Mark Gonnerman: Good evening, and welcome to the Aurora Forum at Stanford University. I’m Mark Gonnerman, the Forum’s director, and tonight we’re pleased to present “An Evening with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.” Professor Gates will be in conversation with Claude Steele, Stanford’s Lucie Stern Professor in the Social Sciences, a professor of Psychology, and the Director of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences here at Stanford.

The Aurora Forum is pleased to join with the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences to bring this conversation to you. The Center is one of our nation’s most prolific incubator’s for new ideas that inform our society and culture. Please read more about it in the printed program that has been prepared for tonight’s event.

Tonight we will follow our typical Aurora Forum program format of 45 minutes of on-stage conversation followed by another 45 minutes of audience-inspired discussion. If, when we get to that portion of the evening, you have a question or comment to contribute, please line up behind one of the two aisle mikes and we’ll bring you into the mix.

This conversation is being recorded for broadcast on KQED Public Radio at 8:00 p.m. on Tuesday, November 11. For this and other good reasons, please turn off your cell phones. This program will also be available on Stanford on iTunes. To learn more about this and other Aurora Forum programs, please visit our website: www.auroraforum.org.

So I’m honored to introduce our moderator tonight, Claude Steele, who will then introduce and interview his long-time friend, Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

As I mentioned at the start, Claude Steele is the Director of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, a professor of psychology, and the Lucie Stern Professor in the Social Sciences at Stanford, where he has taught since 1991. His research interests include investigation into how people cope with threats to their self-image and how group stereotypes, especially as they affect minorities, can influence intellectual performance. He has conducted pioneering research on the academic aspirations and achievements of minority students, with a focus on self-evaluation and self-identification. Professor Steele also studies addictive behavior.

Dr. Steele has received numerous awards, including the Gordon Allport Intergroup Relations Prize and the Distinguished Scientific Career Awards from both the American Psychological Association and American Psychological Society. He is a member of the
American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the National Academy of Education, the National Academy of Sciences, and the American Philosophical Society. He holds honorary doctorates from the University of Chicago, Yale University, Princeton University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He serves on a number of boards, and has recently joined the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Board of Directors.

He received his B.A. degree from Hiram College in Ohio and his Ph.D. degree in psychology from The Ohio State University in 1971.

Professor Steele was born on what many people believe to be the first day of the baby boom, January 1, 1946. He grew up in a working-class suburb of Chicago, and his memories of childhood include his family’s involvement in the civil rights and school desegregation movements. The dinner table was an ongoing seminar, and there is little doubt that this background led to many of the interests that have occupied him throughout his distinguished academic career.

Please join me in welcoming Professor Steele and Professor Gates to the Aurora Forum stage.—[Applause]

Claude Steele: Thank you, Mark. After an introduction like that, in these weeks I feel like saying, “My name is Claude Steele and I approve of that message.”

I want to thank Mark for that very warm and generous introduction. I’m excited tonight for a couple of reasons, the first of which is the lovely opportunity to share with you a conversation with one of my best friends in life who also happens to be one of the most interesting American academics and intellectuals there is around, so it is a real pleasure to have the chance to do that: Dr. Henry Louis Gates, who will henceforth be called by me, at any rate, Skip, because there is no way that I could look at you and call you anything but Skip. If we’re able to achieve anything like what sometimes happens after a few drinks in a restaurant, then this conversation should be a little wild and fun and, in the end, I hope, informative. That’s our ambition for the evening.

It’s also a pleasure to me because this is the very first conversation in what we hope will be a long-time collaboration between the Aurora Forum and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, which as Mark said, is what I currently direct. Every year, we host 40 to 45 of the world’s most interesting social scientists, behavioral scientists, and humanists. We’ve lived a kind of cloistered life up on the hill, but now we’re going to begin to open up a little bit by sharing some of these people in conversations like this, so this is the first one of that sort. I want to thank Dr. Gates for agreeing to be the first partner in this enterprise. He is a member of CASBS – it’s a terribly long name: Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. I can’t say that all night, so I’ll call it CASBS. Skip is a member of that board and he was a Fellow at the Center last year, so we had a little leverage with regard to getting him in this seat tonight, so we’re especially happy that you agreed to do it. It’s a real treat for us.
A few words of introduction to position things: Skip is the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor at Harvard, and I want to immediately point to another honor we have here tonight. Alphonse Fletcher is in the audience. He, too, is a member of the CASBS board. This is his first board meeting that will take place in the next couple of days. We’re really proud to have him on the board and to have him here tonight. Skip is also the director of the W. E. B. DuBois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard. Skip earned his B.A. degree in history at Yale, and then he earned an M.A. degree and a Ph.D. at Clare College of Cambridge University in English literature. His honors would literally take all evening to enumerate. He was a MacArthur “genius award” winner as early as 1981. He was elected to both the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the American Philosophical Society. He’s a winner of the National Humanities Medal. He has been awarded, to date, 49 honorary degrees from little, obscure places like Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Toronto, and Williams College, and of course he is on many distinguished boards and panels including, for example, the Pulitzer Prize Committee, but none are more dear to him, I am sure, than his membership on the CASBS board.

