1925. In 1895, Booker T. Washington, just like Barack Oba—Booker T. Washington, at the Atlanta Exposition in 1895, gives a speech that makes him the heir of Frederick Douglass. Douglass dies in February 1895, Booker T. Washington makes a speech—one speech—at the Atlanta Exposition—it was like the World’s Fair—in September of 1895, and overnight he is hailed by the white press as the new negro. And five years later, he publishes a book, which he edits with two other people, called: “A New Negro for a New Century.” And this concept goes through different iterations, reaches its apex at the height of the Harlem Renaissance in 1925. So, it was a metaphor that was defined with different content. For some people, a new negro was like Booker T. Washington, for some people it was like W.E.B. Du Bois, who started the Niagara Movement and the N.A.A.C.P. For some people, like Alain Locke, the new negro was—was going to defeat racism through culture. For Marcus Garvey, a new negro was a black nationalist. For A. Philip Randolph, a new negro was a militant socialist who had learned to shoot in World War I and would shoot the clan. They’d put a big cartoon in The Messenger magazine of the new negro shooting the Ku Klux Klan running off in the distance.

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

I was astonished that even before he was elected—I was astonished that even before he was elected, certain black commentators started comparing him to the new negro. One article is even headlined “The New Negro in the New Politics.” Charles Johnson, a brilliant novelist, a sober, astute

philosopher, you know, wrote an essay in which he sees Barack and Michelle as a new kind of black person, something sui-generous, something unprecedented in the history of the race, and that we were going to have to change the way we described race relations in America because of the cubbing of this couple. That's the same rhetoric of the new negro at the turn of the century. Another political scientist talked about his significance as literally the new negro in politics. That's ridiculous. With all due respect to my friend Charles Johnson, there is only one negro; it's just old negro, there never was a new negro, they were just black people. And they were part of a long tradition, both Michelle and Barack. There wasn't a break with the past, they were an extension on the past. They didn't redefine the past, they embodied the best of the past. It was a culmination of a lot of dreams, and a lot of hopes, a lot of sacrifices, a lot of tears, a lot of lynching, a lot of beatings, a lot of terrorism, a lot of prayers, a lot of hard work in schools, a lot of deferred gratification.

The Obamas in the context of Black history

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

Barack and Michelle were a culmination of hundreds of years of dreams deferred, as Langston Hughes put it. So, I don't think that Barack and Michelle were guilty of seeing themselves as breaks with the past, but people around them definitely were, and commentators definitely were. They wanted to see them as, somehow, different. "I'm different than these other negroes," as we used to say. That, somehow, they were unlike African Americans; that they

had redefined the possibility of an African American. And, as a race man, as someone who teaches African American history, I know that wasn't true; they were an extension of the best of the African American tradition. And that new negro fantasy had an unfortunate effect, which was to lead to a claim of a new America overnight; post-racial America was born because the election of Barack Obama. That is totally and utterly ridiculous. This discourse of a post-racial America was a fantasy. And I think it had deleterious effects in our society. People—Americans want a quick fix, "Okay, we elected a black man, stop complaining. No more racism, no more NAACP, no more discrimination."

01:17:37:01

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

"Do we really need affirmative action? What are you guys complaining about? You got Barack and Michelle in the White House." And if anyone doubts that post-racial America was not born, just take a quick look at who's living at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue today. Having that lovely, loving, wonderful, bright, brilliant nuclear family of brown faces in the White House for eight years inspired many of us. I couldn't believe it some days. But it also drove many other of us totally and completely crazy.

Election night 2016

01:18:25:20

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

I was astonished. But when I saw those long lines of people, many of whom I grew up with back in West Virginia, waiting to vote on Election Night when Donald Trump was running against Hillary, I thought,—'cause those lines

reminded me, the patience of people in those lines, their level of expectation, their determination—said, “Oh my god. That reminds me exactly of the lines of black people”, particularly in Barack’s first, first Presidential Election. And I thought, “This is gonna be a long night,” and I couldn’t believe it and, of course, disaster happened, as far as I’m concerned, and Hillary Clinton lost.

