

THE CLASSROOM

and

THE CELL

PREVIOUS WORKS

Mumia Abu-Jamal

Live from Death Row

All Things Censored

Death Blossoms: Reflections from a Prisoner of Conscience

Faith of Our Fathers

We Want Freedom: A Life in the Black Panther Party

Jailhouse Lawyers



Marc Lamont Hill

*Beats, Rhymes, and Classroom Life: Hip-Hop Pedagogy
and the Politics of Identity*

Media, Learning and Sites of Possibility

THE CLASSROOM and **THE CELL**

**CONVERSATIONS ON
BLACK LIFE IN AMERICA**

Mumia Abu-Jamal & Marc Lamont Hill



Progressive Black Publishing Since 1967

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To those who love us and whom we love...

To those churning in an unloving world and burning
to fulfill their purpose...

To those in cages of steel, brick, fear or hatred...

To those who come after us, whose work it will be to undo our messes
and create a world where life is more precious than profit...

You have our undying love, gratitude and solidarity

Mumia Abu-Jamal

Marc Lamont Hill

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Introduction

How does a work like this come to be?

It is not by mere chance, yet who can deny that chance played a part?

Two men, separated by class, social standing and generations—not to mention brick, steel and concrete—come together.

One is not merely free but decidedly privileged, an academic ensconced in one of the nation's premier Ivy League universities. The other, is not simply un-free, but caged *en extremis*, on death row, in one of the country's most infamous prisons.

One is living by the professorial adage “publish or perish.” The other is facing the very real possibility of publishing *and* perishing.

Two men who weren't supposed to know each other.

Yet somehow, we not only managed to find one another, but to forge a deep friendship, brotherhood and love. This book, *The Classroom and the Cell: Conversations on Black Life in America*, is one of the many fruits of that bond.

Through countless phone calls, letters and visits over the past few years,

we have plumbed themes of commonality. Both of us are Black men from North Philadelphia, lifelong activists and fathers. We are both a mere three generations from slavery, living in an era more remarkable than our forbearers could ever have dreamed.

While each of us marvels at the ascendance of a Black man to the presidency of the United States, we are sobered by the reality that Black men represent the lowest percentile of college students, as well as the highest percentage of state and federal prisoners.

And yet, this is not a work of “woe-is-us” but rather the rumination of two reasonable men, observing, analyzing and contemplating this rich and rare moment in modern American history.

Both of us are serious readers, and we’ve both earned graduate degrees; the caged, a masters in the humanities; the uncaged a doctorate in the social sciences. Both of us are award-winning authors who have penned works examining this era in the nation’s life. Yet, this is not a traditional academic treatise.

Instead, we have decided to converse, in the spirit of, and with inspiration from Margaret Mead and James Baldwin’s provocative 1971 book, *A Rap on Race*, and bell hooks and Cornel West’s evocative *Breaking Bread*, which came out in 1991. Like them, we have decided to use dialogue as a method of inquiry, cultural criticism, social analysis and, toughest of all, self-examination.

Through our conversations, we wrestle with some of the most pressing questions within the Black community: How do we make sense of Black prosperity in the midst of Black misery? What does it mean to be Black, alive, conscious and resistant in the 21st century? How can we re-imagine the two major spaces that impact Black life—the classroom and the prison cell?

The professor and the prisoner try to answer these questions, and many more, with coherence, sincerity, and, yes, *hope*. Hope that this young century will be better to our people than the last one; hope that we will witness the fruition of long-claimed promises of full citizenship and recognized humanity; hope that we can love ourselves and each other into new levels of joy and freedom.

Ona Move,

M.A.J. (June, 2011)

SCI Greene Prison

Waynesburg, PA

M.L.H. (June, 2011)

Columbia University

New York, NY

Black Leadership: A Continuing Crisis?

Given the range of problems confronting the Black community, there is little doubt that there's a demand for political, intellectual and moral leadership. Sadly, perhaps more than any other moment in history, there is a dangerous absence of such leadership within our most vital institutions. In this conversation, we critically examine current and previous approaches to Black leadership, locating valuable lessons from both our successes and our failures. Through this conversation, we aim to offer a sober but hopeful vision for principled, courageous and visionary Black leadership.

Mumia: In *Breaking Bread*, his book with bell hooks, Cornel West says, "There is a profound crisis in Black leadership... [N]o one who is willing to be prophetic, in a bold and defiant manner, with a deep all-inclusive moral vision, and a sophisticated analysis of the distribution of wealth, and power and resources in our society. Black politicians can't do it because they're locked in the mode of compromise. They cannot speak with boldness and defiance, and hence, most don't. On the other hand, the Civil Rights leaders themselves are not talking about class, gender, and empire. They don't want to give a critique of multinational corporations, probably because those corporations are helping undergird their own organizations."

Marc: What's important about this quote is that it's not only spot on, but that it was articulated 20 years ago. It's sad that very little has changed with regard to the quality of Black leadership.