More to the nature of Skip’s work, he is having, perhaps, the most multifaceted career of any academic I’ve known or ever heard of. It’s an amazingly broadly cast career. I think maybe only W.E. B. DuBois has had a career with the breadth that would rival yours. I’ll go down some of the major categories. This is how I was just trying to cordon off sectors of his vita. He is a literary scholar, a cultural analyst, and a discoverer of lost manuscripts. He’s published, by my count, four books of literary criticism, one of which, The Signifying Monkey, won the American Book Award in 1989. He has authenticated and helped publish two of the earliest books ever written by African American women, Our Nig and The Bondswoman’s Narrative, from the early 1850s. He has also been, throughout his career, a major journalist and public intellectual. If I can again make a sector of his vita, he’s written regularly for TIME magazine, for Tina Brown’s The New Yorker (I really miss you at The New Yorker, but you’re coming back; in two weeks you’ll be back), the New York Times, the New York Times Magazine, and, of course, the New York Times op-ed page. His book writing has placed him at the center of America’s intellectual stage with books such as his classic autobiography, Colored People, which I read in preparation for this. I recommend it to you. I think it’s like an August Wilson play. It really is a good window into mid-twentieth century African-American life – what it was like. Also, The Future of the Race, coauthored with Cornel West, a series of New Yorker profiles entitled “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man,” which I also recommend as a good way of getting coordinates on somebody like Barack Obama, whom we’ll come back to a little later. Then, The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America’s First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers. This is a profound little book, I think, describing the founding fathers’ debates about whether an African-American woman could actually write poetry. A nice, quick read. He has also been hugely productive as an anthology editor, with series like Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience, the Norton Anthology of African American Literature, and African American Lives with Evelyn Higginbotham, which we’ll see a section of in just a second, and an editor of Transition magazine, and I think he’s most proud these days of being editor of TheRoot.com. If you want to see what the thinking is

He’s been an amazing institution builder. I’ll ask him questions about this later. He built what I think has to be regarded as the nation’s foremost African and African American studies department at Harvard as well as the DuBois Institute. These are two formidable, lasting institutional achievements. Finally, he is increasingly a documentarian for public television, producing and narrating at least a half dozen or so acclaimed documentaries for PBS and BBC over the last ten years, the most recent of which will be *African American Lives* and there’s one in production, *Looking for Lincoln*, out on February 11.

[Applause]

**Henry Louis Gates, Jr.:** Thank you very much. It’s good to be here.

**Steele:** Reading your autobiography, there’s a section where you talk about your father and your brother loving baseball, and you feeling kind of excluded from that bond. Then you took up an interest in finding out things about the Negro. Are these things related?

**Gates:** Absolutely. Two weeks after the election, I have an essay coming out in the *New Yorker*, and it’s about this scrapbook; it’s about the day I saw this picture. And I realized in writing this essay that that’s the day I really became a scholar. But I was raised to be a doctor. My mother wanted two doctors, and you understand that. When we were growing up, the closest position next to God was being a doctor in the black community, so we were going to be doctors. But my brother was obsessed with sports, and so was my father, to this day, and I like watching them watch sports. One day when I was five years old, I was playing marbles with my cousin Greg Hill, and my cousin Gary Price. All of a sudden … we were in the dirt in the back yard of Greg’s house … and all of a sudden I rose up – I was sort of floating – watching us shoot marbles. And when I came back down, I said to my cousins, “Have you ever played marbles and then watched yourself playing marbles?” And they said, “What the hell are you talking about?” [Laughter] So I went home and I talked to my mother. And I told her about the experience. And my mother said, “You’re different. You and your brother are special. And no need to tell people when you have these kinds of experiences.” [Laughter] Whenever I teach *The Souls of Black Folk* and we have to define double-consciousness, I tell my students that story because being an academic is having the capacity for second-order reflection. You can watch a phenomenon, even be a phenomenon, and observe yourself doing that – participating in that phenomenon. And you can reflect on it. That’s what we do. We live in that second order of reflection. And it’s a gift. I didn’t have to think about it. It’s just the way it was.

So gradually, between this fascination with historical records, with my own genealogy, with trying to figure out why I was a Gates and where the Gates had come from, and later with the Coleman’s, and falling in love with reading (I’ve read my whole life), but more than that, falling in love with analysis, with this second order level of reflection, I think it was inevitable that I was going to be an academic. But I had to go through pre-med. I was pre-med at Yale. Even when I was at Cambridge I had to take physics in the
Cavendish Laboratory, I took biology, I took a chemistry course at Cambridge – all at the same time I was getting my Ph.D. because I couldn’t imagine not becoming a doctor. I even came back and went to Yale Law School for six weeks, and I took a leave of absence. The last time I checked, I was still on leave.

But I was alienated from my father because of this. My father and I had a very complicated relationship, which took us years to … we came together over the news in the mid-sixties. Then my brother went off to dental school at West Virginia University, about 60 miles from where I grew up, so it was just my mother, and me and my father. He loved newspapers and crossword puzzles and current events, and I loved current events, so we started analyzing and fighting about the Vietnam War and Malcolm X, and I would get a book like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *Manchild in the Promised Land*, which I’d read about in *Ebony* magazine, because this was an all-white town. I’d have to order them through the Book-of-the-Month Club, and I would read them and he would read them, too, and then we’d have big arguments about it. But he enjoyed it and I enjoyed it, and that’s how we came together.

**Steele:** You know, another distinctive thing I was staying about you is that you had a kind of two-handedness in your intellectual career. What I mean by that is that you didn’t get polarized. You came of intellectual age in an era of black militancy and intense culture wars and identity politics, but you didn’t really become strongly militant or strongly conservative; you had a kind of evenhanded demeanor about this work. I’ve kind of been fascinated about how you got through that whole era like that.

**Gates:** I had a two-foot-high Afro, man. I was bad! [Laughter]

**Steele:** So you didn’t get through that whole era.

**Gates:** Cornel West…. My man Cornel’s Afro looked like a crew cut next to mine. [Laughter] I have two daughters. One is 28 and she’s getting a Ph.D. at Harvard. The other one is at Parsons School of Design in fashion design; she’s 26. They cracked up at these pictures. Did you have an Afro?