Obama’s strengths

01:19:13:19

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

I was always wary, too, of Obama’s handlers saying he was the smartest guy in the room. I teach at Harvard. I’ve been here 27 years. There’s no smartest guy in the room. You’re in the room with a lot of smart women and men. You didn’t—they didn’t have to position him as the smartest person in the room. He was smart enough to surround himself with smart people, smart enough to seek advice, smart enough in private to admit what he didn’t know and to spend a lot of time learning. He’s a very good student. He would, as I understand it, have dinner with his family and then go up and work—I mean study, learn about things. The—the way that he managed the Recession of 2008 was a masterpiece. He was like a—a brilliant conductor of a symphony. Appointing Steve Rattner as a Car Czar, and letting Rattner do what he did? It was like magic, man. It was beautiful. And Obama could orchestrate it. I think his biggest achievement, a thousand years from now, will be that he was the first black man elected as President of the United States. And anyone who doubts that that’s a big deal should just look at the White House today. That

seems like an impossible barrier to cross given what's happened to the Presidency since Donald Trump was elected.

What Obama's election didn't change

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

The history of race in America cannot be overturned through one bright shining moment called "the election" of the prince of a man named Barack Hussein Obama. You just can't get rid of centuries of slavery, economic oppression, racial prejudice and its corollary, white supremacy, by snapping your fingers even through an event as glorious as the election of the first black President. It was still there, and it had to be met head on. By embracing a rhetoric that, somehow, we were post-racial, I don't think that helped us to deal with the seething forces underground that we'd had inherited first from slavery, but really from the rollback to Reconstruction.

White resistance to Reconstruction

01:21:52:00

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

In 1867, because of the Military Reconstruction Act, black men in the former Confederacy were allowed to register and vote. And, incredibly, in 1868, 80% of all eligible black men voted. This scared the daylights out of the former confederates and it scared the daylights, too, out of many white people in the North who couldn't imagine that black power would express itself through people who were, essentially, illiterate. And remember, they were just out of

slavery for three years by 1868—it had been illegal to read and write, they had been learning in churches and through freedmen schools. But, essentially, it was a largely illiterate male electorate, and these men voted. And a state like South Carolina, basically, was run like a black state. So, there's power in the ballot—that's why it was taken away. That's why Reconstruction ended, and, of course, they needed cheap labor because cotton remained the leading export in this country even beyond 1930. So, they had to reinvent slavery and disenfranchise black men, which is why it took a Civil Rights Movement to get the Voting Rights Act passed in 1965—a century after the Civil War. So, voting rights, holding office—that was the ultimate, the ultimate symbol of white resistance. And, Barack Obama's election overcame that, and buried the Three-Fifth Compromise in the original—and buried the Three-Fifth Compromise—the notion that black people were three-fifths of a man, as it were, which is inscribed in the United States Constitution.

Obama's navigation of race

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

Barack Obama was elected as the President of all the people, not the President of black people. And so, he had to wear his blackness, inevitably, on face, but he had to demonstrate every day that he represented people who didn't look like him, who didn't share his physical characteristics, who didn't embrace his phenotype, as it were. And I think he did a good job at that. He couldn't be too black. He could be black at night—he had a lot of really good

parties and he was black as he wanted to be, but in the daytime, he had to be polka-dot. He had to be neutral; he had to be multicolored. And, I think he did a very good job at that. And, he tuned his rhetoric for black audiences and—and white audiences. He pulled his punches when had to. I think that many black people found his lectures about black agency, black individual accountability, black responsibility for the conditions plaguing black people tedious, because it was obvious that he was really addressing, while ostensibly addressing members of the black community, there was a feeling he really was addressing his white imaginary constituency, and his white actual constituency, too.

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

Trying to convince them that he wasn't too black, that he was willing to stand up within the black community and say tough things, difficult things, and not pander to people who were making bad judgements and committing unacceptable acts. I—I think it was necessary for him to do that, but after a while, as I say, it became predictable. It was like: "On the one hand, on the other hand, on the one hand." It became a formula. And, I think some people, rightfully, became resentful. Was he—was what he was saying wrong? No. Black responsibility—the causes of poverty are both structural and behavioral—that's what he said. Barack Obama's message was: the causes of poverty are both structural—meaning historical, socioeconomic—but also behavioral—people making bad choices, bad decisions, not deferring gratification, not learning their ABC's. But the reason they were making bad decisions and not learning their ABCs and their multiplication tables, etc.

were also related to larger structural problems. So, it's—on the one hand, we can talk about them in two different breaths, but on the other hand, they are inextricably intertwined. He also learned a lesson from Bill Clinton, which is: a rising tide lifts all boats. So, his economic cures weren't race-specific, they were class-specific. And I think that he was acutely aware of the problems of wealth inequity—wealth inequality—the difference between work and wealth. We grew up, there was a promise that work, if mother and father—generally your father if you're my age—worked, that, maybe, some wealth accumulation could occur.