Mumia: And if things have changed, they've changed for the worse. Especially when you look at the conditions in the Black community on the one hand, and the explosion of the prison industrial complex on the other. Both of those things speak to the absence of real Black leadership. Black leaders today are far more numerous, but they're far more cautious. They're far less tied to Black working class people and they're far less effective. The same

can be said about the Civil Rights movement.

Marc: That's real. And that quote you just read from 20 years ago could've been written 50 years ago or it could've been written today, if we think about the intersections of race, class, gender and empire. This is especially true when we talk about the lack of a prophetic voice and, quite frankly, just a lack of courage on the Black leadership front. So many of today's

There's a lack of COURAGE among Black leaders.

leaders aren't trying to disrupt power, they just want to become power-brokers. There are a lot of us who are considered leaders often without real scrutiny of the term and all it requires. You and I are both considered leaders, but I'm always reluctant to accept that term because I'm not exactly sure what it even means at this moment. I teach at an Ivy League school. I've worked for major media outlets. So I'm certainly visible. And while I like to think I take courageous stands—shit, talking to you is a courageous stand on some level...

Mumia: Absolutely!

Marc: But at the end of the day I wonder, "*Do I satisfy the conditions or qualifications for being a leader?*" While I see you as an indisputable leader, I don't think I've arrived there yet. I see it as a work in progress. Unfortunately I think many of us, including me, are given that title too quickly, before we've earned it. And when I look into the broader sphere, at the Civil Rights leadership of today, at the activist organizations of today, I don't see the kind of vision, courage and moral character requisite for strong Black leadership. I'm curious about your thoughts, though. Has it ever really existed? Is there a leadership vacuum at this historical moment that's somehow greater or more profound than, say, in the 1950s or 1960s?

Mumia: I actually think that there was a time when there was stronger lead-

ership. I mean, of course, we have a tendency to look back at the past as this golden era, when in fact there was no golden era. Still, there was a time when Black leaders were forced to grow—because of the burgeoning, expanding and, really, exploding Black movement—in order to remain relevant. When you read the writings of Martin Luther King, Jr., you can see his transition from this very cautious petit-bourgeois preacher to a voice for those who were not in his choir, who were not of his church. Think about Martin Luther King speaking out against the Vietnam War and the hell he caught from other Black leaders. They were like, “*Whoa! Talk about the inner city but don’t be talking about no empire in Vietnam.*” King’s group lost money. His most intimate leader-colleagues turned against him. The White press, to a man, turned on him.

Marc: Right. Exactly! There are three things that you just said that resonated with me. One, even though you didn’t say it explicitly, is that the leadership at that moment was so damn young, man! Martin Luther King dies at 39. Malcom X dies at 39. Che Guevara dies at 39. All were leading movements at a young age.

Many of our current leaders are people who knocked their fathers off the stage but WON’T let their sons or daughters on.

Mumia: That’s right!

Marc: So leadership was incredibly young at that moment in history. At this moment in history it seems as if leadership is not as young. Or, better put, there is plenty of young leadership, but the dominant voices on the scene are the same voices we’ve had for 30 or 40 years. I’ve worked with some of these leaders and many of them are people who knocked their fathers off the stage but won’t let their sons or daughters get on.

Mumia: Exactly. So the strong, young Black leaders around the country never get a chance to do what they're capable of doing. What we *need* them to do.

Marc: Right. And, of course, there are exceptions. Ben Jealous has injected some youthful energy into the NAACP, even if I disagree with some of his strategies. There are also radical voices like Fred Hampton, Jr.'s in Chicago. And across the country, there are many strong, young voices in the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement. But they don't get the attention that they should because there's such a focus on old school leaders. And that's frustrating because what made those movements so powerful was—

Mumia: —the youth!

Marc: I mean, Fred Hampton, Sr. is in Chicago organizing when he's—

Mumia: —20 years old! When Huey founded the Black Panther Party, he was 24. And like you said, the old heads don't want to get off the stage. But the real deal is, you can't ask permission. I mean, Huey didn't ask for permission. He didn't write to Andy Young and Martin King and say, "Can I be down? Do you guys really mind?"

Marc: Right! Right!

Mumia: You gotta take the stage. You gotta bum-rush the mic sometimes.

Marc: You took the words right out of my mouth. They bum-rushed the show, man. And that connects to the second thing that resonated with me, which is an ethic of risk. You know, they were committed to risking their very lives in the service of freedom. When we look at how many people were railroaded. When we look through COINTELPRO—forget everything else, forget all of our so-called speculation, just look at the stuff that even the government doesn't dispute—we see so many Black leaders being taken out. People who were set up for kidnapping and bank robbery, people who were accused of being terrorists. We've seen the whole gamut of things. And many brothers and sisters knew when going into the movements that this was going to happen. I can't tell you how many activists

from the '60s tell me that they didn't pay their phone bill for three years...

