

Your ID, please?

The Henry Gates vs. James Crowley Event
from an Anthropological Perspective

Mariza Peirano

Resumo

No mundo moderno, documentos são aqueles objetos indispensáveis, sem os quais não conseguimos demonstrar que somos quem dizemos ser. Precisamos de provas materiais que atestem a veracidade da nossa autoidentificação. Neste ensaio, a prisão do professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., em julho de 2009 pela polícia da cidade de Cambridge, Massachusetts, nos Estados Unidos, após a denúncia de arrombamento de uma casa que era a própria residência do professor, é analisada de modo a examinar três mecanismos de classificação e singularização no mundo contemporâneo, a saber, “reconhecimento”, “identificação” e “profiling”.

Palavras-chave: Documentos de identidade, etnografia, Henry Louis Gates, Valentin Groebner, Charles Peirce

Abstract

In the modern world, ID papers are those indispensable objects without which we cannot prove we are who we say we are. We need material proof to attest to our identification. The central ethnographic event of this paper took place in July 2009 with the arrest of Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. by the police of the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts, after a passer-by reported that someone was breaking of the entrance door of a house which, it soon transpired, was the professor’s own house. From the analysis of this episode three mechanisms of classification and singularization are revealed, namely “recognition,” “identification,” and “profiling.”

Keywords: ID papers, ethnography, Henry Louis Gates, Valentin Groebner, Charles S. Peirce

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In the modern world, ID papers are those indispensable objects without which we cannot prove we are who we say we are. We need material proof to attest to our identification since we cannot demonstrate in words and beyond doubt that we are this or that particular person. Our word and our image are not enough. In the world we live in, these small objects, issued by official bureaux, that we carry in our pockets or in our bags – in general of plastic material (or kept inside small plastic folders), as in the case of driver's licence or credit cards, or as small booklets, such as passports, in old or new versions of IDs (with biometric data, for instance) – are like modern amulets that open doors, and in their absence, close them.¹

Identity, notion of the person, concepts of the individual, body techniques – all are anthropology's archetypal themes. But, while the subject of IDs has its theoretical foundation in those classical topics, in this paper I am interested, not in developing an abstract conceptual discussion, but in the concrete mechanisms by which the processes that result in some kind of "identification" come to term. When trying to examine contemporary events, I am especially interested in the distinction among the various forms that we use to classify and single out people around us. For this reason, instead of looking at identity as a sociological phenomenon, my field of investigation privileges questions of classification.²

1 My interest in ID papers began in the context of a research project which intended to examine the impact of the then recently implemented Brazilian Program of De-bureaucratization in the early 1980s (Peirano 1986). A second phase expanded the research to include most of the official identity papers in Brazil, a moment when I tried to investigate the semantic logic of the signs used in ID papers and the role of redundancy in these objects (Peirano 2002, 2006). That is when I was led to examine the American case, especially the absence of a national ID and the great occurrence of cases of identity theft, a phenomenon unusual in Brazil (Peirano 2009). The present essay is a follow-up to this series, this time expanding the range of possible mechanisms of identification and classification.

2 The *Savage Mind*, by Claude Lévi-Strauss, is the central reference in anthropology on the subject of classification and individualization, following the classic work by Marcel Mauss about the notion of



The central ethnographic event of this paper took place in July 2009 with the arrest of Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a well-known – albeit controversial – Harvard scholar of African-American studies, by the police of the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts, after a 911 call from a passer-by who reported that someone was breaking of the entrance door of a house in the center of the city. It soon transpired that it was the professor himself trying to get into his own house. After looking closely at this event, I go on to examine the difference between “recognition” and “identification” as proposed by Groebner (2007) to explain that identity papers and descriptions of a person may not be the same.⁴ These two modes clarify many aspects of our case, but I will in time add a third mode; that of social profiling. Following this first attempt at analysis, I present a report from a multiethnic committee, produced by the City of Cambridge and made available a year after the incident, in which both characters, the professor and the policeman who arrested him, are considered *at fault* in terms of responsibility concerning public safety. I end the paper by inviting Charles Peirce to help in discussing the implicit logic surrounding the singling out of a person by means of official IDs side by side with other less authorized forms. The expansion of the modern ideal of identification by means of official papers and other modern devices to

personhood and primitive classification. See Fry (2005, 2009) for the genealogy of “racial” taxonomies in Brazil and Nogueira (1985, 2008) for a comparison of “racial” prejudices in Brazil and the United States.

3 Image from The Martin Wong Gallery, from a release of an exhibition held during February 17-March 11, 2011, San Francisco State University Gallery of Art: <http://thewong-sfsu-edu.blogspot.com/2011/02/martin-wong-gallery-proudly-presents.html>

4 The basic interest of historian Valentin Groebner is the European Middle Ages (see Groebner 2007 for identification and recognition in early Middle Ages, and Groebner 2004 for the visual culture in the late Middle Ages).

include the persistence of “older” means of identification is, I hope, the principal contribution of this paper.

One important note in advance: although the event in question has a racial component, which, by the way, led to its intense exposure in the media, I will not focus on that specific aspect. Much has been written about identification and racism, but my approach is *ethnographic* – which means that I am interested in native conceptions and their place in the overall cosmology – and *pre-sociological* – by which I indicate that, searching for the classificatory logic in the modern public world, I center the discussion on its semiotic basis.⁵ But, by focusing on the misunderstandings of the event, the discussion is inevitably *also* about racism, though it is crucial to bear in mind that the analysis and the conclusions here presented are intended to be valid in other contexts.

The event

The description of Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s arrest on July 16th, 2009, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was only published at the beginning of the following week by *The Harvard Crimson*.⁶ *The Crimson* is a daily university newspaper that is widely read by the local community of students, teachers as well as the wider population of the town.⁷ According to the newspaper, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., professor and director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African-American Studies, then 58 years old, had been arrested on the previous Thursday, just after noon, at his Cambridge home for disorderly conduct, as reported by the Cambridge Police Department. The report said the professor was arrested for “exhibiting loud and tumultuous behavior,” during which he allegedly accused police officers at the scene of being racist. The report also said

5 Cf. Cunha (2002) for the identification practices at the beginning of the XX century in the Federal District, Brazil, and its disciplinary power in the reform implemented by the authoritarian state in the 1930s.

