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THE NECESSARY ENGAGEMENT WITH YOUTH CULTURE

It is a fallacy of radical youth to demand all or nothing, and to view every partial activity as compromise. Either engage in something that will bring revolution and transformation all at one blow, or do nothing, it seems to say. But compromise is really only a desperate attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable. It is not compromise to study to understand the world in which one lives, to seek expression for one's inner life, to work to harmonize it and make it an integer, nor is it compromise to work in some small sphere for the harmonization of social life and the relations between men who work together, a harmonization that will bring democracy into every sphere of life.

—RANDOLPH S. BOURNE,
Youth and Life (1913)

When Public Enemy first came out we used to say "Public Enemy, we're agents for the preservation of the Black mind. We're media hijackers." We worked to hijack the media and put it in our own form. . . . Every time we checked for ourselves on the news they were locking us up anyway, so the interpretation coming from Rap was a lot clearer. That's why I call Rap the Black CNN.

Rap is now a worldwide phenomenon. Rap is the CNN for young people all over the world.

—CHUCK D with YUSUF JAH,
Fight the Power: Rap, Race, and Reality (1997)

When we ask, what is the state of Hiphop?, the quick answer is that Hiphop (the community) must mature to a level of self-government where it creates, regulates, and profits from its own elements, resources, and intellectual properties. The state of Hiphop is that Hiphop is being negatively exploited by the recording industries of America who manipulate its public image to sell the fantasy of pimpin', thuggin', hoein', flashin', flossin', and ballin' to predominantly young White Rap fans that are impressed by such behaviors. On the one hand it is Hiphop's rebellious image that attracts young people to it. However, on the other hand, the real lives of those that live around pimps, thugs, whores, drug dealers, etc., are far from being just fantasies of defiance that you can turn off and on when you want to feel sexy or macho! The real lives of those that are affected by injustice, lawlessness, and corruption created (and continue to create) Hiphop as a way out of oppression.

—KRS-ONE, *Ruminations* (2003)

In past moments of national division, young people have played a disproportionate role in deepening the American democratic experiment. The black freedom struggle and the anti-war movement in the 1960s were largely sustained owing to their vision and courage. As older folk become jaded, disillusioned, and weary, the lively moral energy of reflective and compassionate young people can play a vital role in pushing democratic momen-

tum. Yet one of the most effective strategies of corporate marketers has been to target the youth market with distractive amusement and saturate them with pleasurable sedatives that steer them away from engagement with issues of peace and justice. The incessant media bombardment of images (of salacious bodies and mindless violence) on TV and in movies and music convinces many young people that the culture of gratification—a quest for insatiable pleasure, endless titillation, and sexual stimulation—is the only way of being human. Hedonistic values and narcissistic identities produce emotionally stunted young people unable to grow up and unwilling to be responsible democratic citizens. The market-driven media lead many young people to think that life is basically about material toys and social status. Democratic ideas of making the world more just, or striving to be a decent and compassionate person, are easily lost or overlooked.

This media bombardment not only robs young people of their right to struggle for maturity—by glamorizing possessive individualism at the expense of democratic individuality—but also leaves them ill equipped to deal with the spiritual malnutrition that awaits them after their endless pursuit of pleasure. This sense of emptiness of the soul holds for wealthy kids in the vanilla suburbs and poor kids in the chocolate cities. Neither the possession of commodities nor the fetishizing of commodities satisfies young people's need for love and self-confidence. Instead we witness personal depression, psychic pain, and individual loneliness fueling media-influenced modes of escapism. These include the high use of drugs like cocaine and Ecstasy; the growing popularity of performing sex acts at incredibly young ages, such as middle-

school-age girls giving boys blow jobs because it will make them "cool"; and the way in which so many kids have become addicted to going online and instant messaging or creating Weblogs in which they assume an alternate personality. This disgraceful numbing of the senses, dulling of the mind, and confining of life to an eternal present—with a lack of connection to the past and no vision for a different future—is an insidious form of soul murder. And we wonder why depression escalates and suicides increase among our precious children.

