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How black Ivy League alums got labeled 'gang-bangers'

by Lori Adelman 11/29/10



Langdell Hall on the campus of the Harvard Law School in Cambridge, Mass. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa)

By now, you may have heard about an [incident](#) that occurred in Boston last weekend in which a party for black Harvard and Yale alums was shut down early due to concerns that a long line of black people outside could "attract the attention of local gang-bangers".

The incident has gained national media attention, garnering coverage on this site and others and eliciting a swell of outrage from most who encounter the rather unbelievable tale.

The club owners have been accused of demonstrating everything from "overt racism" to "simple stupidity". "Is that circus music we hear in the background?" [asks an incredulous Nsenga Burton](#) on TheRoot.com. "You mean to tell us...that club owners could not tell the difference between Harvard alums and gangbangers?"

While, full disclosure, I am an alum of the college, and am acquainted with some of the involved parties, I wasn't in attendance at the (attempted) party, and am therefore not privy to every single detail regarding this particular incident. But it certainly sounds like some of the outrage surrounding the incident is not entirely misplaced: as one organizer wrote in an email to friends and attendees, the alumni were clearly "perceived as a threat because of our skin color." I'd agree with the organizer's dismay at the grim picture of race relations in our country painted by the incident.

That being said, this incident is about more than entrance to a party, or how infuriating it is for black ivy league alumni to be perceived as a "local gang-banger", or discriminated against by way of "visual affiliation" (read: skin color). In fact, it should serve as an opportunity for us to examine the ways in which we as a black community can and must view our struggles as more connected across lines of class and education, now more than ever before.

As many have been quick to point out, including the [Harvard Crimson](#), this is not the first time a racially-charged incident involving Harvard-affiliated African-Americans has made national news.

In 2007, in what some Harvard students refer to as "quadgate '07", campus police received and responded to calls from students concerned about a rowdy group of black "non-university affiliates" playing sports and listening to music on a field in the quad. In reality, the event was a picnic and field day organized and attended by black campus groups, who were subsequently approached by campus police and questioned about their entirely lawful presence on their own campus.

And of course, in 2009 the [arrest](#) of Henry Louis "Skip" Gates, Jr., professor and director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African-American Studies, after Cambridge police thought he was trying to break into his own house created a media frenzy that culminated in a "beer summit" with President Obama, Vice President Biden, Skip Gates, and his arresting officer.

In each case, black Harvard students, and later, national media outlets, protested the treatment of bona fide Harvard students as "common" non-affiliated black citizens. As one disgruntled college alumna and current graduate student at Harvard Law School put it, the incident serves as "pretty stark proof that educational or socioeconomic achievement still doesn't shield black folks from racism at all." While she acknowledged that our people have faced far greater injustices than being denied entry to a party, she maintained that "it still demonstrates that having money, status, or a fancy degree doesn't suddenly make us magically immune to racism."

It's true that it feels egregious when well-educated black people are met with blatant disrespect and the same old prejudicial treatment. But must ivy league alumni experience racism before major media outlets will take note? Such incidents should elicit communal outrage no matter the college degree of their victims. Perhaps we might focus less on the offenders' inability to distinguish who deserves to be treated with dignity and fairness, and more on why there are criteria for such treatment in the first place.

[bell hooks](#), brilliant author, feminist, and social activist, poses a related question in her groundbreaking book about rage and ending racism. "What does our rage at injustice mean if it can be silenced, erased...If aware black folks gladly trade in their critical political consciousness...then there is... no hope that we can ever live to see the end of white supremacy."

As disturbing and unjust as the November 20 incident was, it does not begin to represent the full range of social hardship faced by the black community in Boston and beyond. In Boston, which boasts one of the highest crime rates in America, the community is still mourning the loss from the murders of four people in Mattapan -- including a 2-year-old boy . Incarceration rates among blacks are soaring, obesity has become a [full-blown epidemic](#) in our community, and recent data suggests that the achievement gap for black males is even bleaker than generally known, with young black boys performing at 1/3 or even 1/4 as proficiently on key subject matters.

To be sure, none of these issues trumps the other. There is no hierarchy of oppression; all injustice must be named and addressed. The alumni didn't deserve to be treated poorly any more than anyone else.

But we must continue to call out injustice based on a sense of racial consciousness that extends beyond personal gain. "We experience the world as infinitely less hostile to blackness than it actually is," wrote bell hooks. "This shift happens particularly as we bury into liberal individualism and see our individual fate as black people in no way linked to the collective fate. It is that link that sustains full awareness of the daily impact of racism on black people, particularly its hostile and brutal assaults."

It is this sense of a linked collective fate that will prove to be the most valuable output from this unfortunate incident. And perhaps it will encourage members of our community to engage systemic and institutional racism together, across lines of race and class.

"Ultimately, whether we know it or not, black people at Harvard stand on a huge platform, and the spotlight is on us," recognized one former president of the Harvard Black Students Association. "To only really capitalize on that when we're shut out of a club, or when somebody calls the police and there's confusion on the quad, it's a bad practice. We need to pay attention and be able to offer those around us a piece of the platform to broadcast their concerns, to the betterment of our entire community."