**Steele:** Oh, yeah. [Laughter]

**Gates:** But I never hated white people. I never believed that there was going to be a separate kingdom of black people and that we were going to take over the state. I never called anybody a honky. You know what I mean? It wasn’t my thing.

**Steele:** You said once in an introduction to a book, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*, that you just didn’t feel the deep anger of aggrievement.

**Gates:** Right. I had a secure life, a great life. It was rich. I loved being black, but I never was raised to think that my love of being black meant that I couldn’t love other cultures. That was ridiculous. I could like John Coltrane and Beethoven. In my preface to *Colored People*, I say sushi and fried catfish, Bach and James Brown. Why not? One
of my friends at Yale, a guy I loved, committed suicide, and he committed suicide because he loved this white girl of Irish descent, and his politics wouldn’t let him be with her and it drove him crazy. He finally committed suicide. One Saturday, he took butcher knife and stuck it through his chest. It’s a horrible, horrible story, but I never went through it. If I fell in love with somebody…. Look, love is so rare. If somebody actually liked me, I was not going to throw them out the window because they happened to be white. [Laughter] It just never made sense to me. I don’t know if it was because of my parents, because I grew up in this Irish-Italian town. Some of my best friends were white people, and I wasn’t going to throw them out. And do you remember…. (I didn’t mean that in the funny way that it came out). [Laughter]

I was fascinated by blackness. My first day at Yale, I went to the Black Student Alliance at Yale, and there were more black people in this room than I had ever seen at one time in my life. And all these black kids from New York and L.A. and New Orleans – this was where Yale was recruiting. They stood up and talked about how white Yale was, how disgusting this was, and it looked like Africa to me. It looked like Harlem to me. I was saying, “Look at all these black people who are smart and interesting,” and I just loved being there. But I didn’t ever have…. I volunteered to be secretary of the black student organization. The first day, the moderator announced, “The secretary has quit.” So I went up to him afterwards and said I was new, I didn’t know anything, I didn’t know the people, but I knew how to take notes, and could I be the secretary, because, again, I just wanted to watch these Negroes becoming black and being all militant. I love Toulouse-Lautrec, who would position himself at the corner of his paintings. And it’s me. I like watching things. That’s why I like writing about things. I love making things, but I love observing people do things, and I have since I was a little kid. And I figured out a way to try to navigate through that. So I was there in the middle of these big political rallies taking notes. I never had to stand up and make a speech.

**Steele:** You’re an inherent journalist, is what you are.

**Gates:** Well, I had a great mentor named John Morton Blum at Yale. He was the first person to tell me that I could be a scholar. He’s a great American historian.

**Steele:** I was going to ask you that. When and how did you become convinced that you could be a writer?

**Gates:** Well, I could always write. I was always rewarded in school by my teachers in writing classes on any written assignment. But when I got to Yale…. It’s one thing to be rewarded in Piedmont, West Virginia; it’s another thing to be rewarded in New Haven. But when I got to Yale, I was being rewarded, too. So I started writing a column. I took a year off and went to Africa between my sophomore and junior years. Yale had a program called “Five-Year B.A.,” which was funded by Mellon.

It was an experimental program – a funny, sixties program – and they picked twelve kids in the sophomore class. You were a rising junior, and you went to the third world to work. I went to Tanzania because I wanted to go to Africa and I wanted to immerse
myself in blackness. I met this white guy at the dock at Dar es Salaam. I worked with missionaries in a mission hospital – they were Australian missionaries – because I was pre-med. And I was trained to give general anesthesia … over 120 operations. I was basically holding a mask on somebody. Nobody died. I learned a lot. Then I hitchhiked across the Equator. When I came back after a year off, all my friends were seniors, and I was a junior. A group of my friends were all the editors of the Yale daily newspaper, so they gave me a guest column. It started with me just writing about living with the missionaries and what it was like in Africa, hitchhiking across, the whole thing. And that same year, I decided to be a history major, and I was taking John Blum’s…. John Blum is a great writer. He’s really one of the great American historians. There were 202 kids in this class, and one day I published one of my essays in the Yale Daily News, and Mr. Blum was there in a room like this and he said, “Is Mr. Gates in the room?” I looked up, and he said, “Nice column today.” I was hooked, man. It was great. He said, “Could I see you?” I went to see him and he said, “You could either be a journalist or a scholar. It’s up to you.” And I said…

Steele: And you’ve never been able to decide.

Gates: He said to me, “You don’t have to decide.” I said to him, “Isn’t that insulting? Isn’t it better to be a scholar than a journalist?” And he said, “Not if you write for The New Yorker.” [Laughter] And he said, “Not if you’re Anthony Lewis.” Remember Tony Lewis? He’s a good friend of mine now, and his wife, Judge Margie Marshall. I wrote to Tony Lewis and asked if I could be his apprentice – his research assistant – from Yale. He said no, but I got a job when I was going to Cambridge. Right after I graduated from Yale, I got a job working for TIME Magazine in the London bureau. So the two years I was enrolled and doing course work at Cambridge, I spent half a year working at TIME Magazine and half a year being at Cambridge, so I never chose. And for me, there’s no difference. It’s just a different level of discourse because I love to write and I like reaching a lot of people. Eleven million people saw African American Lives. I could write The Signifying Monkey. How many copies did it sell? But I didn’t want to be a journalist only and I didn’t want to be a scholar only. I wanted to reach a lot of people.