6 Though two different sources offered detailed descriptions of the event the following year – (i) the report *Missed Opportunities, Shared Responsibilities* (Cambridge Review Committee 2010; more below) and (ii) Ogletree (2010), as Gates’ lawyer –, I will follow the order by which the events became public. The *Harvard Crimson* published in July 20, 2009, a Monday, the following article: “Renowned Af-Am Professor Gates Arrested for Disorderly Conduct” (www.thecrimson.com/article-/2009/7/20/renowned-af-am-professor-gates-arrested-for/): “Henry Louis ‘Skip’ Gates Jr. was arrested Thursday afternoon at his Cambridge home for disorderly conduct, according to a Cambridge Police Department report. Police reports say that Gates claimed that the arrest was racially motivated.”

7 See details about the history of the newspaper on the site www.thecrimson.com.

that a woman had called the police to the scene after seeing a man “wedging his shoulder in the front door [of Gates’ house] so as to pry the door open.”⁸

When a police officer arrived on the scene to investigate the call, Gates was reportedly already having an altercation with a police sergeant inside the home. The professor allegedly shouted “This is what happens to black men in America” when asked for identification. He repeatedly told the police officer that “You don’t know who you’re messing with.” The two men then moved to the front porch, where Gates continued to shout that the sergeant was racist, catching the attention of roughly seven “surprised and alarmed” onlookers.⁹ Gates could not be reached for comment, and his assistant said that the professor was away from Cambridge for the summer, filming a documentary, and would only be making periodic visits home. During the first few days, Gates would not comment and, feeling traumatized by the entire affair, decided to rest in his summer house in Martha’s Vineyard.

On being contacted by *The Crimson*, professor Ogletree, a friend of Gates and law professor at Harvard, explained the conditions under which Gates was arrested: he was returning from a week-long trip to China and tried to enter through his front door, which was damaged. He thus forced open the front door with the help of his car driver, who also helped carry Gates’ luggage into the house. According to the same description, Gates noticed a police officer on his porch while he was on the phone requesting a door repair from Harvard Real Estate Services, which owns the home. The professor reportedly stayed inside when the officer asked him to come outside, and provided the officer with both his Harvard identification card and his driver’s license as proof that he lived at the house and taught at the University. Ogletree said Gates then asked the police officer for his badge number and name several times, but received no response.

The police sergeant, who first arrived on the scene, provided a different version. He said he had told Gates his name multiple times when requested, and that Gates had simply shouted at him. The loud yelling forced the sergeant to step out of the home, telling Gates that they could discuss the matter

8 I follow *The Crimson* to the letter in describing the events of that July 16th.

9 The Sergeant was nearby and responded to the call immediately. In the police hierarchy, the Sergeant is superior to the Officer, who is responsible to the Chief. The Lieutenant supervises the Sergeants and the Officers. See http://www.ehow.com/facts_5763736_different-ranks-police-officer_.html (accessed in July 15, 2010).

further outside. To this suggestion, Gates allegedly replied, “ya, I’ll speak with your mama outside.”¹⁰ The sergeant then asked Gates for a photo ID so as to verify he was the householder; Gates initially refused, but then did present his Harvard University identification card.

The police report said that the sergeant warned Gates many times that his behavior was becoming disorderly before the arrest and actually did so when Gates followed the officer to the front door.¹¹ The report also notes that Gates complained that the handcuffs were too tight for a disabled person and so the officers handcuffed him with his arms in front for comfort.¹² Gates was held at the Cambridge Police Station for roughly four hours before being released from custody Thursday evening, according to Ogletree.

The Crimson’s article ends with a brief CV of Henry Louis Gates: chair of the department of African and African-American studies from 1991 to 2006, he earned his M.A. and Ph.D. in English literature from the University of Cambridge after completing his undergraduate studies in history summa cum laude at Yale. Gates was awarded a MacArthur Foundation “Genius Grant” in 1981 and was named one of Time magazine’s “25 Most Influential Americans” in 1997. He is one of roughly 20 Harvard faculty members who hold prestigious University professorships, which are given to honor academic achievement that cross disciplinary boundaries. He is also known for the series “African American Lives”, of PBS (Public Broadcasting Service), about the family history of famous African Americans.

As of July 21st 2009, the news spread throughout local, national and international media: from The Boston Globe to The Washington Post, The New York Times, CBS and ABC News, CNN Transcripts, and, of course, sites such as The Root (edited by Gates himself).¹³ The affair attracted attention by the

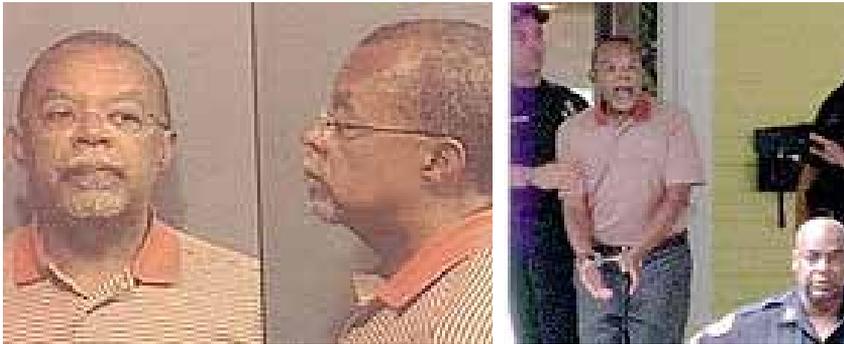
10 The expression led to reactions in several blogs. See, for instance, answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20090724030501AAc-Ev8W.

11 Gates could not be arrested inside the house except with a warrant.

12 Cf. O’Hagan (2003), accessed from the site <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/jul/20/society>: “At 14, [Gates] collapsed at school with a serious hip injury – a slipped epiphysis – which, initially misdiagnosed as psychosomatic, left him permanently damaged. He now wears an elevated shoe and walks with a cane which has become as much a signature as his smart clothes and bright demeanor.”

13 For innumerable references to published articles in the national press, and also for transcriptions of radio communications among the police force, the interview by officer Crowley, the first police report, transcript of the passerby’s 911 call, pictures of the moment Gates was arrested, see the Wikipedia site: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Louis_Gates_arrest_controversy. See, also, the site of The New York Times (from now on NYT) between July 21st and August 4th, 2009, for innumerable articles on the subject.

unusual fact that a well-known scholar had been arrested at the moment he entered his own home, mistaken as an intruder. During the first days, the focus was on Gates, the victim. Reference to Sergeant Crowley, then aged 42, who was responsible for the arrest, was rare: at that moment, the corporation was under the spotlight, not the police officer. Crowley was an opaque figure.



