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Professor and Preacher Michael Eric Dyson on Hip Hop & Politics, Don Imus, the "N"-word, and Bill Cosby



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- **Michael Eric Dyson.** Professor at Georgetown University, where he teaches Theology, English and African American Studies. He is the author of 14 books including "Come Hell or High Water" and his latest, "Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip Hop." He has been named by "Ebony" as one of the 100 Most Influential African Americans.

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Transcript

AMY GOODMAN: From war and violence to the Civil Rights Movement to hip-hop, from Hurricane Katrina to race politics, Professor Michael Eric Dyson takes it all on. Over the past fourteen years he has written fourteen bestselling books, including *Come Hell or High Water* and *Debating Race*. *Ebony* magazine has named him as one of 100 most influential African Americans. His latest book, just out now, is called *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip Hop*. Professor Dyson is an ordained Baptist minister, was just named University Professor at Georgetown where he teaches English, Theology and African American Studies. Michael Eric Dyson joins us now in our firehouse studio with the rain pouring down outside. Welcome to *Democracy Now!*

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Thank you so much. It's always great to be here with you.

AMY GOODMAN: It's great to have you with us. As we were listening to Tupac, we heard that N-word. Last week in Detroit, I think it was —

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Yes, it was.

AMY GOODMAN: — you have the NAACP holding a funeral for the N-word, burying it. What do you think?

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Yeah, I think — and Detroit is my hometown, so I'm from Detroit, and I appreciate the historical legacy of the NAACP. Some people think, well, can you get rid of the "colored" in the NAACP first before you jump on the N-word? I think, maybe — I'm an ordained Baptist preacher — maybe like Jesus, if you bury the N-word, it will rise again on the third day. I think the Holy Ghost of rhetorical fire will insist that the N-word not be buried. I don't think you can bury words. I think the more you try to dismiss them, the more power you give to them, the more circulation they have. I think that there are many more issues that the NAACP should be focused on: structural inequality, social injustice, this war in Iraq, the imperial presidency, which has subverted the democracy of the country.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, let me get your response to what Julian Bond said, the chair of

the board of the NAACP.

JULIAN BOND: I think the Don Imus controversy gave all of us a heightened awareness of how harmful the spoken word can be. And while we are great respecters of the First Amendment — had there not been a First amendment, this organization would not exist — but we don't believe it's a violation of the First Amendment to say to somebody, 'You ought not to talk that way. You ought not denigrate women. You ought not condemn people because of the color of their skin.' So this, we hope, is sending a message to the world — the country, in particular — the world, that there are certain words that ought not be spoken, and the N-word is one of them."

AMY GOODMAN: That's Julian Bond. Michael Eric Dyson?

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: I respect Julian Bond, and I think that non-black people should respect that rule. But I think when you have African American people who are employing that term — Martin Luther King, Jr., the night he was murdered, before that, when Andrew Young came in, after him being missing in action all day, King said, "Little 'N,' where have you been?" The point is that Martin Luther King, Jr. was undeniably in defense of African American people, but there are ways in which nuances, in which complex uses of that term that don't signify hate and vitriol.

And I don't think Don Imus can blame hip-hop for his problems. First of all, the demonization of black women is much older than Snoop Dogg. This is a history in America that is racist, that sees black women as oversexed, because they had to deal with the oversexed organs of their black men. But there's no question that hip-hop must bear responsibility, I'm not denying that. I think that the vitriol directed against women has to be taken on head on. But the NAACP, Rainbow/PUSH, National Action Network, let's look at their sexual politics. Let's look at the history of the Civil Rights Movement and its own tortured gender politics. No, you're not using the B-word or the H-word, but if you go to a black church, 75% to 80% of the women who are there are giving their tithes, supporting a patriarchal order, where they can cook, clean and sew, but cannot pastor a church they numerically dominate. I'll tell you, that's misogyny at its worst.

AMY GOODMAN: You have a chapter, a "track," as you put it, in your book, "Cover Your Eyes as I Describe a Scene So Violent."

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Right, right. Dealing with the reality of violence and homophobia and the assault upon women and the kind of vicious attack, black-on-black so-called crime in Black America that's being glorified and glamorized. So, again, I sympathize and empathize with Mr. Bond in regard to saying, "Look, we've got to do something about it."