Steele: I want to get two more questions in and then I think we need to open this up for the audience to ask questions. One has to do with African American Lives. You used two real interesting methodologies in helping these famous African Americans trace their family roots. One is genealogy and the research center of the Mormon Church, which has been very helpful to you, I know. The other is DNA matching. Some people might argue that you’re introducing a kind of genetic analysis into understanding racial differences – you see where I’m going with this question…

Gates: Sure. Like our friend, Troy Duster at Berkeley. It drives him crazy because he wants race to be totally socially constructed. And he sees anything that reinforces these received categories from the eighteenth century as reinforcing racism.

Steele: Right. How do you navigate those waters? Where do you come down, or how do you feel about that?
Gates: Well, when our daughters were born…. I’m divorced, but my wife’s a white American. When our daughters were born, we had them tested for sickle cell. Was that socially constructed? I mean, there are things that are biological. Biology matters, right? The question is how it matters, where social construction of things starts and stops, what’s biological, and even the interpretation of what’s biological is socially constructed. It’s very complicated, and I have a Ph.D. in English literature. I’m only slowly exploring this. But if you want to know if that child there is your daughter, and I know she is, we could find that out in a laboratory, right? There are biologically established things, and all ancestry tracing is, is a paternity test or a maternity test. We’re looking at somebody’s mitochondrial DNA and looking at their y DNA, if you’re a man, and doing an admixture test, which is the most controversial test of all. But it’s also the most fascinating to me because I use it to deconstruct received categories of race. Look: Chris Rock is 20 percent white; Don Cheadle is 19 percent white. Who knew? I’m 50 percent European, 50 percent African. I had no idea of that. The tests show how mixed we are. We might have lived in America in an apartheid society, but when the lights came down, people slept together. Sometimes it was rape; a lot of times it was rape. If we did the DNA of all the black men in the NBA, the y DNA of 25 percent goes back to white men. Twenty-five percent of all black men descend from a white man. That’s a big number. I think that it undermines these racist categories, the typology which we inherited from the Enlightenment which is based on pseudoscience. So that’s how I try . . .

Steele: It’s interesting, because, again, I’ve admired your “there’s nothing to be afraid of” attitude: Let’s look at these things. It was interesting to me that you interviewed James Watson right after he made those horribly racist remarks about the problems of Africans being lodged in the low IQs. For that, he paid a dramatic price. He was a chancellor at Cold Spring Laboratory.

Gates: Right. He still has the same office.

Steele: Maybe he didn’t pay too high a price.

Gates: But he was very embarrassed.

Steele: You interviewed him and then you wrote a very interesting article. I wanted to read a quote here and have you talk about that a little bit. At the end of the article, where you graciously treated him but, at the same time, I thought, holding him to account, you say, “The last great battleground over racism will be fought not over access to a lunch counter or a hotel room or the right to vote or even the right to occupy the White House. It will be fought in a laboratory, in a test tube under a microscope in our genome on the battlefield of our DNA.”

Gates: That’s right, because what Watson said, and I think what many people feel, is that persons of African descent are biologically inferior intellectually. And the reason Watson agreed (and you know this story, but I’ll tell it) … the reason he agreed to let me interview him…. I did the first interview after he was fired, basically, for TheRoot.com.
It got 3.2 million page views in 24 hours. It was incredible, this interview I did. And he agreed to let me interview him because he went to Clare College at the University of Cambridge. And he came a couple of years ago to hear me give a lecture to Clare alums, and he liked it and he sent me a signed copy of his *Double Helix*. And I liked him. He’s a very nice man – kind of quirky – but he’s like God. Before the lecture, somebody said, “James Watson’s sitting in the front row,” and I said, “What? James Watson? That’s amazing!” Then I read those comments, so I wrote him and I said, “Dr. Watson, would you allow me to interview you so you can tell your side of the story for a black audience?” And he did. But I interviewed him for an hour and a half, and basically he repeated most of same things he said. In the article, I used the distinction that DuBois had used between racism and racialism. It’s when people believe that there are biological categories of races and there are certain characteristics that you and I might find socially constructed, but he thinks that they are inherent, and one of them is intelligence. He said, “You dominate us in basketball.” He said it right on the tape. And he said, “You did all right.” He meant me. He wasn’t condescending. It’s hard to repeat it to make you understand the tone, but you can watch this interview on TheRoot.com. You saw it. It wasn’t condescending, but it’s just that he basically believes that they will find a gene for Jewish intelligence, and that they won’t find one for us. [Laughter]

**Steele:** Well, there’s a sad note in that. Do you think – and I’ll bring this as quickly as I can to the contemporary moment – do you think an Obama presidency would begin to change the belief framework that undergirds that kind of thinking?

**Gates:** I don’t know. You know, we’ve had this argument. I was for Hillary Clinton.

**Steele:** I’m glad you confessed that. I didn’t have to point it out.

**Gates:** Well, I knew that at some point you were going to beat me up with that. Hillary Clinton is a friend of mine. So is Bill Clinton. Not intimate friends – I don’t want to exaggerate it, but every year for a decade, I go to their birthday parties, the man gave me the National Humanities Medal, I’ve hung out with them. What am I going to do: be disloyal? I pledged to support Hillary Clinton before I’d ever heard of Barack Obama. But I admire Barack Obama. Now, obviously, I’m a big Barack Obama supporter. But when I was here at the Center, Claude Steele, Larry Bobo, a dear friend, and I … we hung out every day. And every day they would beat me up about Hillary and Barack, Hillary and Barack.

**Steele:** I thought it was balanced. [Laughter]

**Gates:** Yeah, right. And you guys felt .... I used to tease you about drinking the Kool-Aid. This was going to be the millennium, and William Julius Wilson, our dear friend, cried when Barack gave the race speech. He cried, just wept. And I just don’t think the millennium is coming with the election of a black president.

**Steele:** Do you think that there is a major transformation coming in American society in the way our society looks at race and race relations?
Gates: No, I don’t see it happening. I would love for it to be there.