Obama's approach to the economy

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

Now it's clear that if you own capital, if you're in possession of capital, that your percentage of increase in your total wealth is going to be much greater than someone who's working every day for a living with, basically, no capital. And I—I think that Obama was sensitive to that, of the so-called problem of 1%, and the 1% within the 1%. And I think that, in retrospect, he wanted to see an economy based on the free market, but with a social safety net. Not in the extreme-left forms that Bernie Sanders—a person I enormously admire—advocated, or maybe, you know, my friend Elizabeth Warren is advocating. But certainly, not the laissez-faire economics, or the trickle-down fantasy of Reaganesque or—or Trumpian economics. And I think that could be a great legacy of President Obama, as well. Certainly, healthcare. Everyone from, you know, Harry Truman had tried to get some kind of modification of

the healthcare system. Bill Clinton did. Only Barack pulled it off, at a huge political cost with a lot of compromises. But, it was scandalous that, in a country as wealthy as ours, 20 million people—estimates range from 12 million to 40 million people—who didn't have any kind of healthcare would be forced to live life like that. That was a scandal. And now, because of Obamacare, which Trump is chipping away at, we've addressed that situation and I hope that it survives. But it's out of his—out of his control.

Undercurrents of racism in America

01:29:35:00

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

I tell my students that there are two streams that are running under the floorboards of Western culture: and one is anti-Semitism, and one is anti-black. There—I tell my students that there are two streams running under the floorboards of Western culture: one is anti-Semitism, and running parallel to it is anti-black racism. And the myth of a post-racial America—because of the election of a black man to the White House—let us, unfortunately, put our guard down. You know, we thought: “Well maybe things are better. Maybe white supremacy is a thing of the past. Maybe it's something that our grandchildren will only know about through history books and they'll say, “Why would anyone think that a person, simply because they were black, had been barred by something that was hereditary from holding office or casting a ballot?” But those forces are back; they hadn't disappeared, they were just papered over.

Impact of Obama's statement on Skip Gates's arrest

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

Think about those times that you say something inadvertently, innocently from your heart, and it hurts someone's feelings, it frightens them, it makes them angry. That's what happened to Barack Obama. I think what he said was true, from his heart. I think—I think he felt that what he said was true and something he spoke from his heart. But the backlash is the same product—the backlash produces the same effect when you inadvertently hurt someone's feeling or you offend them or when you touch a raw nerve and you—all you can say is, "Look, I didn't mean it that way." And then you go to great lengths to assuage their pain, to reassure them that you won't do it again, that "I didn't mean it in the way that you heard it."

Obama's response to Trayvon Martin's murder

01:31:46:21

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

W. E. B. DuBois, in one of the classics of the black tradition called "The Souls of Black Folk," it was published in 1903, defined the double-consciousness of every African American. And DuBois said, "One ever feels his twoness—an American, a negro; two warring ideals in one dark body." That was a challenge that Barack Obama had to confront; how did he reconcile being black—reacting to the world as a black man, expressing his black subjectivity—with being the President of all the people who live in America? There never has been a more classic example of DuBois' dilemma than

Barack Obama and his eight years in White House. Because, I'm sure he felt about—passionately about many racial matters, but he had to express his concern in a rhetoric that didn't terrify his white constituency, didn't awake the nightmare of white supremacy. People—people who'd never dreamed they would vote for a black man voted for him. Because they thought, somehow, he was different. You know, he was black, yes, but not too black—meaning not a black nationalist.

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HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

And when he spoke about Trayvon Martin, I think he—he took the mask off. I mean, he said, "This could've been my son." I mean, but it was so authentic, so moving, I don't think that it alienated his constituency. But it took him a long time to get back to that moment when he took the mask off, when—when being an American and being a negro, as it were in DuBois's terms, could be one thing. And he spoke like a human being, reacting as a black man, but speaking to the human community in—through the ultimately personal—through the ultimate personal metaphor, which is one's own son. And, so I—I don't think that that was rehearsed; I think it was spontaneous. But he had received a lot of criticism; Cornel West, Michael Eric Dyson—lots of people had said, "Come on!" You know, you have to, "You're black, too!" You know, "You can't forget your black side." You have to play, and bridge, the duality, but you have to be both. You have to speak to your black constituency, and not just hectoring, but in a compassionate way in order to generate compassion from your non-black constituency. I th—I think it took him a long time to do it. I think it took him a long time to do that. And, also, he had

advisors who were looking at poll numbers and they go, “Look, it’s a white country, you can only be so black.” You know, “You gotta decide: how black do you wanna be? You wanna still be President? You want your ratings to go up?” I think that would be—it must’ve been true for John Kennedy with Roman Catholics. I think we still haven’t had our first Jewish President—I hope it’s Michael Bloomberg—and I think that something he’ll wrestle with, as well.