The most dangerous mode of dealing with this bombardment is addiction—to drugs, alcohol, sex, or narrow forms of popularity or success. These addictions leave little room or time for democratic efforts to become mature, concerned about others, or politically engaged in social change. The popular way of escaping from the pain and emptiness is self-medication—the first step toward self-violation and self-destruction. This is why so many—too many—of the youth of America are drifting, rootless, deracinated, and denuded. They have hardly a sense of their history, little grasp of what shapes them, and no vital vision of their human potential. Many have been reduced to a bundle of desires targeted by corporate America for consumption. Their armor of life is often too feeble to enable them to withstand the emotional trauma generated, in part, by the fast-paced capitalist culture of consumption that confronts them. In short, many lack the necessary navigational skills to cope with the challenges and crises in life—disappointment, disease, death. This is why so many are enacting the nihilism of meaninglessness and hopelessness in their lives that mirrors the nihilism of the adult world—often they are so disillusioned in large

part because they can see that the adult world itself is so bereft of morality.

Yet some young folk do persevere and prevail: those who are dissatisfied with mere material toys and illusions of security. They hunger for something more, thirst for something deeper. They want caring attention, wise guidance, and compassionate counsel. They desire democratic individuality, community, and society. They know something is wrong with America and something is missing in their lives. They long for energizing visions worthy of pursuit and sacrifice that will situate their emaciated souls in a story bigger than themselves and locate their inflated egos (that only conceal deep insecurities and anxieties) in a narrative grander than themselves. Their emaciated souls contain a rage that often strikes out at the world; their inflated egos yield a cocky pose and posture that defies authority, whether legitimate or illegitimate. A grand story and a large narrative—especially democratic ones—can channel their longings into mature efforts to contribute in a meaningful way to making the world a better place. This longing is the raw stuff of democracy matters.

Like every younger generation, our kids today see clearly the hypocrisies and mendacities of our society, and as they grow up they begin to question in a fundamental way some of the lies that they've received from society. They also begin to see that their education has been distorted and sugarcoated and has sidestepped so many uncomfortable truths. This often leads to an ardent disappointment, and even anger, about the failures of our society to consistently uphold the democratic and humanitarian values that can be born in youths in this phase of their life. This new sense of con-

science in young people is a profound force that adult society should take much more seriously. In fact, we should understand the expressions of this moral outrage as having a profound kind of wisdom, even as we must also help to channel that outrage into a more productive sense of commitment to find a positive way forward.

In the political sphere, the most significant expression today of this mix of anger, disappointment, and yet a tough-edged longing is the democratic globalization movement here and abroad. Although still in the early stages, this movement to establish democratic accountability of the American empire and its global corporate behemoths is disproportionately led by the youth culture. The historical day of protest—February 15, 2003—in which millions of people in over six hundred cities (including nearly two hundred U.S. cities) protested the likelihood of a U.S. violation of international law in its invasion of Iraq exemplifies the deep democratic energy and moral fervor that youth can bring to bear. Other protests in Seattle, Prague, Washington, Rome, and Davos, Switzerland—driven largely by young people—focused international attention on the antidemocratic character of global world power centers that reinforce American imperial rule.

The central thrust of this movement is criticism of the dogma of free-market fundamentalism and the increasing wealth inequality all around the world that the slavish devotion to the dogma has produced. The movement also targets the aggressive militarism of the U.S. government and the escalating authoritarianism here and around the world. The impressive efforts to create lasting institutions out of the energy of these protests—such as the public-interest groups MoveOn and Global Citizens Campaign—exemplify demo-

cratic commitment in action. Much of the support for and enthusiasm generated by these organizations is owing to youth culture. One of the tasks to which I am devoted—as a democratic intellectual of middle age!—is to help make this movement more multiracial by linking it to black youth culture. One way I've worked at doing this is by engaging with the profound power and energy of hip-hop culture and rap music, by taking it as seriously as it should be taken.

Although hip-hop culture has become tainted by the very excesses and amorality it was born in rage against, the best of rap music and hip-hop culture still expresses stronger and more clearly than any cultural expression in the past generation a profound indictment of the moral decadence of our dominant society. An unprecedented cultural breakthrough created by talented poor black youths in the hoods of the empire's chocolate cities, hip-hop has by now transformed the entertainment industry and culture here and around the world. The fundamental irony of hip-hop is that it has become viewed as a nihilistic, macho, violent, and bling-bling phenomenon when in fact its originating impulse was a fierce disgust with the hypocrisies of adult culture—disgust with the selfishness, capitalist callousness, and xenophobia of the culture of adults, both within the hood and in the society at large. For example, the most popular hip-hop artists today are Outkast from Atlanta, Georgia. On their first album over a decade ago, in "True Dat," Ruben Bailey explained their name—an explanation that goes back to the original roots of hip-hop:

Operatin' under the crooked American system too long, Outkast, pronounced outcast, adjective mean-

ing homeless or unaccepted in society, but let's dig deeper than that.