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The contradictory versions did not disappear, even with the broader publicity of the affair. On the contrary, its revelation reinforced them: for instance, the argument of the officer that Gates only offered his university ID when asked for his identity conflicted with Gates' insistence that he had also presented his driver's license, both with his picture and the second with his address. Another recurrent contradiction referred to the allegation of disorderly conduct and the fact that Gates yelled at the officer that was established as the motive for the arrest. The professor argued that such a claim had to be inaccurate because he had been physically incapable of yelling at the time due to a severe bronchial infection. He also denied any reference to the officer's mother. Another matter in dispute related to the allegation that the sergeant was guilty of "racial profiling," based on which Gates demanded a formal apology. The officer refused to express regret, and was backed by the Cambridge Police Superior Officers Association. The union said in a statement that Sergeant Crowley was a "highly respected veteran supervisor," who had its "full and unqualified support," adding that "his actions at the scene of this matter were consistent with his training, with the informed policies and practices of the department, and with applicable legal standards."¹⁵

At that moment, i.e., during the week following the event, a number

14 Image copied from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Louis_Gates_arrest_controversy.

15 "Massachusetts: Union Backs Sergeant Who Arrested Harvard Professor", *NYT*, July 23, 2009.

of prominent individuals were interviewed, and the difficult question of racism in America became explicit: Deval Patrick, the black Governor of Massachusetts, stated that he felt “troubled” by the situation; the Mayor of Cambridge, E. Denise Simmons, also black, suggested that the incident could have a positive aspect if taken as a teachable moment. She hoped there would be a meaningful dialogue between Gates, the police force, and the general public. Colleagues of officer Crowley argued that he was an outstanding police officer; Cambridge Police Commissioner Robert Haas called him a “stellar” member of the department whose judgment he relied upon every day. Considered a police officer “by the book”, Sergeant Crowley had been teaching a class on nothing less than “Racial Profiling” at the Lowell Police Academy since 2004.¹⁶ Leon Lashley, a black police sergeant who was also present at the incident (he is at the front in the picture of Gates’ arrest), said he fully supported how his white fellow officer had handled the situation. He added though that, had he been the first to arrive at the scene and initiated the contact with Gates, black man to black man, the result would probably have been different.¹⁷ In an interview for CNN, General Colin Powell – for the media, always an example of moderation in sensitive racial questions – tried to see both sides: in relation to Gates, he suggested that the professor should have reflected on whether or not this was the time to make that big a deal; in relation to Crowley, he indicated that some supervisor would have stepped in and said “Ok, look, it’s his house. Let’s not take this any further, take the handcuffs off, good night Dr. Gates.”¹⁸ Harvard’s president, Drew Faust, issued a statement saying she was “deeply troubled by the incident,” adding that “the legacy of racial injustice remains an unfortunate and painful part of the American experience.”¹⁹

Despite the controversies, or because of them, police charges were dropped the following Tuesday: a joint statement by the City of Cambridge, the

16 I refer to “color”/“race” following the definitions I found in the media. For instance, Mayor Simmons is labelled “black” in the article, “Officer Defends Arrest of Harvard Professor”, NYT, July 24, 2009.

17 One (awkward) piece of evidence of Crowley’s professionalism is based on the fact that, as a Brandeis University police officer on duty on July 27, 1993, he tried, by administering CPR, to resuscitate Boston Celtics star, Reggie Lewis, who had suffered a massive heart attack during a private workout on campus. Reggie Lewis was black. See “Officer Defends Arrest of Harvard Professor”, NYT, July 24, 2009.

18 See <http://gawker.com/5325278/colin-powell-on-henry-louis-gates-he-shouldve-chilled-out>, accessed February 16, 2010.

19 See “Harvard Scholar Won’t Be Charged”, NYT, July 22, 2009.

Cambridge Police Department and Gates himself considered the incident “regrettable and unfortunate”. All seemed to have come to an end when, in the middle of a White House news conference on the new health system that the administration wanted approved, President Barack Obama, a former student of Harvard and a friend of Gates, could not help giving his opinion on the incident. Confessing that he had a certain bias towards the subject, he said “it’s fair to say, No. 1, any one of us would be pretty angry; No. 2, that the Cambridge police acted stupidly in arresting somebody when there was already proof that they were [sic] in his own home; and No. 3, [...] that there is a long history in this country of African-Americans and Latinos being stopped by police disproportionately. That’s just a fact.”²⁰

That was more than enough to rekindle the whole affair.²¹ Having suggested that the Cambridge Police Department had acted “stupidly,” Obama’s remarks placed Sergeant Crowley, until then a secondary character, center stage. In this reshuffled context, feeling “deeply pained,” the officers of the Cambridge Police Department lined up behind Sergeant Crowley’s actions, arguing that they were justified, and that the officer had done nothing other than follow protocol.²²

Interviewed by a local sports radio station, Sergeant Crowley said he regretted that Obama “didn’t know all the facts” and said Professor Gates had been oddly belligerent from the start of their encounter. Specifically, he commented that it was not just what Gates said, “but the tone in which he said it” that seemed very peculiar, and even more so “now that I know how educated he is.” Though “he did not look like somebody who would break into a house,” his tone was troubling. And argued that he was only protecting himself when he asked Professor Gates, whom he did not recognize, to come out and identify himself, considering that daytime break-ins are not unheard of in the neighborhood. Crowley reaffirmed that he tried to identify himself several times, but Gates was shouting too loudly to hear. Having cautioned the

20 Cf. “Obama Criticizes Arrest of Harvard Professor”, NYT, July 23, 2009; “President Obama, Professor Gates and the Cambridge Police”, NYT, July 24, 2009. See also http://articles.cnn.com/2009-07-22/us/harvard.gates.interview_1_cambridge-police-gates-james-crowley?_s=PM:US.

21 “Obama Wades Into a Volatile Racial Issue”, NYT, July 23, 2009. See, also, “Were Obama’s Race Remarks Too Risky?”, NYT, accessed July 23, 2009. Later on, Obama’s intervention was considered a “calamitous mistake,” cf. www.nytimes.com/2010/07/25/weekinreview/25bai.html?emc=eta1.

22 “Sergeant Who Arrested Professor Defends Actions”, NYT, July 24, 2009.

professor in the house, “Calm down, lower your voice,” he was not obeyed. He added, “The professor, at any point in time, could have resolved the issue by quieting down and/or by going back into the house.”

If he had provided his driver’s license, “that would have been helpful.”