Steele: I’ll push this question one more step. Do you think that Obama saw a transformation coming that maybe we old guys didn’t see?

Gates: Well, that’s a good question. But I’m going to answer both of them. Yes, I think that Obama figured out that…. Who wrote *The Difference*?

Steele: Scott Page.

Gates: Now, when I was reading the précis of his application ….

Steele: (Scott Page is an economist at Michigan who has a great book on diversity and the integral value of diversity in intellectual life)

Gates: … and basically, he was talking about what Kuhn would have called paradigm shifts and how you step outside. Ralph Ellison was writing about seeing a Joe Lewis fight, and he said he stepped into the man’s logic and knocked him out. Obama looked at the race situation, the structure of civil rights leadership, and you can use whatever metaphor you want: either he stepped in it or he stepped around it. That’s why Jesse Jackson and all the black congressional caucuses…. Remember, the caucus overwhelmingly supported Hillary. He stepped around them. If he had gone to them and asked permission to run, they would have said no, because he didn’t fit in their paradigm. So he stepped around and created a whole new paradigm. He saw things that I certainly couldn’t see. Maybe you saw it.

Steele: No. [Laughter]

Gates: Barack Obama is brilliant and visionary, and I’ve had dinner with him, I had him at my house, I had a party for him, I like him, I think he’s enormously intelligent. But he’s much more brilliant than…. I have come to appreciate how brilliant he is and how perfect he is for this position, and I think he’s going to be a great president of the United States. I think that given all of …. Nick Kristof had an article about a Chinese person saying, “A black person could be president of the United States?” But remember when I did that profile on Colin Powell for *The New Yorker*? I interviewed all these people, immigrants from Latin America, about a black man being head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and they couldn’t believe it. I said, “Would this happen in Peru?” “Never!” “Would it happen in Colombia?” “Never!” And I think Colin Powell could have been the first black president. I think that Americans are capable of voting for an individual black person. I think the percentage of real racists in America is very small. I think we have black racists and white racists; they’re at the fringe. And I think Barack is going to win and prove that. But I don’t think, to answer to your first question, that that represents a structural change. I hope it would inspire black people to do their homework, learn their ABCs, stop fantasizing about being a basketball player and start fantasizing about being a doctor or a lawyer, like we were raised to do. But I’m afraid that that’s not going
to happen. I don’t think it’s going to make white people who are racists not be racists anymore. That’s why I’m saying I don’t see how this transformative element … how Barack is going to be the catalyst for a larger transformation in America. But I think he’ll be a great president.

Steele: Do you think that Barack himself, in his person, represents a different logic…

Gates: Yes.

Steele: … that will begin to pervade as a model of leadership, as a model of how to make decisions, as a model of how to manage, which he seems to be remarkable in all those ways? Do you think that that could start to have an effect all on its own?

Gates: I don’t know how things like that are transported or replicated or repeated.

Steele: Well, you see it every day on TV and you begin to … there begins to be an almost a habitual way to think about things. There’s the “Barack way” of thinking about things.

Gates: Yes, but can one individual deconstruct, as it were, all of the received structures of “Negroness” that we were raised on and we write about and critique? Maybe, maybe not. I don’t know.

Steele: I don’t want to be the one to put us out of work or anything. [Laughter]

Gates: No, but you want to bottle and sell Barack. You want his essence to be bottled and sold.

Steele: I’m just pushing the idea that maybe in his persona, actually, there is a new logic with regard to these things.

Gates: Well, there’s a new logic in terms of a black person making it in American politics. That’s why Jesse Jackson has a meltdown every couple of weeks because he can’t stand it. And they don’t understand it; they can’t figure out how this guy got there. He’s not beholden to them, and it drives them crazy. And I say, good, because I think that the old civil rights paradigm has played itself out anyway and we needed to get rid of it. I think that the black community has been in a crisis since the day the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965 because we had a century of agitation – exactly a hundred years from the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the passage of the Voting Rights Act: 1865 to 1965. We had an analysis that was based on almost primal xenophobia, and except for the socialists like A. Philip Randolph and some of the fringe groups, the Black Panthers, we didn’t have any sophisticated analysis about race and class interaction. Not really. We believed that if we could … Martin Luther King’s “Beloved Community” …. If we could get rid of de jure segregation, that somehow – and here’s the slippage: if we could get rid of de jure segregation, somehow all black people would go plunging into the middle class. That was the illogic. Race and class. Somehow, no model anticipated the
class differentials that we have in the black community today. No model anticipated (I think Tom Sowell did, someone told me, but I’ve never read it) that the principal outcome of affirmative action would be us – would be the black people in this room, would be the black people that my mother used to say, “Now we have white money; we used to have colored money.” That all of a sudden, to put it in stark terms, the black middle class has quadrupled since the day Dr. King was killed in 1968, and the percentage of black children living at the poverty line, I believe, according to Larry Bobo last week, was 33 percent. The day King was killed it was 37 or 38 percent. We have two classes within the African American community, and this was not predicted. We all naively thought that somehow we would all move forward. So what is Barack’s election going to do about that, particularly in this economic climate? We have lost our way as a people – too many of us – and when you think about all that we overcame…. Cornel West and I were talking one time about…. Cornel grew up in Sacramento. His father was a worker, his mother a school teacher. They raised him to believe he could go to Harvard and become a philosopher. My mother raised my brother and me to believe we could become great doctors.

Steele: I think your mother had a magic potion. She really was able to convey an unusual amount of confidence. From the circumstances that you came from, and I’m not trying to say anything negative, but it’s a town of, what, 3,000 people…

Gates: 2,000.