Are you an outcast? If you understand the basic principles and fundamental truths continued within this music you probably are. If you think it's all about pimpin' hoes and slammin Cadillac doors you probably a cracker, or a nigga that think he a cracker, or maybe just don't understand.

An outcast is someone who is not considered to be part of the normal world. He's looked at differently. He's not accepted because of his clothes, his hair, his occupation, his beliefs or his skin color. Now look at yourself, are you an outcast? I know I am, as a matter of fact, fuck bein' anything else.

The first stages of hip-hop were hot. Coming from the margins of society, the lyrics and rhythms of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, Kool Herc, Rakim, Paris, the Poor Righteous Teachers, Afrikaa Bambaataa, and, above all, KRS-ONE and Public Enemy (led by Chuck D) unleashed incredible democratic energies. Their truth telling about black suffering and resistance in America was powerful. The political giants of hip-hop all expressed and continue to express the underground outlook of Outkast: righteous indignation at the dogmas and nihilism of imperial America.

Yet hip-hop was soon incorporated into the young American mainstream and diluted of its prophetic fervor.

With the advent of the giants of the next phase—Tupac Shakur, Ice-T, Ice Cube, Biggie Smalls, and Snoop Dogg—linguistic genius and gangster sentiments began to be intertwined. Ironically, their artistic honesty revealed subversive energy and street prowess in their work and life. As the entertainment industry began to mainstream the music, that street prowess became dominant—with the racist stereotypes of black men as hypercriminal and hypersexual and black women as willing objects of their conquests. The companies perceived that white kids were much more interested in the more violence-ridden, misogynist mode than in the critical, prophetic mode. This packaging for eager rebellious youth in vanilla suburbs—now 72 percent of those who buy hip-hop CDs and even more who illegally download them—led to an economic boom for the industry, until its recent downturn. Black Star, the progressive duo of Mos Def and Talib Kweli, responded to this market focus exclusively on the bottom line this way in “Hater Players”:

We started to see cats shouting “player hater” to anyone who had nerve to critique they wack shit. A lot of rich players are making wack ass music, that's the bottom line! I remember when the worst thing you could be was a sell out. Then the sell-outs starting running things. We call this song “Hater Players” because there are many players who hate the fact that we do this for love.

The prophetic Lauryn Hill notes in "Lost Ones":

It's funny how money change a situation
 Miscommunication lead to complication
 My emancipation don't fit your equation
 I was on the humble you on every station

It is important not to confuse prophetic hip-hop with Constantinian hip-hop. Prophetic hip-hop remains true to the righteous indignation and political resistance of deep democratic energies. Constantinian hip-hop defers to the dogmas and nihilisms of imperial America. As DA Smart says in "Where Ya At?":

What you trying to pull eatin' us like cannibals
 Whatever happened to that forty acres and that
 animal
 Now you tryin to use integration just to fool us
 Like Malcolm said we been hoodwinked and
 bamboozled.

That such powerful poetry and insightful social critiques could be created by youths who have been flagrantly disregarded, demeaned, and demonized by the dominant market-driven culture—targeted as cannon fodder by a racist criminal-justice system and a growing prison-industrial complex, in disgraceful schools and shattered families (including too many irresponsible, unemployed fathers) and violent environments—is a remarkable testament to the vital perspective and energy that can be injected into our

democracy by the young, who have not made their compromises yet with the corrupted system.

What a horrible irony it is that this poetry and critique could be co-opted by the consumer preferences of suburban white youths—white youths who long for rebellious energy and exotic amusement in their own hollow bourgeois world. But the black voices from the hood were the most genuine, authentic voices from outside the flaccid mainstream market culture that they could find. So the recording and fashion industries seized on this market opportunity. The present state of hip-hop—with great talents like Jay-Z, Eminem, Dr. Dre, Master P, Kanye West, Pharrell, Killer Mike, Dead Prez, and, above all, Outkast—is tenuous. Although it remains a major force in the industry, *much of the talent has gone underground*. And as Imani Perry shows in her superb book, *Prophets of the Hood* (2004), the future of hip-hop is local music. Meanwhile the neo-soul movement—Jill Scott, The Roots, Kindred, Anthony Hamilton, Ruff Endz, Dru Hill, Donnie, India.Arie, Alicia Keys—is a mellowing out of the roughness and toughness. Just as is the revival of the perennial genius of Gerald Levert, Aretha Franklin, Teddy Pendergrass, Stevie Wonder, Luther Vandross, Ronald Isley, and R. Kelly. Yet more underground hip-hop may surface soon. I hope so—for the sake of democratic energies in American life—because hip-hop has made such vital contributions to not only national but international political truth telling.