²³ And, again, he refused to apologize: “As I said yesterday, that apology will never come. It won’t come from me as Jim Crowley, it won’t come from me as a sergeant in the Cambridge police department. I know what I did was right. I have nothing to apologize for.”²⁴ But, as the repercussion of the incident increased, he confessed that he had an apology – of not recognizing Professor Gates: “I apologize that I was not aware who Professor Gates was [but] I’m still just amazed that somebody of his level of intelligence would stoop to such a level, berate me, accuse me of being a racist, of racial profiling”.²⁵

President Obama’s intervention led to a multitude of articles in the press about the narrative of racism in the United States, about the two worlds that collided in Cambridge on that fateful Thursday, police reaction to verbal abuse, on the presumption of police officers and about racial profiling.²⁶ Finding himself at the center of the controversy, and expected to make a move in a pacifying direction, exactly two weeks after the incident in Cambridge, President Obama met Gates and Crowley for a beer at the White House at the end of a working day. Reporters and photographers had 40 seconds to click their shots of the meeting, from a distance at which they could not hear the conversation. As the image shows, Vice-President Joe Biden was included in what the press called a “beer summit,” his presence producing a curious balance. Sitting at a round table, the opposed pairs included two men in shirts (the President and the Vice-President, at the end of the day), and two ordinary citizens, in suits; criss-crossing, two “blacks” with Harvard roots

²³ Harvard’s ID looks like a credit card, with picture, name, bar code and position of the bearer in the university. A driver’s license also includes the address and is issued by the Department of Motor Vehicles of the bearer’s state of residence. The first is issued by a private university; the second, by a state department.

²⁴ NYT, “Officer Defends Arrest of Harvard Professor”, July 24, 2009.

²⁵ NYT, “Officer Defends Arrest of Harvard Professor”, July 24, 2009.

²⁶ Just for The New York Times see, for instance, “As Officers Face Heated Words, Their Tactics Vary”, NYT, July 25, 2009; “An Arrest Sets Off a Dialogue on Race”, NYT, July 25; “Meet the New Elite, Not Like the Old”, NYT, July 26; “Site for Blacks Attracts Slurs After Arrest of Professor”, NYT, July 27; “2 Cambridge Worlds Collide in an Unlikely Meeting”, NYT, July 27; “A Lot Said, and Unsaid, About Race”, July 27; “Details About 911 Call in Cambridge Emerge”, NYT, July 28.

and two “white” workers (it was noted that the Vice-President was able to draw on his credibility with blue-collar, labor-union America). Nobody apologized to anyone.



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Reporters and photographers had positioned themselves on the grounds waiting for the gathering to start, when a white family of five showed up. The reporters knew that the families of Professor Gates and Sergeant Crowley had also been invited to visit the White House. Would they be the Crowleys? One reporter could not help asking: “Excuse me, may I ask who you are?”. The immediate reply by someone who knew the implications of the question: “Not who you think”.²⁸

Groebner: recognition and identification

The reporter’s question takes us directly to the book *Who Are You?*, published by historian Valentin Groebner in 2007. Here we change registers to bring to the discussion this attractive and thought-provoking text, with a strong anthropological flavour. The book engages with significant ethnographic details of historical research, without dismissing similar contemporary situations.²⁹

27 Image copied from “Over Beers, No Apologies, but Plans to Have Lunch”, *NYT*, July 30, 2009.

28 End of the article, “Over Beers, No Apologies...”, cf. last footnote.

29 Groebner (2006) clarifies in an interview: “I must confess that, despite being a historian who works on the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the way I look at my material is always informed by the world I’m living in. We like to pretend that pre-modern peoples were simple individuals with simple identities who did not have to grapple with any of the problems that we attribute to modernity. But we have an

Groebner reminds us that modern identity papers can be described as the combined outcome of techniques developed between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, such as watermarked, stamped, and signed papers bearing a seal and featuring a portrait (2007:65). He insists that, even today, we carry bits and pieces of much older systems of knowledge on our persons in official certifications of who we are (:148). The identity papers that we carry around in our pockets, handbags, and wallets on our day-to-day movements are in fact thoroughly medieval (:8). He does not determine a specific moment for the appearance of “individualism”, but rather insists on the idea that we see “medieval echoes” in our modern procedures (:223). For instance, he holds that “a closer look at medieval seals and coats of arms shows that there was no automatic development from older collective to younger individual signs” (:43). As such, individualization does not function simply as the opposite of collective features and attributions – for an individual’s insignia to be defined at all, its description had to refer to collective criteria. And, so, the common juxtaposition of collective, “medieval” signs, on the one hand, and individual, “modern” insignia, on the other, “fails to recognize that a sign could be perceived and used as such only if other, yet similar insignia existed to enable comparison” (:43).

Given that identification cannot occur without external objects, little by little, the author examines letters, certificates, seals, images, coats of arms, and other means that codified the individual “natures,” as much as to scrutinize marks on skin, clothes, colors and individual signs, up to the seventeenth century.³⁰ If individuals were recognized back then by their signs,

obligation to treat the material we find in the archives in an intellectually responsible manner and not separate it from the sharp edges of modernity or a pre-modern lost world”.

30 A fascinating part of *Who Are You?* relates to the use of categories of individual color in the Middle Ages, and indicates how the scheme with which we are familiar today was only established in the XIX century. For instance, the main medieval colors – white, red and black – were not skin colors in the modern sense, but colors of the body referring to other individual traits of the person’s complexion. The transition from the relatively undefined medieval notions, which emphasized the position of an individual in a spectrum of extremes – someone could be described as exhibiting degrees of redness, whiteness, blackness, or brownness – to the adoption of the notion of “race” or “raza” for human beings, at the end of the Middle Ages, was quite slow. See, in particular, Chapter 5, “Nature’s Way: The Color of Things”, where the examples from literature (Lancelot as being “neither too brown, nor too vermilion, or too white”) combine with real people: for instance, contemporaries described the Dukes of Burgundy, Jean de Berry, Philippe le Bon and Charles le Téméraire, “as comparatively dark.” Likewise, on a visit to the French court in 1466, Gabriel Tetzels of Nuremberg described King Louis XI as a “small man with cavernous eyes, a long nose, short legs, and of ‘brauner gestalt’ (a brown exterior).” (Groebner 2007:131).

it is because they were already disseminated throughout society, and their meaning must have remained relatively stable (:27). Extending this observation to the present day, “identity,” thus became for Groebner nothing more than a “magic word”, a fashionable obsession of the last three decades. Rather than talk about “identity,” he thus prefers “identification.” The distinction is deliberate, he emphasizes, because identification is always a process that involves more than one person – we are what others make us (:154). Likewise, recognition is not the same as identification (:17).³¹

This difference is central to our case: for Groeber, there are two very different ways to define that such a person is who she says she is: the first is by *recognition*; the other, by *identification*. The difference can be summarized thus: “we recognize a familiar face in a crowd despite the bad light, picking up on the smallest of details, be it posture, a gesture, a single word – and sometimes even against our own will” (:17). However, “*identifying* someone we have never seen before is a very different and much more tedious procedure. We compare his description with individual features: gender, height, age, eye and hair color. We match one with the other, and when we have made out a sufficient number of correspondences, we have good reason to assume that it is the person in question” (:17).³² When this process results in an ID document, it is the authority of the issuing agency that matters, and not the individual who is identified.³³

31 Groebner (2007:36). See Crapanzano (1992), Chapters 4 and 5, for an expansion of this perspective from an anthropological viewpoint.