I just don't think the attempt to restrict the use of the word itself among African American people — to not make a distinction between Don Imus and Snoop Dogg is rather ludicrous. I think that there is a great deal of resentment in some white pockets and communities: "Why can't we use that word?" Well, first of all, you invented the term, alright? That's not a black term. So it's not like white folk didn't have their chance, right. They invented the term. And then when black people took it over — "You know what? I'm not going to allow you to define me that way. I'm going to take a term you use as hateful and use it as a term of endearment" — in part, I know it's more complex than that. Then, now the people who invented it are going, "Well, dabgummit, how come we can't use it?" 'Cause we took the term from you. "We" being collective,

and I know I'm being over-large here.

My point is simply this: words have histories, they do track into material effects, but they also have the ability to allow us to resist them. If women use the B-word among themselves, that's different than a man using it. If gay and lesbian people use "queer" among themselves, that's different than us using it on the outside. So I think there are inside and outside discourses, and it does get messy in a global economy, where now a CD can be put out in Africa somewhere or even Japan, people who don't speak English can say the N-word among themselves, not understanding that history. I get that. But Snoop Dogg is not W.E.B. DuBois, and white kids cannot be educated by rappers. We have other intellectuals that you don't teach them to listen to who can inform them about that.

AMY GOODMAN: Do you think Imus should have been thrown off the air? Actually, now word is he's coming back.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Yeah, he's coming back. You know, look, I think at the point, at that time, Imus was an unfortunate or fortunate scapegoat and an example at the same time. Welcome to the black world, brother. So that's the world we live in. And he's a rich, rich guy. He ain't going to hurt for a while. I think he was part of a flashpoint along a bigger trajectory of contest over what can be said and not said. It's not simply about political incorrectness, because Imus was jumping on vulnerable populations, along with, you know, very powerful people. So I think the fact that he got away with that for so long, and people who are on local network television and national network television were getting a free pass. They knew Imus was making racist jokes. They knew he was saying some horrible things, and his sidekicks, but not until, ironically enough, he assaulted these poor black women, and guess what? Most of them have straightened hair, so they weren't even "nappy-headed."

The reality is, his bias obscured his ophthalmological perception. His optic nerve somehow got contorted, because these women had straight hair. There were only a couple, quote, "nappy-headed" women. So he was signifying something deeper: dark-skinned women are not seen as beautiful, lighter-skinned women are seen as beautiful. That's what he tapped into. I saw no conversation, hardly, on television about that, because these are deep, internal debates in Black America. So yeah, I think at that point, he should have been kicked off, but I'm glad to have him back. I'll see — let's just see if he's changed, as he said he is. Let's just see if he's actually been informed the way he said he was.

AMY GOODMAN: We're talking to Michael Eric Dyson, a professor now at Georgetown. Well, this is new.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: It is. It just happened July 1. You know, I went to G-town to become a Hoya.

AMY GOODMAN: I just have to say, if people hear the noise in the background, it's not a truck going by, it is rain that is falling hard on a hundred-year-old firehouse, where we broadcast from in New York. I mean, it is storming outside.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: It is storming outside. And that's a metaphor for what's going on in this country now, the hailing down of resistance and rebellion against an imperial presidency, the vicious fascism of a Dick Cheney and a Condoleezza Rice. I tell you, let it rain and cleanse us.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, talking about war, the Senate had one of these rare

overnights, where the senators got together, had pizza, had their cots outside, and they talked about the war, about possibly pulling troops out by next April, a vote that they say will not pass today.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Yeah.

AMY GOODMAN: What about the war in Iraq?

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Well, it's horrible. I mean, the fact is that we have to make a dramatic show, a theatrical show, of solidarity with the masses of people. I mean, you look at a woman like Cindy Sheehan who was saying, "Look, I'm going to hold you Democrats as equally responsible as these Republicans," and now people are pushing back on her. The reality is that we have to hold all of us accountable. And our political representatives, the neoliberal politics that have ceded the legitimacy of the war initially, now seeing that the tide of the country has turned back against them. I think the Senate has to be responsible, and I think we, as an American people, have to speak out against this war, which is costing us, you know, billions of dollars a month in a day we could be helping not only so many people here, we could actually be rebuilding the infrastructure that we have devastated. And we know hundreds of thousands of people have been killed in this vicious war on the other side, but we never hear any reporting about that. I think it's time for us as an American people to stand up and rise up and say enough is enough.

AMY GOODMAN: You've talked a lot, Michael Eric Dyson, about the prisons of this country. We've heard a lot about what happened at Abu Ghraib, what's happening at Guantanamo, at Bagram. Abu Ghraib was set up by heads of departments of corrections in this country who had been thrown out of their positions for abuse here at home.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Right.