Like the forms of black music in the past, hip-hop seized the imaginations of young people across the globe. Prophetic hip-hop has told painful truths about *their internal struggles and how the decrepit schools, inadequate health care, unemployment, and drug*

markets of the urban centers of the American empire have wounded their souls. Yet Constantinian hip-hop revels in the fetishism of commodities, celebrates the materialism, hedonism, and narcissism of the culture (the bling! bling!) and promotes a degrading of women, gays, lesbians, and gangster enemies. In short, hip-hop is a full-scale mirror of the best and worst, the virtuous and vicious, aspects of our society and world.

Hip-hop culture and rap music are, in many ways, an indictment of the old generation even as they imitate and emulate us in a raw and coarse manner. The defiant and insightful voices of this new generation lyrically proclaim that they have been relatively unloved, uncared for, and unattended to by adults too self-indulgent, too self-interested, and too self-medicated to give them the necessary love, care, and attention to flower and flourish. Only their beloved mothers—often overworked, underpaid, and wrestling with a paucity of genuine intimacy—are spared. They also indict the American empire for its mendacity and hypocrisy—not in a direct anti-imperialist language but in a poetic rendering of emotional deficits and educational defects resulting from the unequal institutional arrangements of the empire.

It is important that all democrats engage and encourage prophetic voices in hip-hop—voices that challenge youth to be self-critical rather than self-indulgent, Socratic rather than hedonistic. This is why I strongly support and participate in the efforts of Russell Simmons and Benjamin Chavis to organize hip-hop into a political force that accents the plight of youth. I also support the vision of KRS-ONE and others behind the Hip Hop Temple, which

teaches youth the prophetic aims of underground hip-hop. There is also the organization of L. Londell Mcmillan—the Arts Empowerment Collective—which protects prophetic artists from abuse by the industry; and there are annual gatherings of the great musical genius Prince at Paisley Park, which bring the older generation together with the young artists in order to wrestle with political issues and enjoy performances. Prophetic hip-hop is precious soil in which the seeds of democratic individuality, community, and society can sprout.

I have experienced this sprouting on an intimate level in the making of my first CD, *Sketches of My Culture* (2001, Artemis), and my double CD, *Street Knowledge* (2004, Roc Diamond). The deep solidarity and community—shot through with critical exchange and political reflection—in Crystal Clear Studios in my old black neighborhood of Glen Elder, in Sacramento, California, is a vital democratic space for young people. Our group—Four Black Men Who Mean Business (4BMWMB)—brings together the inimitable producer and songwriter Derek “D.O.A.” Allen, the initiator and songwriter Michael Dailey, the elder leader and songwriter Clifton West (my beloved blood brother), and myself. Our aim is to teach youths the prophetic history of black music and to reveal to them the political foundations of hip-hop. We build bridges between the older and younger generations by speaking directly to them and performing with them in their own idioms and styles. These CDs are danceable education for artistic and political ends. In this way, democracy matters are woven into hip-hop culture in a respectful yet critical manner.

Hip-hop culture is hardly the only vehicle for such outreach, though it is a vital one. The disaffection of so many youths stems in large part from their perception that the adult community neither understands nor cares about the issues in their lives. Even within the university world, where the highest calling should be to spark the fires of intellectual exploration and to prepare young minds for engaged and productive participation in our democracy, the mandates of the market have attained prominence. The narrow quest for success crowds out the noble effort to be great—greatness understood as using one's success to make the world a better place for all.

A market-driven technocratic culture has infiltrated university life, with the narrow pursuit of academic trophies and the business of generating income from grants and business partnerships taking precedence over the fundamental responsibility of nurturing young minds. It is imperative for the adults who have made the life of the mind their life's calling to be engaged with the wider community and play a vital role in furthering the national discourse on the important issues of the day by exercising the ways of truth telling that engage youth. Young people are acutely aware of the hypocrisies of so many adults in the political and business worlds, and that's why those of us in the universities who are free to speak more frankly without worries of recriminations—though the degree of that freedom is under fire—can create such an important bridge.