Steele: … 2,000 people, a very working-class, so there’s no real….

Gates: But I thought I was rich. My father worked two jobs. I didn’t know I was poor until I went to Yale. No, we were the richest black family in town because my father had two jobs. He worked at the paper mill in the daytime and he was a janitor in the evening. And they were on all the committees for the United Fund, and they were Republicans until John Kennedy, and they worked for the Party. I had new Stride Rite shoes and brand new textbooks and new clothes, and, hey, I was Skippy Gates, class president four years in a row. You know what I mean? Nobody told me I was…. I was the man. I was the king of the classroom and I was going to be successful. That’s just the way it was. My mother was a self-esteem factory. My mother told me and my brother that we were beautiful and brilliant every day of our lives, and she never used those words. We just felt it; it was the air that we breathed. And so you tell a monkey that . . . and they become hypnotized. [Laughter].

Steele: I would love to go on, but we’d better invite the audience to step up to a microphone and ask Professor Gates a question or two.

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Gates: We were at Bellagio together as Fellows.

Spiegel: We were. I thought I was rich until I went to Bellagio. [Laughter]
I wonder if we could continue the conversation we’re having now because it does strike me, as talented and brilliant as Barack Obama is, that something remarkable has happened in the rest of the country that we could have been debating not very long ago whether a black woman could write poetry and now hopefully we will have a black man in the White House. What has happened to the rest of this society that made it even conceivable that this could happen and that we could do the right thing?

Gates: Well, I think that this society would have voted for Colin Powell. It was John the Baptist and Jesus. I think Colin Powell set it up for Barack. That’s why on *Meet the Press* that Sunday, it was a nice closing of the loop. I think Colin Powell made a mistake. I think he went for the money. He became very rich and I think that’s why he didn’t run. I think the story about him being assassinated … I think that was bull. I think he was poor, he was a military guy, and I think he wanted to be comfortable, and he went for that. But I think that for a long time in this society, white people would reward individual black people, whether it was Michael Jordan or…. We haven’t seen it in the political arena like we’re seeing it with Barack Obama, but we’ve seen it in other arenas. So I think it’s been a gradual process of individuality – of accepting an extraordinary black individual. I don’t think that the people voting for Barack are voting for him…. I don’t think it’s a statement about civil rights or about liberalty: I think it’s a statement about Barack Obama. I think it has a secondary fall-out – other implications. Claude and Bill Wilson and Larry Bobo think that it speaks more broadly and more loudly about our transformation. Maybe I’m just cynical. Maybe I’m just too much in the old guard. Maybe I’m too old. Or maybe I don’t want to have my feelings hurt. I want it to be more than I think it is, so to check myself, and especially around these guys, who are lunatics about Barack [Laughter], I had to pull the other way. But I’m going to be down there voting, and when they announce that he’s president, I hope to God, I’ll probably cry and I’ll write an essay about it. [Laughter] I have an editor at *The New Yorker* who says, “There is no pain we cannot publish.” [Laughter]

Anyway, I don’t know if that answers your question, but I think that it’s investing in this moment and onto this man more than the situation can actually bear, but maybe I’m wrong. I don’t know.

Spiegel: I hope you are.

Gates: I hope I’m wrong, too.

Question from the Audience: Dr. Gates and Dr. Steele, thank you so much for an illuminating conversation. Let’s take this a little further. Let’s accept for a moment the premise that there are not overnight structural changes as a result of Senator Obama becoming President Obama.

Gates: I think that’s a safe bet.
Question (continued): Let’s go in the other direction for a moment. Let’s assume for a moment that Senator Obama doesn’t become President Obama. What are the implications in terms of identity safety? What are the implications in terms of educational aspirations? What are the implications at this critical point in terms of racial relations? What happens then?

Gates: Well, I think if we have eight more years of Republican social policies, I would worry more about the transformation of the Supreme Court – what that will do to Roe. It’s not about race – indirectly, it is, I guess – but what that does for gender relations, what it does to the progress of women, and then, my God, affirmative action. I don’t know which will fall first, affirmative action or Roe. That’s a nightmare to me. I don’t think there are going to be riots or anything. People say, “People in Harlem will riot,” but I don’t think so. But I think there will be an enormous…. I will be devastated myself, even my little cynical self. And Sarah Palin and John McCain? That is scary. That really is scary. [Laughter, Applause]

Steele: Yeah. I saw a Barack interview at some point, and he said that every night he allows himself to fantasize about what it would be like to win and what it would be like to lose. I can fantasize about what it would be like to win, but I can’t fantasize about what it would be like to lose. Aside from him, we’re at a point where for him to lose would mean a real entrenchment.

Gates: It would on both sides. I think black people would become cynical. Let me say what everyone is thinking. Black people would become cynical, and I think the class divides within the black community would only increase, which worries me. The class divide within the black community worries me more than the class divide between the overall black community and the overall white community because we have masked the class differences within the black community by contemporary black culture like hip hop, modes of talking, modes of walking, so that we’re all black here. But the quality of the black experience is so fundamentally different between the black upper middle class and the black middle class (like at Stanford) and black people where a 16-year-old mother in the inner city who is unwed, and those lines are going off like that, and never the twain shall meet. I don’t think they’re going to meet now without a structural and behavioral revolution in the United States, and I don’t know if that is going to come. If Barack Obama’s election could be used as a catalyst to transform black people into…. I started to say how irrational it was for Cornel’s parents and my parents or your parents to encourage us that we could be anything in this society. I was born four years before Brown v. Board of Education, and it never occurred to me that I couldn’t go to Harvard or Yale. Never, ever! I would either get in or not, but it didn’t occur to me that there was a barrier to me going there. And that’s amazing. Why? Because of that self-esteem factory called Pauline Gates. But what will happen to make our people buy into literacy? We bought into literacy from the time our ancestors were slaves. Frederick Douglass wrote famously that slaves had to steal a little learning from the white man. What happened to that passion? The blacks we were brought up with wanted to be a doctor or a lawyer, not a basketball player or an entertainer, when we were growing up.
Steele: In a segregated era, it’s very interesting.