AMY GOODMAN: Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Connecticut. The heads of these departments, disgraced, often sued, go to Abu Ghraib, and they set it up. What about this issue of what's happening here at home in the prisons of this country?

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Yeah, that's a very good point you raise, and that's a bit of history that a lot of people are not familiar with, except on your tremendous *Democracy Now!* But it is reprehensible that these people, cast out from their own native land in regard to the prison system, now create these situations of horror elsewhere. But it also shows how horrible they were on the indigenous side, on the native side. Black and Latino people disproportionately being incarcerated, over-incarcerated, poor white men and women increasingly without adequate representation, and I think that it suggests that we have an unequal and unfair justice system that continues to target vulnerable populations.

And the over-incarceration of black and brown youth is ridiculous. Amnesty International did a report about five, six years ago, saying the same offense that little white kids are rapped on their knuckles for — "Don't do that again, Johnny!" — black and brown kids are sent to detention and then on to jail and then on warehouse for prison. And on the backs of black and Latino people, we're building an entire industry that allows working-class and lower-middle-class white Americans to enjoy a decent wage, unfortunately at the expense of these people. And that's a horrible situation to be in, and we got to stop it.

AMY GOODMAN: Speaking of that, I wanted to turn to the case of the Jena Six, the

six African American high school students in Louisiana who are charged with attempted murder for a schoolyard fight with a white student. The fight took place amidst mounting racial tension after a black student dared to sit under a tree in the schoolyard where only white students sat. The next day, three nooses were hanging from the tree, it was reported, in the school colors. The first of the Jena Six, Mychal Bell, was recently convicted of aggravated battery and conspiracy charges for the fight. He now faces twenty-two years in prison. He'll be sentenced on July 31st. This is what his father, Marcus Jones, had to say about his son's ordeal.

MARCUS JONES: One of the best lessons that my son could learn that's one of the best lessons: to know what it is to be black now. You know, if this don't teach him what it is to be black now, I don't know what will. But he's seventeen now. You know, he's got a lot of life left ahead of him. And the day he set foot out of jail, I'm going to tell him, I'm going to tell him again, "You know what it is to be black now. Here it is."

AMY GOODMAN: That's Marcus Jones speaking in Jena in Louisiana. Special thanks to Jacquie Soohen of Big Noise Films, who went down, and we ran the piece on this. So his son Mychal faces twenty-two years in prison. The other five face up to a hundred years in prison each.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: This is just totally reprehensible. And it's even tragic to hear the comments of the father. I understand him as a black man in a place that is, you know, anachronistic. It's lost in time. It's as if the '60s and '70s never happened. But what's tragic here is that he doesn't have to — you know, white kids learn lessons, and they go on to become president of the United States. His kid learns a lesson, and he goes to jail possibly for ten, fifteen years and gets out and learns what it means to be black. That's tragic in its own right.

But more especially, we have to say, let's keep your son from going to jail. Let's organize and be activists and raise our voices for the Jena Six, because this white tree, as they called it, where the nooses were found, the white kids got involved in a fisticuffs, and now being charged with attempted murder is an extraordinary indictment of a justice system or an injustice system, itself, that would dare consign these kids, relegate them to prison for the better part of their adult lives, or at least as they enter adulthood. And this is something, again, that we think exists in some other country. Louisiana is already in another time warp because of Hurricane Katrina. Now we see that the justice system is just as wretched and failing the people of Louisiana, as, indeed, the federal government did when the hurricane came.

AMY GOODMAN: What about that? I mean, you wrote the book — you were on *Democracy Now!* after it was published — *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Yeah.

AMY GOODMAN: Where we are today, the US supposedly can't afford to really reconstruct New Orleans.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Right.

AMY GOODMAN: And yet, Iraq, Afghanistan.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: And yet, we're spending, you know, billions of dollars in Iraq and Afghanistan. I was just there recently for the *Essence* Music Festival and did a keynote down there and visited the Ninth Ward, along with Susan Taylor, as we call

her, the Queen of Black America. And the tragedy —

AMY GOODMAN: Of *Essence* magazine.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Of *Essence* magazine, absolutely. And the tragedy is, as you know, Amy, it looks like nothing has ever been done, because mostly that's true. The Ninth Ward is suffering. Gentilly is suffering. The entire city, except for the business district, has been nearly unmolested by enlightenment or resource. And I think that that's a tragedy in America that people have to hear that nothing has been done.

