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News

If It Can Happen To Him ...

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For many, it was a startling portrait: the normally reserved Harvard University professor, Henry Louis Gates Jr., standing on his front porch in handcuffs, appearing to yell as police officers surrounded him. Yet those were the [images](#) that circulated Tuesday, as news of Gates' controversial arrest – and the subsequent dropping of charges against him – circulated on Web sites and television.

Stephen L. Carter, a Yale University law professor and novelist, felt like he was watching a scene unfold from one of his own books. Carter has written scholarly works along with bestsellers about the lives of upper-class African Americans, including those in academe, and his fiction often illustrates how wealthy blacks draw suspicion in posh environs like private beaches or Ivy League campuses.

"If it can happen to Henry Louis Gates, possibly the most prominent black scholar in the country, and in his home town, then it can indeed happen to any of us," Carter, author of *The Emperor of Ocean Park*, wrote in an e-mail to *Inside Higher Ed*.

"Odd, isn't it? Here we are in the age of Obama, and some things haven't changed. Blackness is associated in the public mind with wrongdoing; if we are spotted in an unexpected locale, we must be up to something."

Echoes of Carter's words could be heard across academe Tuesday, as professors discussed Gates' assertion that he had been the victim of racial profiling, and recalled their own similar experiences. The story, which had drawn significant media attention by Monday, began early Thursday afternoon when officers responded to a possible break-in at Gates' Cambridge, Mass. home. Gates had been spotted trying to force open his own jammed door, and when confronted by officers he accused them of racism, drawing a charge of disorderly conduct, according to a [police report](#).

Amid public outcry, however, the police dropped the charges, and all those involved – including Gates – called the incident "regrettable and unfortunate" in a joint [statement](#).

"This incident should not be viewed as one that demeans the character and reputation of Professor Gates or the character of the Cambridge Police Department," the statement reads. "All parties agree that this is a just resolution to an unfortunate set of circumstances."

For Gates, director of the W.E.B. DuBois Institute for African and African American Studies, the incident was a bizarre case of life imitating scholarship. The longtime academician readily drew parallels between his interaction with police and larger issues of race relations, yelling "This is what happens to black men in America" on multiple occasions during the incident, according to the police report.

"It's one thing to write about it, but altogether another to experience it," Gates told [The Washington Post](#) Tuesday.

Stereotypes Still a Struggle

As news of Gates's arrest spread among college professors, the irony was seldom lost on any of them. Gates has spent much of his life writing and thinking about race, garnering the respect and attention of fellow scholars and pop culture icons like Oprah Winfrey, whose genealogy he helped explore in a PBS documentary and subsequent book. Yet, here Gates was in handcuffs on a front porch.

Jerlando Jackson, an associate professor of higher and postsecondary education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, said he found the entire incident very troubling – and even thought the story wasn't true when he first heard about it. Gates' arrest highlights,

however, the struggles even the most esteemed black professors can have overcoming the perception of black males as criminals, Jackson said. The work of a scholar and teacher is one that requires legitimacy, something black men struggle to attain because others may impose stereotypes upon them, he said.

“This incident confronts that challenge,” Jackson said. “Here is one of the best scholars in his field – who happens to be an African American male, who has studied and taught in the best institutions in the world, and is largely known outside of the academy as well as inside – experiencing an exchange with police officers and mistaken identity that you often would not associate with a professor at a world class institution.”

“We as African American males are very concerned about the images that are imposed on us as professors,” he added.

Struggles with stereotyping are so common that some black males in the professoriate sometimes make overt attempts to undermine those images. Michael Cuyjet, acting associate provost for student life and associate professor of education at the University of Louisville, said he and his wife were just recently discussing how “she and I get dressed up and go to the mall.”

“Our experience is if you go in [wearing] jeans or cutoffs you get followed around by security people, or clerks don’t treat you well,” said Cuyjet, who edited and co-wrote an [essay collection](#) called *African American Men in College*.

When Cuyjet heard about Gates’ arrest, he said he was disappointed but hardly shocked to learn Gates was an apparent victim of racial profiling

“When incidents like this occur it lets the greater population become aware of something that most black men are aware of simply by nature of having been black in America,” Cuyjet said.

Juan Gilbert, president of a group of black male academics called Brothers of the Academy, was similarly unsurprised.

“This isn’t anything new,” said Gilbert, who was recently named professor and chair of Human-Centered Computing at Clemson University. “ ‘Skip’ [Gates] has written about this; Skip knows about this.”

Jack Levin, a professor at Northeastern University who has written extensively about race, said the main issue the incident highlights actually has little to do with whether Gates was in fact a victim of racial profiling. Levin, who is white, said the take-away from the incident is that Gates and other black men live in a world where racism is prevalent enough that Gates would reasonably conclude he was targeted because he’s black.

“Even in liberal Cambridge, Massachusetts, the idea of racial victimization has to be a part of the everyday thinking of black professors,” said Levin, a professor of sociology and criminology. “I mean that even where you’d least expect it – in a liberal environment where there is tremendous tolerance for difference – black professors still in the back of their minds have to think they might be the victims of racism. Even here, because it’s part of our culture. It’s part of the air we breathe.”

— **Jack Stripling**