This is why I have made not only a serious commitment to teaching and writing in the academy but also a substantive conviction to communicate to the larger culture. I have taught in prisons

for over twenty years. My numerous appearances on C-SPAN and other TV networks provide occasions to challenge fellow citizens on burning issues of the day. My weekly commentary on Tavis Smiley's National Public Radio show offers deep democratic viewpoints on U.S. foreign and domestic policies. My grappling with the legacy of slavery with young kids on Linda Ellerbee's *Nick News* highlights democratic progress. My cochairing of the National Parenting Association with Sylvia Ann Hewlett (including our books, *The War Against Parents* [1998] and *Taking Parenting Public* [2002]) spotlights the needs of children; and my recent role as Counselor West in the last two *Matrix* films supports the deep democratic vision of the Wachowskis. Furthermore, the annual Pass-the-Mic tour of several cities—with crowds of thousands paying \$50 a ticket to engage in a discussion of serious issues—that I do with Tavis Smiley and Michael Eric Dyson (the towering public intellectual of his generation) joins older and younger people in a democratic space of critique and resistance to imperial America. I have also tried to support brilliant young democratic intellectuals like Eddie Glaude Jr. of Princeton University and Farah Jasmine Griffin of Columbia University. On each of these fronts, I have been amazed at the hunger of young people for the expression of democratic ideals and for critical conversation.

I am especially inspired in my own outreach by the example of Tavis Smiley, because he is the most influential democratic intellectual in mass media of the younger generation—and possibly of any generation. His vibrant presence in the culture is always accompanied by his relentless wrestling with race and empire. He has done more than anyone to educate and inspire young people,

especially young black people, to attend to democracy matters. Tavis Smiley's commentaries appear twice a week on *The Tom Joyner Morning Show*—the black radio show with the largest audience in the country (twelve million people). His historic National Public Radio show and his TV talk show on public television are unprecedented: never in the history of mass media in America has anyone—of any color—had a National Public Radio show and a show on public television at the same time. His nine books sell swiftly. And both his Tavis Smiley Foundation for young leaders and his annual black think tank on C-SPAN are major forces for good. He understands and embodies the kind of vision and courage needed to make youth culture central to democracy matters.

I do not believe that the life of an academic—or at least all academics—should be narrowly contained within the university walls or made to serve narrow technocratic goals. Surely academics must delve deeply into the more specialized concerns of their chosen fields and must seek to make significant contributions to the furthering of those concerns—and I have done my share of writing articles that are narrowly focused on recondite issues in philosophy and specialized books such as *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (1989) and *Keeping Faith* (1993). But I also have always believed that there is a vital public role for those academics who are inclined to engage with the broiling issues of the day. The participation of academics in political protests and in the coalition building behind the most successful democratic social movements in our history has been so vital, often joining workers, students, disenfranchised citizens, activists, and

politically engaged academics in potent protests of elite corruptions and bringing youths into that energized democratic fold. Indeed, it is out of an early embrace of this rich tradition of academic engagement in the democratic doings of society—which I admired so much in so many of the intellectuals prominent when I was coming up—that I have devoted myself so determinedly to taking part. But the technocratic management culture on the rise in our universities today offers few such democratic rewards—rather crude rebukes—for those academics who embark on projects that fall outside the narrow range of the technocratic vision, especially if those projects are politically provocative. This is the narrow-minded mentality that I ran into head-on in my all-too-notorious encounter with the president of Harvard, Lawrence Summers.

My rich and promising democratic experiences of weaving a web of interconnections between the academy, mass media, prisons, churches, and the street were called into question because they did not fit into the narrow field of his technocratic vision. For Summers, the role of the professor is to engage in an elite and comfortable pursuit of academic work that is pleasing to a market-driven university management and imperial America. His vision puts a premium on accumulating academic trophies and generating sizable income in the form of government contracts, foundation grants, and business partnerships that secure the prestige of the university. This technocratic view of the academy fences professors off from the larger democratic culture and has made university life too remote from that of the larger society that supports

it. Summers found little or no value in my efforts to cultivate young minds in quality interactions outside the academy. To him, outreach to the public at large, and especially to youth culture, fell outside the mission of the university. Furthermore, he questioned my academic accomplishments and my political affiliations, without bothering either to read any of my work or to develop an understanding of how it has been regarded by the wider academic community. I would have preferred that the meeting between us that prompted me to resign from Harvard had never become public, but given that the press did have a field day with the story (full of both honest distortions and dishonest attacks), it is important for me to set the record straight. Only he and I know the truth—and the story is representative of a callous disregard for the vocation of democratically engaged intellectuals in too much of American academic life.