32 In a field work research in the 1980s, in the district of Rio Paranaíba, Minas Gerais (Brazil) I was told that the “program of debureaucratization”, then in course, was not really necessary, since everybody was known to all (Peirano 1986). In Groebner’s terms, in that small town, “recognition” dominated over “identification.”

33 During the last decade, ID papers became more and more objects of interest to historians and social scientists. Today, there is significant literature about this and related subjects. Among them, there are Caplan & Torpey (2001), Scott et al. (2002), Torpey (1998), DaMatta (2002), Oliven (2001), Peirano (1986, 2006, 2009). On ID documents as artifacts of knowledge, Riles (2006); on the culture of auditing, Strathern (2002, 2006); on state narratives and their implicit violence, Scott (1998), Daniel (1996); on the logic of writing and the organization of society, Goody (1977, 1986, 1987), Clanchy (1979); about the history of signature and the post 9/11 graffiti in New York, Fraenkel (1992, 2002); on the role of numbers in modern times, Poovey (1998), Neiburg (2010); on the pragmatics of prices and the role of identification in trading room telephones, Muniesa (2007, 2008); on the historical case of the rebellion of coachmen in the XIX century Buenos Aires, Ferrari (2007); on the life of images, Mitchell (2005); about names and classificatory systems, Pina-Cabral & Viegas (2007); on objects considered as evidence, Engelke (2009); about the relationship between people by means of objects, Gell (1998); on the use of archives and documentation in contemporary art, Enwezor (2008), besides, of course, the exemplary stories of impostors (Davis 1983;

We thus return to the drama that took place in Massachusetts with an alternative narrative. Sergeant Crowley's conduct can be summarized like this: answering a call about a house break-in in the center of the city of Cambridge, he goes, despite his superior rank, to the spot because he happened to be nearby. Outside the house, he finds the woman who called the police and, in the house in question, a senior citizen out of control, complaining that a police officer is at his door only because he is black. The same man refuses to show any ID other than that of a Harvard professor and affronts the police officer with rude expressions, besides accusing him of racial profiling. In the presence of other members of the police force, who, in the meantime, had arrived responding to Sergeant Crowley's call, the sergeant arrests the professor for disorderly conduct.

What Sergeant Crowley requests is a document that proves that Louis Henry Gates is, without any reasonable doubt, who he says he is. Note, however, that this is *not* the reason why the police department backs up the sergeant afterwards, but instead Gates' behavior vis-à-vis the police officer. However, the request for an ID is part of the incident and later accounts for the officer's refusal to apologize for the detention: as he adds in the interview after President Obama's involvement, the presentation of a driver's license "would have helped." From the officer's perspective, then, he acted following the script of what Groebner calls *identification*, independently of the fact that the arrest was or not a disproportionate act. We may even remember that, arriving from a trip to China, Gates does not offer his passport – which he most certainly had at hand – as an official document of identification.³⁴

Yet Gates refuses to abide by the formal protocol and does not respond to the officer's demand because he acts following a different frame, i.e., what Groebner calls the context of *recognition*. Gates is a public figure – a well-known scholar of African-American studies at a prestigious university, besides being a regular presence on the PBS TV channel; he is a sort of "celebrity scholar" whose documentaries around the world on racial issues have a large audience.³⁵ Besides, he was in his house, in his city, a situation in which, in

Chatterjee 2002).

34 In no circumstance did I find a reference to the possibility of Gates showing his passport to the officer, an obvious option given his recent trip.

35 For one more ethnographic example of identification of a public figure, see the case of Eliot Spitzer (Peirano 2009).

principle, recognition would be more appropriate than identification. Thus, he offers the police officer what would be his most impressive and valuable ID, that of a Harvard professor.

But an important element prevents the recognition Gates anticipates: the police officer does not know who he is and, therefore, cannot (*re*)cognize him. Apparently the university ID does not prove anything – or, alternatively, proves so much in an unauthorized register that the sergeant rejects it. We may infer that a document issued by a private institution cannot be officially recognized by the police, besides not having the proper address of the bearer. That is what Crowley seems to suggest when he says that, in the whole episode, he has only one apology to make, that of not recognizing Gates – but that is exactly the cue for him to say how perplexed he is to realize that a man with such erudition could behave in such a disturbing manner.

The fact that Gates acted in the field of recognition is clear by the remark, “You don’t know who you’re messing with” as much as his answer in a blog when interviewed by his daughter: “He was there investigating? He should have gotten out of there and said, ‘I’m sorry, sir, good luck. Loved your PBS series – check with you later!’” He continues: “if he would have [sic] given me his card I would have sent him a DVD!”, a remark that makes both laugh. In another moment, after praising the system of justice, but considering it corrupted by racism and classism, Gates adds: “I think it’s difficult for ‘poor people’—poor white people, brown people—to be treated fairly before the law in the same way that upper-class people are. [...] I was lucky. I could have been in there all night with as few as three other prisoners. What if I had been anonymous and in some other place?”³⁶ It is because he moves in the terrain of recognition that he imagines one day making a documentary about the whole episode.³⁷ The power of the media gives him ammunition to contravene Crowley’s ignorance, showing him “who he was messing with”.³⁸

36 Cf. Elizabeth Gates, “My Daddy, the Jailbird”. The Daily Beast. Blogs & Stories, July 22, 2009. See www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2009-07-22/my-daddy-the-jailbird (accessed March 21, 2011).

37 There is no hint that Gates made a documentary on the episode, but six months later he said he intended to donate the handcuffs with which he was arrested (and which he obtained from Sergeant Crowley) to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African-American History and Culture. See Gates (2010) for an interview in the talk show *Oprah*.

38 This is a good example of what DaMatta (1980) would call the context of a relational logic, expressed in the (once) common Brazilian dictum “Você sabe com quem está falando?” (*Do you know who you are talking to?*).