So we're organizing to go down there on 8/29, just like 9/11, 8/29, to say in the second anniversary, "We will not take this." We're calling it a day of presence. We care, and we act. We listen, and we care, and we act. So it's very important for to us go down to New Orleans and to write your congress people, to send letters and emails, to flood them. If a grassroots organization can, you know, get a horrible thing done for illegal immigration and get the Senate bill stalled by sending a million faxes, then those of us who are progressive and left-leaning or leftist and liberal and who are good Americans should do the same, and no less, when it comes to the people of New Orleans, because this is a litmus test not only for New Orleans, but what happens when many other vulnerable populations are left to their own resources without the help of the federal government.

AMY GOODMAN: Kanye West, the President doesn't like black people, making that statement live, national television —

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Right, right, doesn't care about black people, yes.

AMY GOODMAN: Doesn't care about black people. Talk about hip-hop, how Hurricane Katrina affected it, how it talked, how hip-hop artists dealt with it.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Right, right. Well, that's a great point. Lil' Wayne, who's a, you know, New Orleans rapper, spoke out about it in a very powerful way against Mr. Bush. Kanye West made his statement.

AMY GOODMAN: What did you think that day?

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: I think it was absolutely accurate. I write about this in my book. Look, he didn't say, "hate black people." He said, "doesn't care." And how do you measure — he didn't mean personally. He said the — he's talking about George Bush, not individually. He doesn't have dinner with him. He's talking about George Bush, the face of the government, George Bush, the representative of the American way of life and democratic institutions. This man, as our representative, failed to show up until five days later, so he doesn't care. How do you measure care in political terms? The development and delivery of critical resources during a critical time to vulnerable populations. He obviously doesn't care, institutionally, about these people. Whether he likes us individually, of course, I'm sure that's the case. But the institutional effect of his disregard is what was devastating.

Jay-Z made an incredible — I think the best — hip-hop song, in regard, in response to Hurricane Katrina. It's called, "Minority Report" on his latest album. Check that out. And when he talks about President Bush and the refusal to recognize and acknowledge the humanity of these people. Mos Def, "Katrina Clap," made an incredible song. So hip-hop at its best responded to this lyrically, they gave their resources. David Banner from Mississippi, Kevin Powell, the activist, who is part of the hip-hop generation and many other hip-hop artists organized especially around this issue, and it was quite admirable.

AMY GOODMAN: And what effect does it have?

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Well, I think it at least raises the consciousness of people, number one. And one of the rappers said, look, we rap all about the bling and the diamonds and we act like we're so rich. Well, then, don't tell me anything about that, and if you can't show up down here during this crisis and help people — the question is, does it have a long-term effect. Most of us, you know, have ADD, nationally speaking, right? So there's no drug to remedy that, except a memory and a recall. We have to have dangerous memories to recall what happened there. Many people have moved on. They've forgotten. They've got Katrina fatigue and compassion fatigue, and they moved on. That's why we've got to keep hammering this home. And the rappers, like many other entertainers and artists, have largely moved on, but we have to recall their attention, and we have to stage these dramatic public displays of empathy and political sympathy for those who are most vulnerable still.

AMY GOODMAN: Michael Eric Dyson, talk about conscious rap.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Well, conscious rap is a very important subgenre within hip-hop. So-called young people who are conscious of the political limitations of the culture and who are conscientious about speaking out against them, a guy like Mos Def — *"You can laugh and criticize Michael Jackson if you wanna / Woody Allen molested and married his step-daughter / Same press kicking dirt on Michael's name / shows Woody and Soon-Yi at the playoff game."* Or a guy like Talib Kweli: *"These cats drink champagne, toast death and pain / like slaves on a ship bragging about who got the flyest chain."* Or a guy like Common, who's incredibly important, wrote a song about Assata Shakur on his album *Like Water for Chocolate*. *So these are — or Lauryn Hill, : "_Even after all my logic and my theory, I add a cussword so you ignorant people hear me."* So these are rappers who understand the political definition historically communicated in African American culture about who we are as a people, and more broadly, progressive America and try bring that to bear on their rap art form.

AMY GOODMAN: Last October here in New York, hundreds of people gathered for a town hall meeting on the future of diversity in the nation's media. Speakers included a number of artists and activists from the hip hop community. One of them was M-1 of dead prez. This is some of what he had to say.

