

Setting the Record Straight

A Response to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

We, the undersigned, take strong exception to the Op-Ed, “Ending the Slavery Blame-Game,” published in the *New York Times*, April 23, 2010 by Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. There are gross errors, inaccuracies and misrepresentations in Gates’ presentation of the transatlantic European enslavement system. Moreover, we are duly concerned about his political motivations and find offensive his use of the term “blame game.” It trivializes one of the most heinous crimes against humanity—the European enslavement of African people. Gates contradicts his stated purpose of “ending” what he refers to as a “blame-game,” by erroneously making African rulers and elites equally responsible with European and American enslavers. He shifts the “blame” in a clear attempt to undermine the demand for reparations.

The African Holocaust or *Maafa*, as it is referred to by many, is a crime against humanity and is recognized as such by the United Nations, scholars, and historians who have documented the primary and overwhelming culpability of European nations for enslavement in Europe, in the Americas and elsewhere. In spite of this overwhelming documentation, Gates inexplicably shifts the burden of culpability to Africans who were and are its victims. The abundance of scholarly work also affirms that Europeans initiated the process, established the global infrastructure for enslavement, and imposed, financed and defended it, and were the primary beneficiaries of it in various ways through human trafficking itself, banking, insurance, manufacturing, farming, shipping and allied enterprises.

No serious scholar of African history or reparations activist denies the collaboration of *some* African rulers, elites, merchants and middlemen. Indeed, collaboration accompanies oppression as a continuing fact of history. Historians have described collaborators in two other major Holocausts: the Jewish Holocaust and the Native American Holocaust. Yet Gates, ignoring the historical record, makes the morally unacceptable error of conflating three distinct groups involved in the Holocaust of enslavement: perpetrators, collaborators and victims. The Jewish Holocaust had its *Judenräte*, Jewish councils which chose Jews for enslaved labor and for the death camps and facilitated their transport to them, as well as its *kapos*, Jewish camp overseers, who brutalized their fellow prisoners along with the SS guards. In the Native American Holocaust, there were also Native American collaborators who fought with the Whites to defeat, dispossess and dominate other Native Americans. Thus, such collaboration in oppression is not unique to Africa and Africans.

Gates makes it clear that the article is written in the context of “post-racial posturing,” eagerly set forth by a nation citing its first Black president as false evidence of the declining significance of race and racism. Indeed, this is a period of *resurgent* racism reflected in the rise of the Tea Party movement, increasing hostility toward immigrants, open public commitments to embracing and celebrating the history of racial oppression, joined with the fostering of fear to facilitate the continued denial of civil and human rights.

The purpose for Gates’ misrepresentation of the historical record is to undermine the African and African descendant reparations movement, and to make it appear to be based on unfounded demands. An accurate reporting of the history of the Holocaust of enslavement and the period of segregation and other forms of oppression which followed it, attests to the importance, in fact,

the essentiality of reparations. The widespread opposing responses to Gates and the anti-reparations interests and sentiments he represents in his article, provides us with an excellent opportunity to renew the just demand for reparations for centuries of enslavement and continued economic disadvantage and exploitation Black people endured in the Jim Crow era and subsequent years of wage slavery.

Gates' flawed and misconstrued presentation of the global reparations movement to redress the injuries of the Holocaust of enslavement and subsequent labor exploitation attempts to leave the reader with the impression that the movement is only a product of misguided African Americans. However, legal battles regarding reparations for the European enslavement of Africans are being waged throughout the United States, Jamaica, Brazil, South Africa, The Virgin Islands, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Martinique, Canada, Namibia and Barbados. The United Nations declaration that 2011 is the International Year of People of African Descent will afford yet another opportunity to expand the reparations movement for the longest unpunished crime against humanity --- the European enslavement of African people. In this country, reparations scholars, activists and others will continue their efforts in support of the House Judiciary Committee, HR-40, which calls for a study of the economic, cultural and psychological impact of enslavement on United States citizens.

The record of the United Nations World Conference Against Racism (WCAR), held in South Africa in 2001, offers additional evidence of the global reach and relevance of the reparations movement and the work of Africans and African descendants in Africa and throughout the African Diaspora. Gates' omission of these efforts and WCAR seems to suggest either a deliberate misrepresentation or a reflection of his distance from contemporary political movements in the international African community.

We, the undersigned, intellectuals, activists, artists, professionals, men and women from various fields of focus, assemble here from a call by the Institute of the Black World 21st Century united in our profound commitment to African people and with a long history of involvement in national and international issues involving Africa and people of African descent. Signing this letter is not simply to respond to Gates' clear inaccuracies, misrepresentations and questionable timing, but rather to honor and defend the memory and interests of the victims of the Holocaust of enslavement. We have come together at this historical moment to bear continuing witness to this gross human injury and the continuing consequences of this catastrophic and horrific event and process, and reaffirm our renewed commitment to continue and intensify the struggle for reparative and social justice in this society and the world.

Committee to Advance the Movement for Reparations

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Signatories

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