I thus suggest that the mechanisms of “recognition” and “identification” help to advance and improve the perception of this event, full of nuances and controversies: Gates asking for *an exception* to the formal identification because everybody knows, or Crowley should have known, who he is, recognizing him, if not by his public role, by the university ID card; Crowley, acting *by the book*, holds tight to his request for legally valid identification, as much as for civility and respect as prescribed behavior. This case indicates that, despite the fact that a formal identification is the legitimate and lawful means to prove one’s identity in modern nation-states, yet other forms for establishing who is who are accomplished by possibly different and divergent means – though it is the absence of a legitimate document that proves Gates lives in his home that causes his arrest.³⁹ This interpretation does not invalidate Warner’s (2009) comment that “both men were, consciously or not, following scripts in their heads, stories of vulnerability and grievance much more meaningful than their actual.” Or, even, Maureen Dowd’s remarks in *The New York Times* in which, condemning the arrest on principle, notes the battle of egos being played: “the hard-working white cop vs. the globe-trotting black scholar, the town vs. the gown, the Lowell Police Academy vs. the American Academy of Arts and Letters”, and reminding us that, from Shakespeare to Hitchcock, dubious identities are the basis of powerful narratives, especially when they involve “race, class and testosterone.”⁴⁰

A committee for the 6-minute event

A year later, the event returned to the newspapers with the disclosure of a report written by the Cambridge Review Committee, a 12-member independent panel of law enforcement officials, community members and experts on race relations and conflict resolution, convened in September 2009 to review the arrest of Professor Henry Louis Gates and make recommendations to the police on issues of race and police authority. These experts were chosen from several universities, and included community members from the city

39 See Tambiah (1996) for the relationship between the logic of participation and the logic of causality, using as his ethnographic case the flag-burning discussion in the United States Supreme Court.

40 Cf. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/26/opinion/26dowd.html>.

of Cambridge.⁴¹ The 60-page report, under the title of *Missed Opportunities, Shared Responsibilities*, as the name indicates, does not blame any of those involved in the incident, but considers both at fault for having missed the opportunity to de-escalate the conflict which, having lasted only six minutes, echoed in several groups in Cambridge and elsewhere in the country. It mentions two opposing interpretations of the event: while some saw the encounter as a clear case of racial profiling, others perceived it as an example of conscientious police work. Recognizing the plausibility of the two positions, the committee considered both Gates and Crowley responsible: “The July 16th incident serves as a textbook example of how a police officer and a member of the community can clash if they do not share a sense of responsibility about cooperating toward the common goal of a positive encounter that results in increased public safety” (CC 2010:4).

The long report includes a summary of the July 16th event, complimentary biographies of both protagonists in their respective areas, narratives obtained in interviews with the two men, discussions on the training of the police force, and recommendations. Annexes include short biographies of the committee members, the Sergeant Crowley police report (and also that of another police officer present at the incident), official correspondence and experts’ analyses. The major part of the text focuses on the police force practices and orientations, including the relationship between procedural justice, tactics and security considerations, the training of police officers, police officer discretion, zones of conflict between police officers and residents. Written as if to have an impact and possible influence on other cities, the report is especially didactic in relation to police practices in general, and specific in relation to the way the police force may de-escalate conflicts with the population. In fact, the chairman of the committee and executive director of the police executive research forum, Chuck Wexler, remarked at a news conference that though race, class, and police authority had to be included, “this encounter is much more about the relationship that these two individuals had.”⁴²

The emphasis on the police conduct in the report is revealing, to the extent that it nuances some difficult issues, one of them being exactly the

41 See in the References: Cambridge Review Committee (2010) – from now on referred to simply as “CC 2010”. The report can be found through the following link: www.cambridgema.gov/CityOfCambridge_Content/documents/Cambridge%20Review_FINAL.pdf.

42 Cf. “Officer and Professor Faulted for Confrontation at Home”, NYT, June 30, 2010.

racial question. That aspect is only implied in the (multiethnic) composition of the committee, but actually never openly dealt with.⁴³ From the report, it looks like the conflict was basically circumscribed by the legal and police dimensions, by omission revealing how sensitive the racial theme is. While the report skirts around the racial implications of the case, the media faced them head on, recounting the sequence of the events over and over again, adding fresh comments, such as, for example, the Philadelphia Police Commissioner saying there was “nothing to suggest that race drove this,” and Crowley’s statement that “no one that knows me thought that the arrest was based on race in any way; arrests are based strictly on behavior.”⁴⁴

A second question has a more explicit sociological character: the arrest was made in front of a group of police officers, from the city of Cambridge and from the university, who were brought in by Crowley himself after Gates presented his Harvard professor ID. In addition to the police officers, there were some seven “surprised and alarmed” onlookers also nearby on the street during the altercation.⁴⁵ We may thus suspect that the police officers, to whom Crowley was hierarchically superior as a Sergeant, in addition to the passers-by, may have influenced his quick decision to arrest Gates, who continued yelling at the porch of the house. At this point, Crowley was being publicly disrespected in his official role in an open scene for all to see.

Finally, a third aspect relates to the production of ID documents, a subject matter apparently secondary to the report. Although the text includes a section of the kind “perhaps if... it could have...” (CC 2010:3), nowhere do we find a reference to the passport which Gates of course could have easily produced, since he was at that moment arriving directly from the airport from a trip to China. That would certainly have prevented the conflict from escalating as it did. The absence of a debate about the many ways identification can be achieved, and the discussion about the validity (or not) of the university ID turned out to be one of the “missed opportunities” of the report itself. On the back of the Harvard ID there is a revealing remark: “This card is the property of Harvard University, and is intended for University purposes *only*” (italics in the original)⁴⁶.

43 A detailed research was necessary to recognize the committee’s multiethnic character, including the careful reading of the members’ biographies as much as successive visits to the Google search engine.

44 See http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2010-06-30-harvard-professor-arrest_N.htm.

45 See the first article in The Harvard Crimson on the subject, published July 20, 2009.

46 I am aware, however, that university IDs are often accepted as official documents in the United

In relation to the circulation and publicizing of the text, the reaction of the two men involved was, as always, divergent, but in an inverted symmetrical sense: representing Gates, Law School Professor Charles Ogletree applauded the committee for its recommendations, but felt numerous facts were omitted, including the neighbor's testimony. That absence turned the report "sorely disappointing."⁴⁷ Sergeant Crowley – who could have been the report's most targeted individual – said in a statement that he had "learned a lot through this process", and continued "to be committed to the city of Cambridge."

Anchoring in Peirce

After considering Groebner's distinction between "recognition" and "identification" – which helped us understand many aspects of the Gates vs. Crowley event, I summon Charles Peirce to round up my argument and eventually deepen the analysis. I suggest that, from Peirce's perspective, "recognition" is a *Second*, and "identification", a *Third*. To these two mechanisms, I add "profiling" as a *First* that completes the trichotomy.