01:35:16:06

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

It wasn’t a cynical thing, it wasn’t hypocritical—it was political. But he’s a political being in a political office, you know? We’re not talking about how a person actually feels in the privacy of their home with their friends, we’re talking about your message embedded in political rhetoric, speaking from the White House to 300 American people. When you’re elected to the White House, you stop being a black person first—you’re President first. You’re—you’re not a black man who’s President, you’re a President who happens to be black. But he’s a President who happens to be black, and—and a bunch of other things. Like a democrat, and a good swimmer, and a person—I don’t know—who likes pineapple juice. You know? I don’t know what. So, that—he has multiple identities, I’m trying to say, and he has to speak to a constituency that is multiply-identified. And I think he did a good job at doing that. Though, it was very frustrating for many black people for a lot of the time.

Charleston church shooting

01:36:30:10

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

South Carolina was the blackest state in the Union. Even in the 18th century, its name was "Negro Country." So, if you think about the history of racism and white supremacy, many of the most heinous examples have manifested themselves in South Carolina. Why? Because there was a black majority at—at certain periods in—in history. So, as soon as I heard, I—I couldn't believe. I couldn't believe that someone would actually pray with a group of people on a Wednesday night for an hour and then kill him. I can understand—you know, we've all heard of acts of terror when somebody knocks the door down and just shoots people with an automatic rifle. But to think about it for an hour, and then kill them? So then, as the facts came out, we learned that he's a white supremacist. Dylann Roof didn't need to read Louis Agassiz's, good Harvard man's, ridiculous theories about polygenesis and the subhuman nature of people of African descent. Or he didn't need to read Vardaman's speech about why we're in the Constitutional—In the Redemption Constitutional Conventions, why we're instituting poll taxes and literacy tests, and examinations. It wasn't about, as he says, "disenfranchising uneducated poor white people. It was about disenfranchising black people"—and he used the n-word. And he said, "Let's make no bones about that." White supremacy is in the D.N.A. of the American people generally, and the South, more especially. It's in the air that you breathe. And Dylann Roof had imbued this horrendous blanket of hate and extremism—it was just part of his being. And—and it's no accident, either, that he picked Mother Emanuel.

History of Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston

01:38:55:17

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina. It was opened up in 1865 after it had been closed after the Denmark Vesey slave rebellion. And he brought him from Boston, and then he is elected to Congress, the minister. It's no accident that this horrendous act occurred at Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church. Because Mother Emanuel played a pivotal role in the history of Reconstruction. Denmark Vesey's slave rebellion in Charleston in 1822 is connected with the church, so they—the people who suppressed that rebellion—shut the church down. It wasn't opened again until 1865, when the church sent a minister from the North to revitalize the church. His name was Richard Cain. And he used the church to teach literacy to the slaves, and to encourage political action, and he, himself, became involved in politics and was elected to Congress. So, the church where the murders occurred played a huge role in the victory of the North over the South, and in the suppression of white supremacy for about 10 years. And then, of course, Redemption, rollback Reconstruction. But the church continued to play a role in terms of the education of black people, and in terms of their political involvement until, of course, the State Constitutional Convention basically disenfranchised black people. But, the church didn't die, didn't stop being political, it bided its time. And then was the modern Civil Rights era under Martin Luther King, the church, again, was a vehicle for that. It's organ of expression. A way that people met for political protest. So, it's

not a surprise that, I mean, it—these murders occurred at a pivotal site in the history of the Civil Rights Movement, a pivotal site that fought white supremacy. So, when Dylann Roof, a self-styled white supremacist, wanted to make a political statement, where did he do it? At Mother Emanuel Church, which was imbricated in the history of the fight for black rights from the 19th century, on.

Obama's speech after the Charleston church shooting

01:41:26:10

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

I thought that the President's speech was deeply moving. And, we all learned that he has a pretty good voice, too. It—Presidents are expected at times of tragedy to console, and I think that he'll be remembered as a figure of consolation in times of unimaginable tragedy, like the murders of the school kids. And I think that he's a deeply compassionate person for all sorts of unimaginably horrific, anti-humane acts. And I—I think that we saw that in his reaction to the murders of the school children, and we saw that, certainly, at Mother Emanuel Church. I mean, he spoke from his heart, without doubt.