M-1: We're sick and tired of not having voices that reflect exactly our reality in our community. We're are sick and tired of that. And we're also sick and tired of being bombarded with senseless and useless and meaningless messages that don't do anything but drive forward this capitalist machine and get us to spend more and more. That's not what we want to hear. That's not what we want to hear.

I work for the people. The streets is my office. I put my ear to the ground, and I hear our movement. That's not being reported on the radio. It's not what's being seen on the TV. That's what I do, you know, as a social animal. And right now, I'm here to say that the word for today is "self-determination." That's what we need: self-determination. That's what — inside this meeting, outside this meeting, over our lives, and it's being reflected in what's happening to our brains.

What would Huey say? On the 40th anniversary of the Black Panther Party, what would Huey P. Newton say? "Community control." Just like my partner here said. If we ain't talking about complete community control, if we're not about the people being able to govern the voices that's coming

into our community — our elders, our ancestors, our leaders. Like we say in hip-hop, let the poppers pop and the breakers break. In other words, let the leaders lead, and let that be the filter for what's being heard in our community, the real that need to be heard in our community.

AMY GOODMAN: M-1 of dead prez.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Yeah, a highly articulate, incredibly insightful young man, and he's right. A lot — what dead prez does, "Mind Sex," "Revolutionary But Gangsta," some of their hits and songs, this group has not been nearly accorded the level of respect that it should have for being politically conscientious or, you know, on the frontline, on the cutting edge, trying to tell the truth. And that's not a popular truth.

You know, the white record executives, and increasingly the black ones, who control rap music are not trying to hear self-critical, self-conscious, political rap, as opposed to belligerent behinds and bouncing bosoms. They'd rather have that kind of stuff — the bling, the broad, the booze — as opposed to the serious political rebellion and activity. As he says, "The streets is my office, I keep my ear to the ground, and that's not been reported." Most black radio and broader radio doesn't play the kind of progressive hip-hop we hear from him or the Coup, a Bay Area group, as well.

AMY GOODMAN: Who determines what's heard?

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Well, the people who play the music, the payola. You know, there's still payola. We can call that an anachronistic term, but people who pay the dough to get the top twenty hits played. We hear the same thing mindlessly repeated. Record labels collude with some of the radio stations, and the radio stations have their play lists, dependent upon what they call the, quote, "hits." What's commercially viable gets recycled, endlessly repeated, and as a result of that, the progressive music can't break in. And some of the best artists who are commercially viable, some of their best work can't even get heard. So we might hear, "Show Me What You Got" from Jay-Z, but we won't hear "Minority Report," as well, and he's making that kind of brilliant music. So if a guy like that who's making commercially viable music can't get the other stuff played, then much less can a guy like M-1 or a Talib Kweli get heard.

AMY GOODMAN: M-1 came to our studios, oh, a few years ago, when we were in the garret of this old firehouse. This is his rap:

*M-1: She wanna pop the lock,
but prison ain't nothing but a private stock.
And she be dreaming 'bout his date of release.
She hate the police,
but loved by her grandma
who hugs and kisses her.
Her father's a political prisoner.
Free Fred!
Son of a Panther that the government shot dead
back on 12/4, 1969,
Four o'clock in the morning.
It's terrible, but it's fine.
'Cause Fred Hampton, Jr. looks just like him,
walks just like him, talks just like him,
and it might be frightening the feds and the snitches
to see him organize the gang brothers and sisters.
So he had to be framed, yo.*

*You know how the game go:
 eighteen years, because the 5-0 said so.
 They said he set a fire to a Korean store,
 but he ignited the minds of the young black and poor.
 Behind enemy lines, my niggers are cellmates.
 Most of the youth never escape the jail fate.
 Super-maximum cans will advance their game plan
 to keep us in the hands of the man, locked up.*

*For Tupac.
 They try to make us think we crazy,
 but I know what they doin',
 they tryin' to put us back in slavery.
 Check it, to get on welfare, you got to give your finger prints.
 Soon you got to do eye scans to get your benefits.
 Now they got them cards to swipe. Ain't no more food stamps.
 Should have seen it coming. It's too late to get amped.
 And everything got a bar code,
 so they know what you got when you got it
 and what you still owe.*