In early October 2001, shortly after Summers arrived on campus, I was summoned to meet with him. My friend and department head Henry Louis Gates Jr. had kindly put me on notice that President Lawrence Summers would like to talk to me. I had neither met President Summers nor would I have recognized him on the street. I had no idea what he looked like. I'd heard a few rumors about his bumpy start as leader of Harvard. He had reputedly made remarks about putting the famous Afro-American Studies Department in its place. He had held meetings with department heads and deliberately skipped over the Afro-American Studies head, Professor Gates. I had also heard that in a meeting with black employees he had said that the beneficial results of affirmative ac-

tion were not yet convincing. And there was the story of his infamous memo at the World Bank in which he suggested transporting dangerous polluted material to sub-Saharan Africa because that region suffered from overpopulation. I took those rumors with a grain of salt, though, because I had seen little hard evidence that confirmed them. I was annoyed about some of the early signs of his administration—especially regarding opposition to a living-wage campaign I strongly supported. I had also been annoyed by the administration's request at the start of the term that I reduce my course on Afro-American studies from seven hundred to four hundred students because, it said, there was no room at Harvard to teach such a large class. The latter matter dragged on for three weeks as I refused to cut back on my class, until I finally settled for teaching all seven hundred students in the basement of a Catholic church off campus owing to the support of its prophetic priest.

Just prior to my date with President Summers, Professor Gates took me aside and showed me a three-page single-spaced letter he had written to the president reviewing my sixteen books and eight coedited works, and describing my faculty advisory roles with numerous student groups. I was taken aback to discover that I was apparently under scrutiny, and I couldn't believe the amount of energy and time Professor Gates had been required to devote to the task; it seemed unnecessary, even wasteful. As a University Professor at Harvard—a special kind of professorship that resides in no department or program—I was free to teach wherever I so desired and able to cut back on my teaching load if I so desired, though I had not at all desired to and had in fact added to mine.

I didn't think I should have needed such an introduction, or needed to justify myself, to the president.

When I entered his office, Professor Summers seemed nervous as he shook my hand; frankly, he seemed uneasy in his own skin. Then, to my astonishment, this man I'd never met before started our conversation by saying that he wanted me to help him f— up Professor Harvey Mansfield, a leading conservative professor who has openly disparaged the sizable presence of black students and women at Harvard. President Summers apparently assumed that because I am a deep black democrat I would relish taking part in bringing Professor Mansfield down. To his surprise, and I would imagine embarrassment, I told him that Professor Mansfield is a friend of mine, my former teacher and a respected colleague, and that in fact I had just congratulated Mansfield at the faculty club on his superb translation (with his wife) of Tocqueville's two-volume classic *Democracy in America*. I told Summers that Professor Mansfield and I had taken part in many public debates on race, which had been wildly popular with students, that I had lectured in his classes, and that though I vehemently disagreed with Mansfield's views we never reverted to ugly language or nasty name-calling. President Summers reacted as if I'd transformed from a stereotypical hip-hop ghetto dweller into a Bible-thumping, Sunday-school-attending evangelical believer (which, in part, I am) before his eyes. I was appalled that the president of this country's premier university would take such a bullying and crude approach to his faculty.

With those pleasant formalities over, Summers then launched into a litany of complaints about me and reprimands. He complained that I had canceled classes for three straight weeks in the

year 2000 to promote the Bill Bradley campaign. That I had lent my support to a presidential candidate no one in his right mind would support (I wondered whether he meant Ralph Nader or Al Sharpton, but quickly concluded he meant the latter). He exclaimed that my rap CD was an embarrassment to Harvard, and that I needed to write a major book on a philosophical tradition to establish myself (he was apparently unaware that I had written just such a book twelve years earlier, and that I was in fact quite well established, having earlier held tenured positions at both Yale and Princeton). He then asserted that my course in Afro-American studies—and other courses in the department—were contributing to grade inflation in the curriculum. That I had to learn to be a good citizen at Harvard and focus on the academic needs of students, not the wages of workers (though, of course, I had just fought to address the needs of students by keeping my most popular class open to all seven hundred who had enrolled). That I needed to write works that would be reviewed not in popular periodicals like the *New York Review of Books* but in specialized academic journals (no book of mine has ever been independently reviewed in the *New York Review of Books*, but there's always hope). And that we should meet bimonthly so he could monitor my grades and my progress on published work. He ended his tirade with a sense of reassurance, which was accompanied by a smug grin of the arrogance I often associate with the bosses of my late father as they denied him a promotion for the nth time. What kind of reaction could he have expected from me? What kind of narrow-mindedness would drive someone in his position of authority to make such irresponsible characterizations on the basis purely of hearsay and perhaps per-