Trump's election

01:42:30:18

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

Is Donald Trump's election a direct response to Barack Obama's Presidency? Many people think so, but it's not as if Barack Obama was Marcus Garvey or Malcolm X. I mean, he was the most middle of the road, assimilationist

President of African American descent that one could imagine. So, it wasn't because of—of strident militancy, it wasn't because of favoritism to the black community, it wasn't because he was primarily a race man. I think it was because of the long legacy of white supremacy. I think people were more shocked at the rise and expression of white supremacy because—precisely because so many well-intentioned people had fostered the illusion that a black man's election had defeated, and finally buried, white supremacy. And that wasn't true. And we knew it wasn't true. The fictions of a post-racial America were a joke. I used to watch commentators—I mean, black people I know—talking about all the old days when there was racism. It's like, what are you talking about? You know, what—what province is being made from advancing that argument? And I don't mean literally in terms of—I, I want to take that. I don't want it—it looks like—make. It looks—make it look like people were selling out for money. But, let me say it this way: I could never understand what anyone thought the society was gaining by pretending that the election of one man—no matter how brilliant, no matter how charming, no matter how compelling their family relationship might be—that that one event could erase three centuries of oppression, the stigma of racism, the forms of—multiple forms of white supremacy that developed first during slavery, then were challenged during 10 years of Reconstruction, 11 years of Reconstruction, and then the long period of Redemption, or the rollback of Reconstruction, the rise Jim Crow—that, somehow, Barack Obama's election was going to wipe—wipe that out? That's ridiculous and, actually, it's offensive to one's intelligence. But it was a fiction that was doing work for a

part of the community. That, somehow, we've changed. America's changed.
All that's behind us.

01:45:18:18

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

How much had America changed because it had finally gotten rid of this hereditary barrier to occupancy of the White House that is race? Well, turned out it had changed a lot, for a day. The Election Day. But, had it fundamentally changed? Did it lower the number of black men going to prison? Did it lower the child poverty rate? Did it lower the unemployment rate? Did it lower the number of people who think affirmative action allows people who are "not qualified" or "less qualified" to take the positions of good hardworking people who are qualified? Absolutely not. By pretending that these race-based problems had been solved—it was a bit like going to a faith healer when you have cancer, you know? And saying, "Psht. I'm—Cancer's gone! You know, the minister told me the cancer was gone." And tonight, you're gonna die of cancer unless you get systematic, scientific treatment. So, to some extent, the post-racial discourse kept us from dealing with real problems of race and racism with deep and entangled roots in American history, and which can't be explained away or wished away through the fantasy of post-racialism and the new negro.

Obama's farewell tweet

01:46:58:13

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

January 20th, 2017th, President Obama tweeted farewell twice to the nation. “It’s been the honor of my life to serve you.” And I could just see him in—in tears when—it had to be a sad day for him. “It’s been the honor of my life to serve you. You made me a better leader and a better man. I won’t stop; I’ll be right there with you as a citizen, inspired by your voices of truth and justice, good humor, and love.” Barack Obama. Reply to POTUS44: “You’re not a citizen. You weren’t even born here. America has finally defeated you. Now, back to Kenya you go, ape.” In that tweet, you see embodied the principle tropes of white supremacy: first, that black people aren’t citizens—don’t have a right to be citizens. Black people only became citizens with the ratification of the 14th Amendment. That’s the first thing. “You weren’t even born here.” Birthright. Citizenship. “America has finally defeated you. Now, go back to,” where you’re originally from, “Kenya,” or and by extension for all black people: Africa. “You ape.” You’re not—you people aren’t a member of the human community, you’re at the top of the animal kingdom under Europeans or what, people—other people of color, then at the bottom of the human community: the Africans.

01:48:41:00

HENRY LOUIS "SKIP" GATES, JR.:

Who’s under the Africans? Apes. And a lot of white supremacists say there is no line between the ape and the African. This person, again, without studying the history of white supremacy, embodies the key metaphors or tropes of anti-black racism in this pathetic little tweet, saying to the President: “You think you defeated racism? You think you changed history? Got news for you: we’re still here.” And these people came up out of the center of the earth,

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reemergent and stronger than ever. And these people—this person wasn't alone. There were many people who shared these beliefs, and they emerged out of the center of the earth like zombies that we thought had long been put out of business. And that's that.

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