*This is for Mumia and Sundiata, Herman Bell, we gotcha.
 Mutulu Shakur, we want you free with Assata.
 And, Giuliani, yo, you could swim with the lobsters.
 I hope your mobsters lose your livers to the vodka.
 Somebody need to get took hostage.
 This is preposterous.
 Got a whole nation up in bondage.
 It might sound rash, but, brothers, we 'bout to crash.
 We're in a race for life. You're thinkin' it's for cash flow.
 I'm going to be the asshole coming in the party to harass you.
 Or should I say f--- it and just dance to,
 But we don't dance no more, unless it's capoiara.
 We the new rap era of natural born guerrillas.
 'Cause anything can happen if you make it so.
 I'm like George Jackson, 45 in my afro.
 I'm like Marcus Garvey coming with money to blow.
 Saying I want an army of boats full of brothers that led revolts.
 On that note, I'm sick of these scared rap millionaires —*

AMY GOODMAN: That is M-1 in the firehouse studio.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Yeah, you know, spitting it. He's spitting it raw. M-1 from dead prez, my man. You know, the two brilliant rappers from the Coup. When you think about Immortal Technique, these are some — people go, "Who are they?" These are some of the most brilliant political, radical rappers. You see the intelligence he's spitting. You see the common sense he's spitting. You see the progressive sentiments he's spitting. That's not something that people want to hear. And they claim it's not in Black America. Where is it? But when we spit it like this, when the truth is told like this, Black America can embrace it more broadly, and we know the broader mainstream America doesn't do it as well. But we need voices like that. And maybe ten years from now, fifteen years from now, when we look back on this era, we'll say, "Because a guy like that lived." And I was just on a panel with him a couple weeks ago in New Orleans, a brilliant, articulate, soulful artist. And we need to hear more of them.

AMY GOODMAN: Michael Eric Dyson, we're going to go to break, come back, also hear Mumia Abu-Jamal talking about hip-hop. And I want to ask you about how you traverse these worlds, as you go from the Ivy League, from the University of Pennsylvania to Georgetown to, well, where you came from in Detroit. We're talking to Michael Eric Dyson, professor now at Georgetown University, has a new book out. It's called *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip Hop*. Stay with us.

[break]

AMY GOODMAN: Our guest, professor and preacher Michael Eric Dyson. He's written many books, among them, well, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*, *Debating Race with Michael Eric Dyson*. His latest book is *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip Hop*. Nas, talk about him.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: He's an incredible genius. In fact, Jay-Z wrote the introduction to my latest book, and Nas wrote the outro. Nas is one of the great rhetorical geniuses that this art form has produced. "*It's only right that I was born to use mics / and the stuff that I write is even tougher than dice. / I'm taking rap into a new plateau / through rap slow. / my rhyming is a vitamin, hell, without a capsule.*" An incredibly fertile artist, a man who has been obsessed with trying to join political sensibility with street-thug truth and not celebrating it, but try to interrogate it, trying to ask questions.

At their best, these rappers are like ethnographers, you know, searching anthropologists trying to figure out the folk ways and the mores of the culture that they emerge from. And they're spitting truth for those, witnessing for those who are left behind. And I think Nas is one of the greatest ever to do so and has written such a powerful music that has been balanced between high cerebral art and the kind of street vitality that it takes to make that music viable.

AMY GOODMAN: Jay-Z — he wrote the introduction to your book — says, "Michael Eric Dyson came up on the tough streets of Detroit, didn't grow up with silver spoons at the family table. The family didn't have fine china. His path from then to now wasn't clear of trouble and strife. He came up through the church in the world of academia in spite of his experience."

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Yes, ma'am. It was very kind of him to say. Another great genius, one of the great geniuses in this art form, and Nas, of course, is acknowledged for his rhetorical power and depth and the way in which he's able to reach back to these traditions of black revolution and protest. Jay-Z is seen as a commercially viable rapper selling, you know, some of the best tracks and records in the history of hip-hop. But sometimes people sleep on. They think, well, he's clever, but his cleverness sometimes obscures the kind of genius that he possesses that speaks to some of these political situations, you know. "*All my teachers couldn't reach me, / and my mama couldn't beat me / hard enough to match the pain of my pops not seeing me. / So with that disdain in my membrane, / I got on my pimp game, / f--- the world, my defense came.*" That's an explanation for what happens when fatherless-ness besieges a young black man and leaves him psychically vulnerable. So, Jay-Z is an incredible artist, who, yes, is commercially viable, but if you listen to the b-sides, "*I'm from the place where the churches are the flakiest, / the people been praying to God so long they're atheist.*" He really has an intelligence that you have to listen to.