Mumia: And the phone stayed on!

Marc: The government kept that phone on! So it's an ethic of risk that I see at the best moments of leadership. Not just in the 1960s, but even when we think about Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Harriet Tubman or Ella Baker. There was always this ethic of risk that stands in sharp contrast to the current lack of political courage.

Mumia: When you talk about COINTELPRO and you talk about the state violence that was visited against people who were part of a movement, we have to agree that this violence had its impact. And the impact was on successive movements, where people said, "Well, I ain't crossing that line!" And we can even talk about it in the realm of culture. For example, think about Bob Marley. Think about how reggae made its fast transformation after Bob Marley. If you listen to him, and you listen to almost everybody after that with some exceptions, the trend of the music profoundly changed. Marley was a revolutionary artist.

Marc: And that was because Bob Marley had a commitment to challenging empire, which goes to my third point. You got the youth. You got the ethic of risk. But effective Black leadership also requires us to start challenging empire. When Martin Luther King stands up and says that there's a military industrial complex, when he starts talking about the relationship between global war and global poverty, when he starts talking about these intersectional forms of power and oppression, now his project is something bigger. So when I think about Black leadership at this moment, that's what I don't see enough. I see older leaders, I see leaders who aren't willing to take a risk, and I see leaders who are unwilling to challenge the real, fundamental power structure. It's like when Bill Cosby comes out and speaks against poor Black people. Even if some of his critiques were true, that's the easy part! The challenge of true leadership isn't picking on the vulnerable. As Michael Eric Dyson pointed out, don't go out and just challenge the poor kid on the block with his pants down low. Cosby would have had more credibility if he challenged NBC as well, and if he challenged those multi-

national corporations that paid his bills for all those years...

Mumia: ...And then wouldn't let you buy the network!

Marc: Exactly! Courageous and visionary leadership requires you to take a stand and offer a critique when there's something at stake. Right now, we have a Black president who is endorsing crippling forms of global capitalism, prosecuting imperialist wars and failing to protect the most vulnerable citizens of the country. But so many Black leaders are content to be cheerleaders for the Obama Administration. Courageous and visionary leadership requires us to stand up and challenge him. And, of course, it's not "either-or," it's "both-and." We also have to protect the president from unjust and unfair assaults by those who aim to personally attack him, and, more importantly, to drag him even further to the political Right.

Mumia: True. So many of the things that Black leaders would say about George W. Bush or even Bill Clinton are not being said about President Obama. Yet they still apply! Poverty, war, civil rights, the environment—the list goes on. If we can't speak up right now, when are we gonna do it?

Courageous and visionary leadership requires you to take a STAND and offer a critique when there's something at stake.

Marc: Too many of us are content to sit at the "cool kids table." We don't want to challenge a Black president because it'll cost us some social capital, some book sales, some endorsement deals. We want to remain popular. After all, who doesn't wanna be popular? The problem is, racial justice ain't never popular. LGBT rights ain't never popular. If we are to be leaders and freedom fighters, rather than mere celebrities, then we must stand up and speak painful truths at moments of difficulty.

Mumia: Exactly. And that's a key part of your point about critiquing empire. Unless we have the courage and vision to point out how a president, even a Black one, is a part of the American empire, then our critique is lacking.

Marc: True. At the same time, there is a need for an internal critique. For a range of complicated reasons, Black people are engaged in some self-destructive behaviors, from using and selling crack and heroin to absentee parenting. How do we engage in the necessary work of collective self-criticism and taking responsibility without allowing that to become a red herring that distracts us from the structural issues that we've been pointing out?

Mumia: I agree with you, man, about the need for an internal critique. But I'm thinking it's got to be an *informed* critique, one that comes from a place of true understanding, as opposed to adding a whipping to those already whipped. From my vantage point, I see dudes, especially young bucks, who know nothing—*nothing*—about our folks' history. If they've been informed at all, it's been by their own somewhat truncated experience, and what's projected in the corporate press.

Marc: What you mean by that?

Mumia: Let me give you an example. I met a young buck here on The Row who was from North Philly. We used to talk during the one hour a day we're allowed outside our cells. I didn't know him, but his parents were about my age. In fact, he told me that his mom used to see me rolling down Columbia Avenue to the Panther Office. Anyway, he was up here in the yard rapping. Or trying to! He was saying some lyrics, like, "When I hit the bricks / I'ma be pimpin' thick / Flippin' them tricks..." So me and another older brother spoke to him when he finished, and asked him about all that pimp talk. Where did he get that stuff from? And you know where he got it from?

Marc: Where?

Mumia: He told us that he saw it in *The Mack*, the old movie with Max Julien. And when we asked why he was using the movie as a basis for reality, he

said, “I saw the movie. Wasn’t it like that back in the day?” I was shocked. I tried to tell him that it was only a movie, that real life pimps got mugged by dudes. Why? Because guys had sisters, aunts, friends and, after all, mama! I told him about dudes in my neighborhood that chased them with baseball bats. He saw a movie and he thought it was *real*. Too many people don’t know because they’ve never been told. Or they grew up, perhaps separated from their parents and elders, and looked at movies, especially from the so-called Blaxploitation era, and thought these were more than entertainment. But to quote the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, “When you know better, you do better.”

