

# THE HOTTEST DUO IN ACADEME

NEOMI RAO

*April 22, 1996 at 12:00 AM*

**S**et against the backdrop of the multicultural and progressive All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, Henry Louis (call him Skip) Gates and Cornel West fearlessly fought the conservative backlash and reaffirmed their commitment to radical chic, affirmative action, and world revolution -- all while promoting their new book, *The Future of the Race*.

Gates and West are the hottest duo in academia; as the driving force behind Harvard's African-American Studies department, Gates paid big bucks to get the in-demand, bestselling West (author of *Race Matters*) to jump from Princeton to the climes of Cambridge. In the past few years, Gates has moved from being an academic voice on political issues to being an icon in his own right -- a jet-setting journalist doing pieces on Hillary Clinton for the New Yorker, the magazine for which he has just finished guest-editing a special issue on black America.

West is definitely the more high-flown of the two; he considers himself a philosopher. His slow English transfixed the salt-and-pepper bourgeois audience at the church, his prophetic voice soothing their social consciences. "He's so reeeal!" sighed one girl seated in front of me. Gesticulating wildly with his white starched cuffs and cufflinks shining in the spotlight, West proclaimed, "We need something that can appeal to the hearts and minds and souls of America."

His first invocation was to the "lost giants," which seemed to refer to the late Ron Brown and other black leaders. But as the meeting wore on, West tried to find and resurrect all

the old "giants" who were suffering or dead, especially Marxist ones.

We need to have more dialogue locally, nationally, and of course internationally, West said, because "we're talking about international capital, global capitalism." But, West quickly added, "I'm not demonizing the rich. I'm telling the *truth!*" His voice reached a crescendo. The obliging audience applauded wildly. West's version of Marxism has none of the angst of world-historic struggle, and certainly none of the pain of the proletariat. He has the frenetic and hollow sound of a health-tonic salesman.

Occasionally, Gates would try to elevate the discourse and make West's show respectable by actually talking about something serious. For instance, how was it possible for Gates to defend the obscenity of the rap group 2 Live Crew? Not because he condoned obscenity, certainly, but because prosecuting a rap group for obscenity was a) racist and b) against the First Amendment. We should, Gates said, study 2 Live Crew in the context of racism, just as we should study *The Merchant of Venice* in the context of anti-Semitism. "This," he informs us, "is real teaching."

Criticizing Newt Gingrich and the Contract with America was another crowd-pleaser. "Our main goal is to protect, preserve, and expand affirmative action," said Gates. Thundering applause. Never mind that a majority of blacks oppose affirmative action, or that the courts continue to strike down racial preferences as unconstitutional.

Even though there are more blacks than ever before in the middle class, Gates asks, "What is the responsibility of college-educated blacks? No, even more than that, what is the responsibility of government? Of corporate America?"

For Gates and West, the battle lines are clear: wealthy white folks against poor black ones. But how exactly do bestselling authors fight capitalism? By raising money. Over

the past four years, Gates has raised over \$ 6.2 million for his department, and another \$ 2.5 million for the university's endowment.

The downtrodden, poor, and homeless were hardly attending the \$ 5 lecture: " Please, sir, can have a dollar to go hear Skip Gates and Cornel West promote their new book?" It looked like a church full of capital-drive types to me.

Gates and West position themselves above the corporate hype. Race may be a hot, money-making issue, but even West seems to realize that it can be talked to death. He asks the audience, "What is the moral content of your racial identity?" If you don't understand that, then blackness becomes "amorphous . . . promiscuous, and then, nothing at all."

West and Gates both demonstrate the viability and vitality of one form of racial identity, at least when it comes to public adulation, speaking fees, and book advances. Their success may not have all that much to do with "moral content," strictly speaking, but then, you can't have everything.

**NEOMI RAO**

---

**NEOMI RAO**