AMY GOODMAN: And the contradictions of hip-hop, I mean, for example, with Jay-Z, videos of women in degrading positions.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Sure. Well, you know, hip-hop at large certainly has to answer and account for the way in which women have been degraded, the vicious assault upon women, to use B and H as the common parlance in reference to women. And it's an interesting irony, maybe even a cruel paradox, in hip-hop. They love their mamas, but hate their baby mamas, love the women who produce them, but hate and loathe the women with whom they produce children. That's not a good recipe or an equation for something healthy and productive.

Now, to its credit, at least we can understand where they're coming from. When you see the misogyny of hip-hop, it's so horrible, it's so putrid, it's so, you know, odious, that we know, we smell, we see it. The misogyny that is reified, that is reinforced, that is subtly reproduced in corporate America or in church life or in synagogues and temples and the like, is sometimes more subtly dealt with. I'm not trying to say therefore we should get rid of both of them. But we should be honest in the fact that the misogyny reflected in hip-hop is a reflection of the deep and profound misogyny in the culture at large. But they should be held accountable, and they should be challenged.

AMY GOODMAN: What about women hip-hop artists?

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Yeah, well, you know what? Many of them are reduced to either being the kind of reverse-Lothario or a woman who's like sexually promiscuous and shows that I can hang with the guys. Or when you have a person like a Lauryn Hill, a Bahamadia, a Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, a tremendous rhetorical flow and enormous gift, they're often marginalized — or Eve — within the context of hip-hop culture. There's not much room for women, when you think about it, pound for pound, as there are for men who possess this gift and this talent. It's seen as a man's world. And, unfortunately, what that means is that the viewpoints and perspectives of progressive feminist women are not as largely circulated or broadly amplified.

AMY GOODMAN: Do you see hip-hop playing a role in the next election?

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Well, potentially if hip-hoppers, like any other citizen, any group of citizens, get together, come out, organize their base and say enough is enough. You know, all of us have to come together here, hip-hoppers, backpackers, you know, green, environmentalist activists, progressive folk, the millions of people who listen to *Democracy Now!*, and those of us who are out here on the frontline trying to do the right thing. We've got to organize our dissent in concrete and logical ways that appear to be reasonable to a constituency beyond our own leftist circles to allow this country to be shaped and shaken.

That's why, you know, a guy like Barack Obama, who brings a breath of fresh air — even if you disagree with his politics or think they're neoliberal and middle of the road, but the fact is he is a result of the judgment against the lethargic politics of American culture, or a Hillary Clinton, who's running again as not only as a woman, but as a woman who at least is making an argument for her spot and space in the culture. But if you take a guy like a Barack Obama, who's raised millions of dollars from the most donors in the history of this nation, it suggests that there's a deep and profound hunger for a new politics to come forth. And a guy like him has been able to mobilize that and to reach certain parts of the hip-hop generation. I mean, Ludacris wrote a big check to Barack Obama. That's an interesting combination, you know? When I move, you move, just like that, along with the audacity of hope. That's a hell of a combination.

AMY GOODMAN: What do you think of how Barack Obama is being covered?

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Well, it's an interesting thing. It's a difficult position to be in. After all, he's a highly articulate, as Joe Biden reminded us, and clean and fresh guy. Who knew that when we talked about the influence of hip-hop, we'd be speaking about Joe Biden listening to Outkast? "You're so fresh and so clean." I think, you know, Barack Obama is very hard. You read on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine about race. Is he raceless? He's biracial. "Is he black enough?" black people saying. He's got a black wife. He lives on the South Side with two black girls he puts to bed every night, and he's subject to the vulnerabilities of black masculinity. Yeah, he's a pretty black guy right there, right.

The question is how black are his politics? Well, look at the progressive character of what he's trying to put forth. Then you begin to say, Wait a minute. This guy has the potential to make a difference." Now, it doesn't mean we can't hold other people accountable or hold him accountable. But I think that how he's being covered is a reflection of the obsession with race and the avoidance of race at the same time. It will be interesting to see how that continues to be negotiated around the coverage of him in the coming election.

AMY GOODMAN: I wanted to play a clip of Mumia Abu-Jamal, on death row in the state you're leaving, Pennsylvania.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Exactly, exactly.

AMY GOODMAN: Just — his case was just in court. This is Mumia Abu-Jamal, who speaks frequently about the importance of hip-hop. A prison radio commentary from Mumia Abu-Jamal last year.

MUMIA ABU-JAMAL: Hip-hop all over the world. When the term "hip-hop" is mentioned, it often evokes images of jewel-encrusted rappers, their mouths blazing with glitter and gold, bumping and grinding to a heavy bass beat. That's part of it, but it's a small part.