Marc: No doubt. And “knowing better” is the outgrowth of rigorous analysis, but also intergenerational dialogue. My generation cannot have a thorough understanding of the social landscape if elders aren’t committed to engaging us, offering us their own counter-stories, and preparing us for the next stages of our struggle. And, of course, we have to be willing to listen with sincerity and humility!

Mumia: Both of us have mentioned Kanye West several times. Kanye just recently apologized to George W. Bush for calling him a racist in the wake of the Hurricane Katrina. But Kanye never actually called Bush a racist. He said, “Bush don’t care about Black people.” And if you looked at Katrina, I think that was a valid assessment.

Marc: Of course! We also have to find a way to sustain and encourage and protect those courageous voices so that they don’t give in. Part of that is our responsibility.

Mumia: In addition to that protective force, the other thing is that you have to have independence. Today’s leaders have none.

Marc: Well, from a historical perspective, one of the most free, protected and independent spaces for Black people has been the church. The Black church was never all political—you could even argue that it wasn’t mostly political—but it was still a political base. In the current moment, however, how do you see the church’s role in Black leadership?

Mumia: The present generation of Black church leadership, as it relates to the Black community, is frankly quite degraded from its historical antecedents. Du Bois makes the point that, unlike many people, our first real institution was not the family, at least not in terms of a legalized structure called marriage. It was the church. That was the only place where people could feel

Our first real institution was not the family, it was the CHURCH. We had to pray in hush harbors, in the field at two in the morning, but that's where our community began. The church should be the foundation of our organizing.

whole, human, loved and part of a broader community. It was either that or the fields, you dig? And even though we had to pray in secret, in hush harbors, in the field at two in the morning, that's where community began. So one would think that the church would be the foundation of every political organization among African-Americans within the last century. As you mentioned, what made it remarkable and made it the birthplace of many of our greatest leaders was precisely because it was independent.

Marc: Independence was really crucial, right? It was a free Black institution, for the most part. Of course, we could talk about its governing ideology and the ways that White supremacy operates within the context of the church. But in many respects it was free. Nowadays, most of our institutions are underwritten by private capital, which rarely represents our best interests. There are moments of convergence between their interests and ours, but fundamentally, these organizations aren't interested in producing strong leadership or enabling the rise of independent Black institutions. And I think this idea of being a free Black institution is critical for any

type of leadership because you're not beholden to the government. You're not beholden to private capital. You have your own fundraising, your own leader. And you have your own vision. You have your own forms of tradition. You have your own forms of resistance.

Mumia: My statement of independence is far more than a sense of economic independence. By that, I mean spiritual independence. Psychological independence. I even mean cultural independence. And, of course, the farther we left the churches of the fields and the closer we came to Northern branches of those faiths and religious groups, the further from independence we became. The high water mark of church leadership might be that of Martin Luther King, Jr. as both a church leader and a Civil Rights leader. But as we've seen in the last half of the 20th century, and the beginning of the 21st, Black preachers are far less independent today than they were 40 years ago. And that's because of capital, on the one hand, and politics on the other.

Marc: You have these megachurch preachers with 16,000 parishioners—hell, a 6,000-member congregation is considered a small megachurch. And the preachers attached to them are literally bringing in tens of millions of dollars per year, easily. Shouldn't that make them more separate, more independent from these power structures?

Mumia: It would tend to make them want to think that. One would think that, yes, economically independent they would seem to be. But if you look at them and examine their rhetoric and look at their activities in the community, they are far more interlocked with political structures than, say, the Martin Luther King generation. I mean, think about Martin's wife, Coretta Scott King's, funeral. When you had two Bushes and both of the Clintons in a Black church.

Marc: Right. Right. And they're delivering votes to those people. Look at [First Baptist Church of Glenarden] in Maryland, where Pastor John Jenkins allowed President George W. Bush to speak from the pulpit, but refused to challenge his stance on affirmative action because he thought it was inappropriate. Think about all of the preach-

ers who literally delivered votes to Bush in 2004.

Mumia: Right! And not only that, what did Bush do? He did something that was extraordinary: He created the Faith Based Initiatives. Or what I like to call the FBI!

Marc: Damn! I like that—the FBI. I never peeped that before!

Mumia: Well, it's real! He began to expend federal money on churches—in many cases, Black churches. And if I take your money, homie, you own me.

Marc: Right!

Mumia: So that's what I mean about independence. What you'll see are Black preachers talking about electoral politics around election time as though they're speaking for themselves or us. But they're essentially appendages of the Democratic Party and in some cases the Republican Party. What you won't hear is them talk about independent political power for Black people. Think about the 1972 National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana. People from all across the country came together and talked about the problems and possible solutions. Well, what were they going for? A politically independent Black Party to address the needs of African-Americans. We're no closer to that today than we were in 1972.