For Peirce, there are three modes of being: "I hold that we can directly observe them in elements of whatever is at any time before the mind in any way. They are the being of positive qualitative possibility, the being of actual fact, and the being of law that will govern facts in the future" (Peirce 1955: 75). Positive qualitative possibility is a *First*; an actual fact, a *Second*; the law that will govern facts in the future, a *Third*. Three is the number that defines meaning, which is never derived from simple dyadic conditions: as an example, east, west, and up are required to define the difference between right and left (:92).⁴⁸ Peirce regularly begins from experience to follow it up

States, but as such they depend on the good will of the officers or clerks receiving them. In Brazil, Christine Chaves notes that her identity from the Universidade Federal do Paraná, in which a line says it is a document "valid throughout the national territory" was always accepted for boarding a plane. The Universidade de Brasília's identity, however, because it is issued as strictly intended for university purposes, has made her miss a plane because it was the only one she carried at that moment (personal communication).

47 Cf. http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2010-06-30-harvard-professor-arrest_N.htm.

48 From Hertz to Louis Dumont, anthropologists are used to triadic relationships: for Hertz, the right hand was opposed to the left in relation to the human body; for Dumont, apparent binary oppositions reveal a hierarchical component by which the whole encompasses the elements.

with feeling and thought, so that his explanations depart from *Secondness* – an example that I follow here.

Secondness is an event, something that happens “then and there”, in which “actuality is something *brute*” (:76; italics in the original). Ethnographic events are, thus, *Seconds*. In the idea of reality, *Secondness* predominates, because the real is “that which insists upon forcing its way to recognition as something *other* than the mind’s creation” (:79). The real is active; we distinguish it by calling it *actual*. Thus, Gates’ arrest, as much as the “recognition” he expected (but did not receive), are found in the realm of *Secondness*. The handcuffs on Gates’ wrists are poignant, and indicate action, cause and coercion.

But having not “re-cognized” Gates, Crowley’s reaction follows the mode that Peirce denominates *Thirdness*, that which, based on convention, governs the facts of the future. Thus, if action is a *Second*, conduct is a *Third*; if law as active force, a *Second*, as order and legislation it is a *Third*. In our event, though the arrest was a *Second*, the rules and guidelines that Crowley follows are a *Third*. It is also on the basis of *Thirdness*, i.e., of convention, that the police force supports Crowley’s actions; he just followed the protocol for the occasion. His request that Gates provide an ID, i.e., some official proof that that was his home, besides civility towards the police authority, are legally codified. Crowley acts according to the law.

Among the American IDs, the driver’s license is the standard – a card that *identifies* the person by means of several kinds of information, some of them complementary to each other, some even redundant: name, picture, signature, address, number, state validity. The redundancy always present in ID documents is not a deficiency of the classificatory system; contrary to common sense, it is a form of ensuring, according to different modes and perspectives, that its bearer is indeed *that* person, *that* individual who he or she claims to be.⁴⁹

ID documents are thus mixed objects: in the American driver’s license (as much as in the national Brazilian ID), the signature is predominantly indexical; the picture, iconic; the name, a symbol. All these elements partake of the

49 For other examples of ethnographic situations in which redundancy is a fundamental mode in the process of *identification*, see Peirano (2006, 2009). Fraenkel (1992) – also cited in Caplan (2001:52) – suggests that, although signs of identity are in one sense heterogeneous and disorderly, the elementary signs of modern identity have come to be conventionalized as the name, the portrait, and the fingerprint. Caplan (2001:52) comments that these elements correspond, “by a logic that is surely not accidental” to Peirce’s trichotomy of signs, namely the symbol, the icon and the index.

Peircean trichotomy of the sign.⁵⁰ When Crowley requires an official ID with an address, Gates offers his Harvard ID. This card contains some elements of identification, such as name, number, occupation, bar code and expiration date; i.e., it does not *deny* who he is; it even *suggests* he is a singular person, a professor of a prestigious university. Yet, it does not *prove* he lives in the house, because there is no address on the ID. And just as the driver's license carries the formal authority of the bearer's state of residence, the university ID is issued by a prominent university, but that university is private.

It remains to focus on the neighbor who denounces the supposed break-in. Here there is a novelty: she seems to act under the umbrella of *Firstness*, a mode which is defined as a possibility, its qualities merging into one another so that “they have no perfect identities, but only likenesses, or partial identities” (1955:77). *Firstness* is something peculiar and idiosyncratic, and is predominant in feeling, as distinct from objective perception, will, and thought (1995:79). By feeling, Peirce indicates an instance “of that kind of consciousness which involves no analysis, comparison or any process whatsoever, nor consists in whole or in part of any act by which one stretch of consciousness is distinguished from another” (:81). A feeling is not an event; a feeling is a *state*. The woman who calls 911 stereotypes the two men she sees at the door of a neighboring house; she fits them into a class or category from a shape she has in her mind.⁵¹

She is under the domain of profiling. Dismissing analysis, with no evident proof, as a true *First* profiling can be just imaginary, but it affects the sensations and pushes the senses to respond to them. Though the main sense of “profile” is “the outline or contour of the human face, esp. the face viewed

50 As a case of a semiotic theory of great logical precision, I offer a brief synthesis of just one of Peirce's typological trichotomies. For a basic introduction to the author's semiotics, see Peirce (1955), especially Chapters 6 (“The Principles of Phenomenology”) and 7 (“Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs”). I copy here one of the various syntheses Peirce presents: “A regular progression of one, two, three may be remarked in the three orders of signs, Icon, Index, Symbol. The Icon has no dynamic connection with the object it represents; it simply happens that its qualities resemble those of that object, and excite analogous sensations in the mind for which it is a likeness. [...] The Index is physically connected with its object; they make an organic pair, but the interpreting mind has nothing to do with this connection, except remarking it, after it is established. The Symbol is connected with its object by virtue of the idea of the symbol-using mind, without which no such connection would exist” (1955:114).

51 When the woman and the sergeant met on the sidewalk, before the sergeant entered the house, she said one of the two men looked “hispanic”; the other she could not describe because he was already inside the house.

from one side”, the word includes also “a set of characteristics or qualities that identify a type or category of person or thing”.⁵² When profiling, one takes into account any attribute, such as clothing, skin color, origin, accessories, accent, or all of them. Even if Gates says he does not profile, he seems to be acting under the mode of *Firstness* when he says the police officer is racist by asking him for his documentation – the presence of the police arouses strong negative feelings in him. The same may be said of Crowley, in an inverted sense, when he says that the professor *did not seem* someone suspected of breaking into someone else’s house, but his behavior was suspicious.