sonal and political bias? Did he believe he was beyond accountability, like some rash CEO of a corporation?

In response I looked him straight in the eyes and asked him what kind of person he took me to be. I informed him that I had missed one class in all my time at Harvard, in order to give the keynote address at a Harvard-sponsored conference on AIDS in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, led by my wife. That I don't support candidates based on what others say or respect, but based on my personal convictions. That I was as much a part of the Harvard tradition as he was (I revere the place, having graduated from Harvard College in 1973) and that if I wanted to present a danceable education to young people in their own idiom I would do so. That I had written sixteen books, including a highly respected treatment of the major American philosophical tradition (pragmatism—from Emerson to Rorty) still in print after twelve years. That the grades in my courses could stand next to any grades in any other department. That the *New York Review of Books* had never reviewed my books in a major way. That I had given over fifty lectures to student groups in my seven years at Harvard. That my office hours were often extended to five hours to accommodate students. And that I would not mind meeting him over the year but never to be monitored as if I were his negligent graduate student. At that our meeting was over.

Though the encounter should never have become news, because of the explosive nature of the situation—a clash between a prominent black Harvard professor and the brash new Jewish Harvard president—it became a news bombshell. This experience gave me a personal taste of the media's crass, sentimental nihilist quest for the juicy story. After meeting with my close colleagues at Harvard,

I had decided not to go public and simply to resign from Harvard and return to Princeton, an offer that had been extended to me long before, first by Princeton president Harold Shapiro and then by the new president, Shirley Tilghman. But then the rumors began to swirl and news reporters started to appear at my door, and though I refused to say a word, the press had a field day.

The *Boston Globe* ran a piece on the incident by a reporter who had tried to reach me for two months. The *New York Times* followed with a front-page article—without talking to me—that focused on Summers's ambivalence about affirmative action, an issue not even broached in our meeting. The next thing I knew, reporters from around the country and the world were descending on Cambridge to get the scoop on what was *really* happening at Harvard. Students responded with petitions of support. TV pundits were charging me with never showing up for classes, spending all my time in the recording studio, refusing to write books, publishing mediocre texts years ago, and mau-mauing Summers to enhance my salary. George Will even wrote that my position at Harvard was an extreme case of "racial entitlement." In the face of an onslaught like that, and after consulting my friend Professor Charles Ogletree Jr. of Harvard Law School, I decided I had to speak, and did so first with Tavis Smiley and later the *New York Times* and on *The O'Reilly Factor*. My purpose was to tell the truth, expose the lies, and bear witness to the fact that President Summers had messed with the wrong Negro.

Despite the press's focus on me and my alleged transgressions, the image of Harvard was tarnished. The media frenzy had made

Summers look not in control of the situation. When some colleagues threatened to leave with me, the Harvard overseers—his bosses—began to get nervous. The word also spread that I had more academic references in professional journals than all other black scholars in the country except my colleague Professor William Julius Wilson (also a University Professor); that I had more academic references than fourteen of the other seventeen Harvard University Professors; and that I had nearly twice as many such references as Summers himself. It had become clear that he had not done his homework—not read one page of my corpus, not listened to one note of my CD, nor consulted colleagues about my grades or my work with students on campus. Despite the premature wave of support for him in the press, the truth was emerging. So Summers requested another meeting to clear the air, and I accepted.

In our next meeting, Summers was cordial, at ease, and clearly eager to get the matter behind him. We talked movingly about my upcoming surgery (I had cancer at the time) and his courageous experience as a cancer survivor himself. He thanked me for not playing the race card. His major fear in the incident was clearly that he would be pegged as a racist—a charge already leveled at him during his years at the World Bank. I replied that in America the whole deck was full of race cards; I just felt that other issues were also at stake. He said we'd had a mere misunderstanding and apologized—more than once—to me. I replied that he had authorized every xenophobic and conservative or neoliberal newspaper writer in the country to unleash pent-up hostility toward me. And still the media distortions continued.