Marc: I agree. And I think so much of it is the fact that these Black institutions have been co-opted and corrupted. They have been fully infiltrated by market values, market logic and mainstream political ideologies. No longer are we trying to be revolutionary, or even radical. Early in Black life, there was nothing more radical than Sunday school literature. Even if we disagree with the Jesus piece or the adoption of a European religious tradition, the church was nonetheless used for resistance. And there are still spaces for that, whether they're within the Unitarian movements, Black branches of the United Church of Christ, or other Black radical churches that operate in the James Cone tradition of liberation theology. These churches have refused to become fundamentalist in their reading of scripture, a position that has never worked in favor of marginalized people. They've also

managed to hold on to the “love ethic” of Jesus as the model for how we navigate the world and deal with social dilemmas. But, in general, many of our churches have adopted market logic. Even this idea of a gospel of prosperity, whereby your faith is measured by wealth—and not just your personal wealth but the wealth of your preacher—becomes a reflection of how the market has become the arbiter of Black cultural and religious and political life. The idea that these churches are basically neo-liberal, that our faith traditions have become neo-liberal, suggests that there’s no space for radical political leadership in those places ‘cause they have an unshakeable belief in capitalism. They believe that capitalism will not only free us politically, but spiritually. This is literally what cats like Creflo Dollar and Eddie Long say! That is a very strange space to occupy.

Mumia: If you analyze it philosophically and you look at the impact of say, Max Weber, on capitalism and the Protestant ethic, the same sensibility emerges.

Marc: Right. That’s an important point of reference, as it shows how this sensibility isn’t indigenous to Black religious life, but part of a much longer historical trajectory within the West.

Mumia: Absolutely. And African-American Christians and church leaders have taken that sensibility one step further. You know, Weber praised the Protestant ethic as a kind of capitalist model. In essence, he was an exemplar of the idea that the good Protestant didn’t waste his time in idleness, but in productive—as in profitable—labor. The acquisition of wealth was a mark of one’s faith in the divine. It was also God’s measure of your goodness, your holiness. It was the spiritual foundation of Yankee profiteering. When you look at American history, getting money ain’t just a hip-hop cliché—it’s the very essence of the Protestant ethic. But these preachers are saying that your salvation can literally be measured by your wealth, right?

Marc: Right.

Mumia: Because your prosperity is a mark and reflection of your faith. You know, we come from people who came to church in rags. With no shoes, right?

Marc: Teach!

Mumia: With welts from whips on their backs. But their faith was more authentic and more real than the people who were whipping them, the people who were oppressing them, and the people who so-called owned them. These were people who acted, who survived, because of their faith. And we see the exact opposite of that today. Because even though we are in America, and I never want to forget this, among the richest Black tribe in the world—

Marc: —right. That ain't saying much, but you're right!

Mumia: —Our lives are a disaster! To quote Young Jeezy, “We livin’ in hell!” Let's not fake this thing.

Marc: That's real. And that's my frustration with Black religious leadership. Too often, they're not drawing from a prophetic tradition. I don't care what your religious tradition is. You can, on some level, marshal it in the service of justice and freedom. But if you start to buy into the idea that people who are unsuccessful, simply don't work hard enough, that gays and lesbians aren't full human beings, that private greed is better than the public good, then we're no better than any other tradition. There have always been Black conservatives in the church. There have always been Black opportunists in the church. We had Sweet Daddy Grace. We had Father Divine. We had Reverend Ike. We had people selling luck 100 years ago. But they've moved from the margins to the mainstream, and now they're moving from the mainstream to the White House. These preachers get a little bit of access, they get a little bit of power, and suddenly they become proxies and agents for the radical Right Wing. And I'm not trying to suggest that their politics are completely inauthentic. Some of them really just don't believe in liberal politics, particularly on social issues. Black people are often quite conservative. I get that. But it seems to me that now there's little or no space for resistance. That notion of independence that you talked about—being divorced from these institutions, being separate from Washington, being separate from Wall Street—those are critical parts of a Black church. And it seems to me that we no longer want to speak back to Pharaoh. We're just

happy to be sitting next to him.

Mumia: But Marc, it's actually worse than that, in my opinion. You know, none of us can escape our history, individually or collectively, as a nation or in this world. And what they have really done with the adoption of this kind of market-faith psychology is betray their history. Because if you praise the market enough, you will look back and you will find that you're now in the shoes of the slave master. You see, because he believed that everything was for sale. Even your mama!

Marc: Right! Exactly!

Mumia: And the Black liberation faith that kept our people sane and alive held that there are some things that can never be bought, that were beyond the market. A human being, for example. A child. We have betrayed that. If the market is all things, then human life and human dignity and human liberation mean nothing. They have no value.