Gates: DuBois didn’t put black athletes on the cover of *The Crisis*. He put black Harvard graduates. The future of the Negro was through education. We believed in education as if our collective lives depended on it, and now a huge segment of our community doesn’t embrace education. A huge segment of our community is functionally illiterate. Forty-five percent of all black kids don’t graduate from high school. It’s amazing. Seventy percent of all live births in the black community are out of wedlock – single mothers. You cannot progress as a people with these statistics. If Barack’s election could be used by the leaders of the race or the educational system or whatever buttons we can push to transform these attitudes within the community, that would be great. I don’t see that happening, but I hope so.

**Question from the Audience:** I was at Berkeley in 1968 when Herbert Kohl came out of Harlem and told all of us young idealistic students that we just needed to give students typewriters and let them do their own thing and then these kids from these poor inner-city communities would thrive and want to learn. In the 40 years since then, there have been all these attempts to make a difference in the inner-city schools to change what you’ve been talking about. Of all the different things you’ve seen – Teach for America, KIPP Schools, charter schools, vouchers, and all that – are there any that you specifically have hope for that can make a difference, because 40 years hasn’t done much?

Gates: My colleague, Roland Fryer, just got $44 million from Eli and Edie Broad to start an educational lab. (He’s my next-door neighbor so I talk to him all the time.) One of his ideas is that there’s no FDA for educational programs, so why don’t we test all of those...? I went to Jonathan Fanton, who is the head of the MacArthur Foundation. Last year, I went to his house and did a little tap dance for a program that teaches inner-city kids how to play squash. Then I’m on the board of the Harlem Educational Activities Fund in New York. It was created by Dan Rose, who is a good friend of mine. All the kids in their schools learn chess. Nobody knows whether, if you could scale up learning squash or scale up learning chess, it will matter. And of course, these schools where everybody learns chess and the schools where everyone is learning squash are doing very well because of the Hawthorne Effect, at the least. So, we don’t even know what the impact of 1,001 after-school programs might be.

I’m developing a curriculum now that I’m very excited about using genealogy and genetics to transform the way we teach inner-city high school kids history and science. You know, if we walked into an inner-city high school and said, “Today’s lesson is *The Double Helix* and Watson and Crick,” they would say, “Get out of town.” But if you said: “We’re going to use these cotton swabs. We’re going to swab everybody, and in six weeks we’re going to tell you what tribe your ancestors came from on your mother’s side for everybody, and if you’re a boy, on your mother’s and father’s sides, and in the interim, while we wait for the results, we’re going to teach you how the science works for ancestry identification – ancestry markers – and we’re also going to teach you something about the history of the slave trade and American history, and then we’re going to create...
your family tree – do a unit over six weeks and take you all the way back to your slave ancestors. We’ll show you how to do that and then each week you’ll come in with another rung of your ancestry and we’ll teach you what was happening in the world and in America to black people,” I get excited even thinking about it because it excites me. Your favorite subject is yourself. I don’t know if that’s a good idea or not. It turns me on because I’m obsessed with genealogies and genetics. I’ll probably get a grant from somebody to do it. I got an award from Wired magazine just for saying the idea on the Charlie Rose Show. Now, I’ve had over 200 school systems that have written to me saying, “Try our school system to launch this experimental curriculum.” But is it a good idea or not? I don’t know. I think that we have to rethink all of these after-school programs and all of these things that have been tried. We need a period of assessment to figure out what works and what doesn’t. Roland Fryer’s efforts are an attempt to do that. I would hope that Linda Darling would have a prominent role in the education department under a Barack administration, and other good people I know would, as well. I would hope that that is what they would do because I don’t know what is structural and what is behavioral. I don’t know where one starts and stops, and I don’t think anybody else does either. Many black people are afraid to talk about behavioral causes because they say it gives ammunition to white rage, anti-black rage. But I don’t think that’s right. I think we have to have the courage to stand up and say, “You have to learn to read and write.” You have to stay in school. Abraham Lincoln said no white man is going to come in on a white horse and save you. We have to save ourselves. We have to go back to traditional black values, and that is the embrace of education.

**Question (continued):** So when Bill Cosby made that point a number of years ago, he got pretty blasted by a lot of people.

**Gates:** Yes, but I thought he was bit extreme. I think we have to talk about structure and behavior and the system, and I think he went overboard. But I agree with Cosby. I think it’s both.

**Steele:** I think you’ve been talking to Bill Wilson and Larry Bobo. You’re getting to be more of a structuralist.

**Question from the Audience:** Good evening, Professor Gates and Professor Steele. Let me see if I can’t construct a question. I’m thinking about the idea of coming of age during the sixties and having a sense of self and a sense of purpose that’s connected to a cogent sense of struggle – one that’s extant both in the larger society but also one that’s embraced by one’s parents and neighbors and those invested in the same endeavor. Then I think about a post-1960s America, in which kids of color are predominantly getting their teaching from, for lack of a better word, white teachers. I’m a firm believer that anybody can teach anybody, but getting back to the institutional issues, there are questions I have in mind. I’m in total agreement with what you said about the sixties model no longer being an effective model, and I think it’s not an effective model because the issue is not that racism is necessarily the domain of individuals but rather it’s this pervasive ideological thing. I guess my dilemma is that in the post-sixties colorblind practice that I think is pervasive in many schools, how do students of color find examples
and models of principled struggle when the only time that history comes up is in February? And typically it’s a redemptive narrative around Martin Luther King and not something that presents the civil rights movement in a more complex way and one that allows them to give voice to the issues that they’re struggling with today. We look at the rates of incarceration, we look at high rates of attrition and drop-out, and we look at a lot of different things. There are plenty of indicators that the struggle needs to be ongoing and yet this high rate of attrition of students is not seen as a democratic crisis or a human rights crisis, which I believe very strongly that it is.