The next day, a story on the front page of the *New York Times* reported that Summers had not budged an inch, had held his ground against me, and had refused to apologize. I could not believe what I had read and immediately called him and asked him whether he had not in fact apologized—more than once. He said of course he had and that the story had simply gotten it wrong. Unbelievably, I was later to find out that when a contact of mine asked the reporter about the story, and whether Summers had apologized to me, the reporter said that in an interview Summers had strongly insisted that he had not apologized and would never do so. I then knew just what an unprincipled power player I was dealing with. In my next interview I called Summers the Ariel Sharon of American higher education—a bull in a china shop, a bully in a difficult and delicate situation, an arrogant man, and an ineffective leader. Needless to say, more hell broke loose. Charges of anti-Semitism were heard from New York to Tel Aviv—charges I had encountered before, given my support of the Million Man March led by Minister Louis Farrakhan, as well as my staunch opposition with my friend Rabbi Michael Lerner to Sharon's repressive policies against the Palestinians.

The whole ugly incident reflects the crass level to which the university world has sunk; it has become a competitive, market-driven, backbiting microcosm of the troubles with American business and society at large.

My disappointments were threefold. First, how little interest the Harvard faculty and the press had in waiting to ascertain the truth—*veritas*, the very motto of Harvard—as opposed to relishing

the swarm of rumor and misstatements. University professors are all too aware of what a backbiting world academic life has become, and yet they showed so little concern about academic freedom and respect for a fellow colleague. This attitude is so representative of a spinelessness in the academy that is antithetical to the important role universities should be playing in holding up standards of truth and integrity and working to impart faith in those standards to our youth.

Second, I was amazed at how parochial and personal the issue was perceived to be. It was viewed as a mere local clash of personalities, with the president upholding standards and refusing to give in to an undeserving and greedy professor. What was missed was the larger issue—a debate about the vision of the national university in the age of American empire. A well-established professor—already tenured at Yale, Princeton, and Harvard, with more publications than 95 percent of his colleagues—was told to tame his fire, limit his audience, and do what he was told in the academy by a Harvard president with a technocratic vision and bullying behavior. Universities are meant to be sanctum sanctorum of robust debate, not institutions run by dictatorial mandate. President Summers has every right to his views about affirmative action, Iraq, hip-hop culture, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and a living wage for workers at Harvard. And so do I, and I should have had the right to oppose him and insist on reasonable debate without being subjected to slightly veiled threats and overt disrespect. None of these issues about the integrity of academic freedom surfaced in the worldwide frenzy over the incident. Only a subtle article by Sam Tanenhaus in *Vanity Fair* (June 2002) raised these issues.

Third, the delicate dilemma of black-Jewish relations was boiling beneath the surface of our controversy, yet only Rabbi Michael Lerner had the courage to address it. The first Jewish president of Harvard—an institution with its own history of anti-Semitism and racism—not only comes down on a high-profile African American professor but also challenges the merits of the premier Afro-American Studies Department in the world. The tensions between blacks and Jews are so volatile and our national discourse regarding difficult issues is so stunted that thoughtful dialogue is nearly impossible. Now there is little sensitivity to and awareness of the legacy of that tension at the country's leading university.

The larger message of my sad encounter with President Summers is that it reflects a fundamental clash between the technocratic and the democratic conceptions of intellectual life in America. Summers revealed that he has a great unease about academics engaging the larger culture and society—especially the youths of hip-hop culture and democratic movements of dissent and resistance. My vision of academic engagement embraces his academic standards of excellence yet also revels in overcoming the huge distance between the elite world of the universities, the young people in the hood, and the democratic activists who fight for social change. As one who is deeply committed to the deep democratic tradition in America and to engaging youth culture, I have no intention of cutting back on my academic and outreach activities, because the effort to shatter the sleepwalking of youths who are shut out of the intellectual excitement and opportunity of the academy is such a vital one for our democracy.

It is imperative that young people—of all classes and colors—see

that the older generation in the academy cares about them, that we take them seriously, and that we want to hear what they have to say. We must be relentless in our efforts to connect with youth culture in order to impart hard-won wisdom about life's difficult journey—and keep our fragile democratic experiment alive in the future.