Marc: Another place that we're beginning to see Black leadership emerge, at least ostensibly, is in the academy. Of course, we have always had Black intellectuals in leadership positions, most notably the great W.E.B. Du Bois. But now, some of the most visible faces within the Black public sphere are those of Michael Eric Dyson, Melissa Harris-Perry, Cornel West and, of course, Skip Gates. These folks are household names. As someone who operates from outside the academy, how do you see the role of the Black intellectual these days?

Mumia: Many of the people who you named are, of course, exceptions to the general rule. In fact, they're kind of seen as insurgents in academia. Think about how Harvard, one of the most prestigious universities in America, essentially kicked Cornel West to the curb because he was both a scholar and a cultural worker who combined brilliant academic analysis with music. And the elite of the university said that this was unprofessional.

Marc: Right. And, of course, Cornel was a tenured university professor, so they couldn't fire him. Instead, Larry Summers, who was president of

the university at the time, came to him and questioned the legitimacy of his non-academic projects, as well as his support for the 2004 presidential campaign of Al Sharpton.

Mumia: Exactly. So one of the most brilliant minds of his generation is essentially disciplined for being too brilliant. For being academically and intellectually brilliant, but also for being a culturally brilliant person who contributes on another level. You know, most of what Cornel writes is not going to be read in the mainstream African-American community. But if he creates something like a piece of music, it will reach people who would not read one of his books, initially. But they might be turned on by the vibrations and say, “Damn this dude is bad. Let me check that book out!” So Cornel is disciplined for going outside of a narrow range of acceptable work. This really makes no sense at all because it’s all life and it’s all cultural work, is it not?

Marc: I agree man! And I think the idea that the intellectual has to operate in different spaces and engage different publics is a critical one. And I think in the past two decades, we’ve begun to see the effectiveness of that approach. For example, Cornel West can write *Race Matters*, which becomes a bestseller because he didn’t just write for an audience of 20 academics. And then he does stuff with music that attempts to reach an even wider audience. I think that’s a great

Some who are public intellectuals are more PUBLIC than they are intellectual.

idea. And when you see those of us who operate on TV, write popular books and have newspaper columns, I think we all have the potential to make powerful interventions in public life. Still, I’m concerned that some of us public intellectuals are more public than we are intellectual, and some of us aren’t doing the work that really matters anymore, you know?

Mumia: That's a valid critique because TV can capture and then corrupt far more than it can enlighten. That means that those people who are doing that work have to be challenged, and I don't mean by their academic superiors. I mean by their people. You dig? By the people who consume their work.

Marc: Right.

Mumia: You know, I wrote a piece quite a few years ago that was designed to urge revolutionary intellectuals to become part of a collective. But the academy creates this kind of individual who stands alone and above the people. None of us is an island. We are all part of a collective. Plus the very reason that many of us exist in the academic arena is that a big collective called the Black Power Movement said, "Yo!" and demanded their presence. So to ignore the collective that put them in there is, well, jive. Can I still say jive?

Marc: I like "jive." Let's take it back to the '60s, dog! But you're right! There's an ethos in the university that promotes a kind of individualism over the collective in terms of how you get tenure, in terms of how you do your work. On top of that, the academy also promotes this notion of celebrity, so that you're actually encouraged to become a so-called star in your area of expertise. As a result, you're not necessarily thinking about a collective project anymore. And for a few of us, the so-called stardom isn't limited to the academy anymore. So cats ain't just thinking about tenure and promotion; they're thinking about their next book or movie deal. I mean, there's money out here to be made. And cats are trying to get it now. They're hustling just like anybody else.

Mumia: But who does that serve? Because if you're part of a collective, first of all, you're thinking about someone other than yourself. You're thinking about your people, or at least you're thinking about your class, right? And that promotes another kind of thinking, a broader kind of thinking so that your analysis begins to serve a social project. It's not about the Ivory Tower. It's about the communal and the collective, the broader sense of what self is. And therefore, if we admit that Blacks and women and gays and other

people entered this arena because of a popular struggle, then you have to respond to the popular struggle that brought you.

Marc: Exactly! And some people would argue—and I’m starting to think that this might be the truth even though it might make me a hypocrite—that the most important and radical work that we can do as intellectuals won’t happen as members of universities. I mean, if we’re talking about leadership, then maybe intellectual leadership doesn’t have to manifest that way. Think about White intellectuals throughout the 20th century, particularly the New York intellectuals of the 1950s. They were in salons. They were in coffee shops. They were writing for newspapers. They weren’t working for a major research university and they weren’t writing to university presses. They were writing to the people. Even in the Black power movement, much of the intellectual leadership that we had didn’t come from universities.

Mumia: It came from the movement.

Marc: Right!