**Gates:** If we could find ways to integrate, as it were, black content throughout the curriculum…. Black History Month: February is the coldest, darkest, shortest month. The month is a leftover that they give to it. It’s wonderful. It’s great having Black History Month, but it’s not enough. That’s why I think if we could have a DNA curriculum, if we could have genealogy and genetics, particularly for inner-city brown and black kids, I think that would be a good thing because they’re outside of February – something that could be carried on throughout the year. It’s just one way; it’s not enough. I didn’t have any black teachers, ever, until I went to Yale, but I’m here.

**Question (continued):** I’m not necessarily advocating for more African American history, although I think it would be useful, and it would also be useful to populate the curriculum with other people’s experiences.

**Gates:** You’re talking about role models and teachers?

**Question (continued):** Not actually. I’m actually looking at the ideological framework of race. So if you look at eugenics in the way that eugenics shapes the way that we think about thinking and learning, and how pervasive it is, you have LaBruzio in Louisiana who is trying to attach welfare access to voluntary sterilization. We’re building a wall on the southern border. We’re policing the parameters of marriage. There are efforts to erode *Wade*. And if you go back historically, all these ideas are ways of controlling the race. Again, I would also suggest that those notions articulated by teachers are rooted in certain racialized assumptions about race. So rather than looking at simply the history of people of color, I’m wondering what you think about the idea of looking at the ideological structure of race so that everybody has an opportunity to deconstruct that. That’s not just for people of color; it’s for white folks, too.

**Gates:** I think that would be perfectly great. But how would you introduce it into the curriculum?

**Question (continued):** I won’t editorialize tonight, because that’s what I’m trying to do. But I’m wondering about….

**Gates:** So you’re talking about teaching the social construction of everybody’s race.

**Question (continued):** Yes, exactly.
Gates: Which is what we do in college, of course, what we do in literature departments, what we do in social science departments now, but I don’t think it’s done so much in high school, but I’m no expert on that, but thank you, and thank you for your work.

Question from the Audience: Hello, Dr. Steele and Dr. Gates. My name is Vivian and I’m a freshman here. The question I was going to ask you actually ties into a question asked before about the structural issues that black people face. My question is about your opinion on cultural collaboration in order to get to these issues. It seems like some of the values you espouse like education or value for genealogy – those are things that I’ve experienced as an Asian American, and I’m wondering about your opinions on using cultural collaboration and not feeling like black people themselves have to necessarily feel alone in this effort because I feel that, especially as a Vietnamese American, my parents came here, they told me the stories, and this is a hope that I would love any culture to have.

Gates: I absolutely agree. But most black kids live in all-black neighborhoods and go to all-black schools. So there is not a great opportunity for a lot of cultural collaboration in the inner city. Orlando Patterson gave a great lecture the other day. We’re more segregated now than we were when I was born. It’s astonishing. So what do we do then? As a goal, yes. On a campus like Stanford, absolutely. In the inner cities of America, it’s hard to have the kind of cultural collaboration that would be our ideal of democracy.

Question (continued): Right. So you would feel like those values you espouse – curriculum and things like that – those aren’t really exclusive to one specific culture, but rather for anyone in any position.

Gates: Right. But the schools that I would try it out in would be all-black schools basically in the inner city.

Gonnerman: Professor Gates, I really hope your DNA curriculum takes off. This is a terribly exciting idea because it’s hard to imagine a future unless you know something about your past. Thanks, everyone. Thanks, Professor Steele. Good night. [Applause]
Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
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Henry Louis Gates, Jr., is most recognized for his extensive research of African American history and literature, and for developing and expanding the African American Studies program at Harvard University. The first black to receive a Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge, Gates is the author of many books, articles, essays, and reviews, and has received numerous awards and honorary degrees. Gates, who has displayed an endless dedication to bringing African-American culture to the public, has co-authored, co-edited, and produced some of the most comprehensive African-American reference materials in the country. His honors and grants include a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (1981), the George Polk Award for Social Commentary (1993), Time magazine’s “25 Most Influential Americans” list (1997), a National Humanities Medal (1998), election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1999), the Jefferson Lecture (2002), and a Visiting Fellowship at the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton (2003-04). He was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford in 2007-08.

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Claude Steele grew up in a family of four children in a working-class suburb of Chicago. His memories of childhood include his family’s involvement in the Civil Rights and school desegregation movements. He received his BA from Hiram College and his MA and PhD from Ohio State University. He came to Stanford in 1991 where he developed his theory of stereotype threat, designating a common process through which people from different groups – being threatened by different stereotypes – can have quite different experiences in the same situation. He has received the Dean’s Teaching Award at Stanford, the William James Fellow Award from the American Psychological Society, the Kurt Lewin Award and the Gordon Allport Prize in Social Psychology from the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, the Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award and the Senior Award for Distinguished Contributions to Psychology in the Public Interest from the American Psychological Association, and the Cattell Faculty Fellowship. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the National Academy of Education, the American Philosophical Society and the National Academy of Sciences and he has been awarded honorary doctorates from the University of Michigan, University of Chicago, Yale University, Princeton University and the University of Maryland.

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