That profiling is antagonistic to convention and to law is common sense today, although some American states seem tempted to adopt it.⁵³ The event we examined indicates furthermore that intents to domesticate *Firstness* as a feeling, and move it to understanding and analysis (i.e., a *Third*), are not unheard of. One example is the very course that Sergeant Crowley provides at the Lowell Academy of Police, which is no less than “Racial Profiling.” In short, by overlapping Peirce’s trichotomy of signs to Groebner’s two modes of discovering who is who (i.e., “recognition” and “identification”) we reached a more subtle understanding of the event and its nuances. Then adding profiling to Groebner’s modes, we associated profiling to *Firstness*, recognition to *Secondness*, and identification to *Thirdness*.

Peirce was not modest in his intellectual pretensions, aspiring even “to outline a theory so comprehensive that [...] the entire work of human reason [...] shall appear as the filling up of its details” (Brent 1998:25). The “discovery” of the trichotomy profiling-recognition-identification can thus be attributed to Peirce’s ingenuity, indicating how the ideal of *identification* by means of documentation is a central aspiration, but not a fact in modern societies. Actually, it is because profiling is so threatening to the principles and values

52 Cf. www.dictionary-reference.com.

53 The state of Arizona is such a case, allowing police officers to confer the status of any person suspected to be illegally in the country. This procedure, many people fear, could become “a wide-open invitation to racial profiling and an intrusion into federal authority” (cf. “D.I.Y. Immigration Reform,” *NYT*, March 19, 2011). In another context, Makihara (2010) reveals how profiling is legally accepted by the Japanese police force. She describes the situation in which, because she is taller than the majority of the female population, she is regularly detained in her own country for a police exam. Though there is no translation in Japanese for the word “profiling” (neither in Brazilian Portuguese) the Police Duties Execution Law establishes that “a police officer may stop and question any person who has reasonable grounds to be suspected of having committed or being about to commit a crime”, making profiling acceptable and official as a mode of identification.

of equality that it is condemned both legally and morally. It is thus in the larger context of profiling (and recognition) that ID documents work.⁵⁴ In principle, they assure that an individual is *that* person who is being identified, by the force of convention and by law, when the description in an official ID document matches the characteristics of the individual and indexes that particular human being. The request to which we are constantly and inevitably subjected, that we identify ourselves, over and over, is not going to disappear, in as much as the intrinsic ambiguities of legal papers will not die out. The many uses to which we submit them will also continue to be part of the life of ID papers. If the racial question made the Gates-Crowley event fertile to examine the subtleties present in the diverse forms by which we prove who we are, it is because legal ID documents became the legitimate objects of identification in modern states – but sure enough not the only ones to operate.

Concluding

For decades, anthropologists have been living in a universe dominated by dichotomies and binarisms, an inheritance of Saussurean linguistics, and, later on, of structuralism's popular versions. In this context, acoustic images attached to concepts became the key that opened the interpretative doors to phenomena like kinship, myths, taboos and other human manifestations. Thus Malinowski's old remark that

“[...] there is nothing more dangerous than to imagine that language is a process running parallel and exactly corresponding to mental process, and that the function of language is to reflect or to duplicate the mental reality of man in a secondary flow of verbal equivalents” (1935, vol. II: 7)

became, in general, forgotten. The predominant emphasis for the past decades resided mostly on thought and not on deeds.

54 As I write (2011), India is launching the largest biometric database that ever existed to include 1.2 billion identities. The Indian government proposes to reduce the inequality corroding the people, and help the most vulnerable citizens gain access to benefits. Aadhaar, as the new number-based system is known, is designed to be the simplest possible and will contain only name, date of birth, sex and address. Each person will be assigned a 12-digit number after having fingerprints and iris scanned. To confirm a person's identity, in principle the number along with a thumbprint will be enough. See http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/02/world/asia/02india.html?_r=1&ref=world. See also testimonies of some individuals already registered in <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/08/29/world/asia/IDENTIFICATION.html?ref=asia>.

The reinstatement of ethnography as a nodal point of anthropological theory itself, however, produced a reaction to the strait jacket of the then prevailing binarisms. From Durkheim on, we have always been aware that action *and* thought were indelibly related. It is thus time to rehabilitate Malinowski, in at least three senses: that of an “ethnographic theory,” which he proposed as an ideal goal; that of including social action as generating meaning; and additionally that of delineating a contemporary appreciation of the famous “native’s point of view.” It is in these senses that Peirce may represent a breath of fresh air, inspiring us to open space to the *actually lived*, to the object of action, to *Secondness*, to the unpredictable, and to the *imponderabilia of actual life*.

In this context, ethnographic events become, as much as rituals in the past, the pathway to a kind of anthropology that intends to be comprehensive and, thus, consequential, in theoretical and political terms. It is not the case to inaugurate a new anthropology, but “to be unoriginal in a new way” or, as Alfred Gell reinforces when proposing an anthropology of art, “to develop a new variant of *existing anthropological theory*” (1998 :4; emphasis on the original). From this perspective, action is as fundamental as the word, and the spoken and the deed are conceived as inseparable, an idea Edmund Leach propounded almost fifty years ago.⁵⁵ More recently, E.Valentine Daniel made this point forcefully when looking at violent events in Sri Lanka: “The significant divide is not between the consensus theorists and the contestatory ones, but between those who privilege the word – a group to which most academic scholars belong – and those who privilege the deed” (1996: 199). I join them, and Stanley Tambiah as well, when analyzing the United States Supreme Court decision on flag burning by means of a ritual approach in order to “correct the asymmetry [in Western intellectual discourse], and accept that there are contexts in which iconic and indexical relations are converted into ‘relations of participation’” (1996: 38). Peirce is well and alive. Accepting that an anthropological approach can be useful and relevant whenever or wherever we find significant ethnographic events, in this paper I took advantage of the attention the 6-minute Gates vs. Crowley episode received from the media and from the public in the United States – due both to the misunderstandings and the confrontations of the two protagonists, and the racial dispute they were involved in –, to disclose the many ways by which,

55 See Leach (1966); Tambiah (1985); also Peirano (2002).

notwithstanding the central place documentation holds in the life of modern states, we spend most of our lives profiling, recognizing and/or identifying one another as a matter of course.



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⁵⁶ This is a common kind of sign in Brazil, which combines the command “Stop” (*PARE*) with a parallel enlarged hand of a distant character, and the requirement to show an ID. Most signs are in red – the usual color for “danger”.

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