Mumia: But even before then, look at Du Bois. Here was a cat who essentially betrayed his class, betrayed his color in a sense—his high yellowness if you will—and devoted his life intellectually, artistically and politically to his people’s struggle, and to a class struggle. Here was a man who denounced his citizenship because he found that he was more at home in Africa, in Ghana. You dig what I’m saying? And that’s like almost unthinkable today, is it not?

Marc: You’re right.

Mumia: And you know, people forget that Du Bois was on the board of directors of Black Swan, one of the first independent Black record companies.

Marc: Wow. I didn’t know that.

Mumia: Oh yeah! I read about it in Angela Davis’s book on blues women. But

think about his impact culturally. If you read *The Souls of Black Folk*, he has a brilliant polemical work, but it's also art like a muthafucka. The poetry of it. The songs. Here's a person who is deeply inspired by the creative energy of his people. So you don't see the dichotomy between this brilliant intellectual, which he certainly was, and someone who captured in his spirit the sorrow songs of his people. But you know, my favorite Du Bois book isn't *The Souls of Black Folk*, it's *Darkwater*, which is far rougher and harder and angrier. But when you read his stuff, boy, you feel it.

Marc: That's one of the interesting things about Du Bois, and I think most people have him wrong. Most bourgeois Black scholars have sort of framed Du Bois as a bourgeois intellectual who was unabashedly elitist, who was detached from the people, and who possessed an almost blind optimism about the possibilities of American democracy in ways that blinded him to the realities of the world. Our dear brother Cornel West, to some extent, talks about Du Bois in that way in his essay "Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization," where he references Du Bois's "Enlightenment optimism." I think other people, like Adolph Reed and Anthony Monteiro, are more accurate when they say that Du Bois was with the people. Du Bois was on the ground. He had a consistent belief in the necessity of collective struggle and collective economics. Du Bois had a thorough critique of American empire and he understood the interconnectedness of race and gender and class and power. And to me, that's the correct model of engaged Black intellectual leadership.

Edward Said talks about this idea of being in exile. And when I think about the work that we do as intellectuals, I don't care if you're in the academy or not, I think we have to take on a kind of self-imposed marginality, a self-imposed exile. So that even if you're *in* the university, you're not *of* it. But also, even if you're outside the university, you don't have its sensibilities governing how you write. I mean, in your case, you're an intellectual who's writing in literal exile, right? I won't go so far as to say that your circumstance is easier, but it certainly makes it more clear what the project is and what the stakes are. You have no doubt about what you're dealing with. But, man, I think a lot of cats start to think that because they're at Harvard or Yale or Columbia or wherever, that this shit can actually work out! They start to think that it's not a real struggle so they start going for self. If there's

a failure of leadership from our intellectuals, it's that our intellectuals now want to be celebrity intellectuals rather than public intellectuals. And, look, I fall victim to that too. Shit, I got a TV show! You know what I'm saying?

Mumia: Right! Well, we all have models, no matter who we are. But when I look at models in terms of intellectuals, I can't get away from Du Bois. I can't get away from Angela Y. Davis. You dig? And these are people who, you know, walked it and talked it, and in many ways are still walking and talking. Even though Du Bois is not with us, to read his work today is to feel the power of his analysis.

Marc: Yes! *The Philadelphia Negro* still matters when we think about urban sociological analysis! *Black Reconstruction* still provides brilliant analysis of labor relations, of the political economy of war, of the psychological investment in Whiteness, education...

Mumia: And how many people are creating works that will last this way? How many people are producing work that folks will read 50 years from now and say, "Got-damn! I feel that!"

Marc: Not too many. But that's what I'm talking about!

Mumia: That's what it's about! 'Cause if it ain't about that, what's it about? It's never about the university. The university is a site. The university is a site for resistance, certainly. But it ain't home. You know, Du Bois wasn't home nowhere. Fisk gave him something, but you know University of Pennsylvania was like, "Uh, you got about two minutes to get your Black ass outta here!"

Marc: They gave him a broom closet.

Mumia: "You brilliant, but you still a nigga!" You dig what I'm saying?

Marc: No doubt. And I'm glad you mentioned Angela Y. Davis as a key leader, as so many of us will discuss Black leadership without ever invoking the name of a woman. In fact, in each of the areas we've discussed—

mainstream activist communities, Black churches, and the academy—there is a clear lack of female leadership. Clearly it's not because sisters aren't capable or willing, since each of these spaces has always been filled with brilliant, courageous and committed Black women. So how do we account for the stunning lack of female representation in leadership circles?

Mumia: Well, Marc, in my mind it's similar to your earlier critique of how older brothers didn't make room for younger leaders. They also didn't make room for sisters. That's really problematic, 'cause in each of the areas you've mentioned—activist communities, churches and the academy—who are the people in the body of these structures? Women. When I wrote *We Want Freedom*, I went back and read Bobby Seale's work, and I was actually quite surprised to find that he said that the majority of Black Panthers were women. That wasn't my recollection, but I only worked in three or four chapters and branches across the country.

We must prioritize GENDER equality as an indispensable part of any credible Black agenda.

Bobby, as chairman of the organization, certainly had a more informed view. I'd always thought that he meant to say that the most consistent and reliable members were sisters, because they showed up every day, rain, sleet or snow, and did the work. And that would certainly be true. They were the most conscientious, the most consistent, and in many ways, the most principled members and leaders. But, what about the church? Without Black women, what is the Black church but an empty building? And the same thing goes for these other institutions.

Marc: I agree. The fact that Black women demographically dominate these spaces yet have always had very little access to literal or representational power speaks to yet another perennial crisis of leadership. To me, this must be addressed in three ways. First, we must prioritize gender equality as an indispensable part of any credible Black agenda. After all, there are no

Black people or poor people who are not simultaneously gendered, and navigating a world that has differential expectations, privileges, penalties and possibilities based on those gendered identities. Second, we must demand that leaders engage in a critical gender analysis, in addition to race and class, when dealing with Black issues. For example, we can't talk about the prison industrial complex without talking about its impact on Black female bodies. We can't talk about economic globalization without talking about the ways that it is creating public health crises that have disproportionate impact on Black women. And third, we must commit ourselves to nurturing and promoting and sustaining Black female leadership, so that women aren't merely represented by proxy, even by well-meaning progressive brothers.

Mumia: Well, the Party was unlike many of our contemporaries, for it stood alone in the appointment of a Black woman who held undisputed organizational—and indeed, paramilitary—power. Read Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power*, Safiya Bukhari's *The War Before or Assata*, and you'll see it. But I think one of the problems of the movement, then, as now, is that so many dudes rose up from the church, which is strictly and profoundly patriarchal, thus they are ideologically and theologically conditioned to see women as subordinate, you dig me? But I want to go back, way back, to a cat who rose not from the church, but from the realm of activism and struggle. He was clear as crystal on the central role that women's equality and freedom played in the Black freedom struggle.

Marc: Frederick Douglass!

Mumia: Yes sir! Against catcalls and curses, Douglass openly and publicly supported the suffragist movements. He wrote, spoke, and attended such gatherings shortly after slavery, and called for women's right to vote. He extolled one of the slogans of the movement, which has a resonance and reason that we should bring alive again in our day: "Intelligence has no sex!"

Marc: One of the consistent arguments throughout history, from Black leaders, has been that gender is important, but secondary to race. They

argue that White supremacy is the organizing force and logic of America, and that we must deal with the race question first. Afterward, they argue, issues of gender, sexuality, etcetera, can be addressed. What do you make of that position?

Mumia: Hmm. That's a good one, bro. But I think it's important to read and study the writing of Black feminist thinkers on this question. Quite a few years ago, I read, *Critical Race Feminism*, a compilation of essays mostly by Black feminist scholars about the way that the law treats Black women. In it, Adrien Wing wrote that the law tends to see Black women as an additive like this: woman and Black, like $1 + 1 = 2$. She argued that Black female experience is actually multiplicative, and thus not susceptible to the simplistic legal logic of additives. She saw it as woman and Black and working class, etc., or $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$. No part of a woman can, in a real life sense, be subtracted or divided, for she is a being of many facets. This results in a whole being—single and distinctive. That always made sense to me, because it revealed the limits of the law, its shortsightedness. How can you subtract something that is integral to your being? We must abandon the legal circumscriptions for the reality of multidimensionality of our being. I think that's especially so when we look at the organizing principles of White supremacy, which adds, subtracts, divides and excludes. It is built on the principle of divide and conquer. But what if we embrace our multidimensionality? Human beings are Black, White, Indian, gay, straight, working class, poor, project-born—the list

Are we not fundamentally human, with more SIMILARITIES than differences?

goes on. Still, are we not fundamentally human, with more similarities than differences? Or do we continue to embrace the illogic foisted upon us by a system that seeks to keep us at each other's necks? That is our choice, man. We have to take on all questions, at the same time, from the perspective of our multidimensional realities, and work to bring forth a stronger, more inclusive whole that rejects the narrowness of an actually false notion of White and male supremacy.

Marc: Absolutely. And if we've properly learned the lessons of history, we will incorporate all of these factors into a new vision of leadership. This new vision must be inclusive, democratic, principled, courageous, and, most of all, animated by a deep love of all people. It's an uphill struggle to enact this vision, but it's the work we must do if want to truly redirect the destiny of our people towards freedom.

FOR YOUR LIBRARY

Betrayed, Houston Baker

A Taste of Power, Elaine Brown

The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, Harold Cruse

The Souls of Black Folk, W.E.B. Du Bois

Uplifting the Race, Kevin Gaines

Breaking Bread, bell hooks, Cornel West

Transcending the Talented Tenth, Joy James

Holy Mavericks, Shayne Lee and Phillip Sinitiere

Watch This!, Jonathan Walton

Race Matters, Cornel West

Critical Race Feminism, Adrien Wing (ed.)