Through the power of the US media and the international forces which fuel radio, hip-hop is now a world music with borders that can no longer be marked. To most of us, it's a black American thing and perhaps a Puerto Rican thing with roots in the gritty South Bronx. Those days may reflect the birth of that art form, expressed in rap, in dance and in street art styles, but hip-hop echoes abroad today with adherents and fans as far field as Hawaii, the Middle East, Nigeria, India, Germany, France, Cuba, Samoa, South Africa, Tanzania and beyond. It is almost dizzying when one considers the various forms hip-hop and rap takes when it crosses the seas.

In many places, even though it began with perhaps rather poor imitations of African American rappers, they inevitably adapt their own forms, heavily influenced, yes, by African American rap, but quickly and cleverly becoming something that reflects the recurrent power of the indigenous. In Hilo, Hawaii, the group Sudden Rush has indigenized hip-hop by using the Hawaiian language in their work and also openly opposing the US annexation of the island and the imprisonment and dethronement of the Hawaiian Royal House. One of their biggest hits was entitled "Ku'e," Hawaiian for "resist" or "stand up." They speak about Uncle Sam's grand larceny in stealing Hawaii from the native people there.

In Britain, hip-hop often takes a more Asian flavor than an African one, as

seen in the group Kaliphz, which features folks from Pakistani, Sikh and South Asian families. Interestingly, one of their biggest influences has been the Wu-Tang Clan, a black rap group that uses Asian imagery and language about the Asiatic black man, a reference born in the Nation of Islam's teachings. In the UK, black is commonly used to refer to Africans, Asians and Caribbeans, in fact anyone who isn't white. With a group like the Kaliphz, a line from one of Wu-Tang's biggest hits, "Proteck Ya Neck" from the album *Enter the 36th Chamber*, has an interesting meaning when they rap that they want to terrorize the jam like troops from Pakistan. As the Kaliphz demonstrate, blackness has many faces and many forms.

As many art forms have spread out of Black America, once it leaves, it changes and becomes a tool of other people struggling against their own internal communal problems. Around the world, the art form embraces social transformation and has become a voice of many languages against racism, exclusion, poverty, political exploitation and imperial domination. Those that began the art form probably never saw its possibilities. But there it is. It is a world music, just like jazz or rock 'n' roll.

From death row, this is Mumia Abu-Jamal.

AMY GOODMAN: Mumia Abu-Jamal. Actually, a panel of judges, three-judge panel, heard oral arguments to decide whether he gets a new trial. We're waiting to hear on that, but he's talking about the global impact of hip-hop.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Yeah, as brilliant as he always is, and we hope and pray that justice will be done in his case and that he will soon be free. There's no question that he is absolutely right about the global impact of hip-hop and the way in which an art form that was indigenous to black people in the South Bronx could travel the world over. I mean, think about it. The partition that came down late '80s in Poland, you know, they're playing "F** tha Police" — in the '90s, you know, "F** tha Police." You know, they've never been to Compton, and yet that music traveled so far their speaking out against the repressive state through police brutality now becomes a universal symbol of arguing in defense of dissent against a state that would repress that. So hip-hop has a global influence that actually needs to be acknowledged.

AMY GOODMAN: Bill Cosby, you wrote the book *Is Bill Cosby Right or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?* He's just turned seventy. We're hearing a lot more from him now.

MICHAEL ERIC DYSON: Yeah, just turned seventy years old. Yeah, we're still hearing a lot more from Bill Cosby, and look, God bless Mr. Crosby's heart. He obviously has the right to say what he says. The reason I wrote that book is to argue against the demonization of poor people. My Bible tells me that to whom much is given much is required, and if you're going to start beating up on black people who have failed, you can't start with the poor. They have been failed. Now, of course, they have flaws like anybody else. But it's the black bourgeoisie, it's the upper middle class, it's the rich black people who have sold their consciences at the price of silence in the face of denial of opportunity for their lesser-well-off brothers and sisters, and yet they would take the media spotlight that is hugely focused upon them to beat up on vulnerable black people.

There is nothing brave about demonizing poor black women. And if you talk about hip-hop's demonization of black women, listen to Bill Cosby's speech and tell me you can tell the difference. "These people and women having sex with the people coming

through." That's gangsta rap against and vicious vitriol against poor black women. "The people have one daddy and two daddies, and so pretty soon you're going to have to have a DNA card in the ghetto to determine if you're making love to your grandmother?" That's pretty vicious.

AMY GOODMAN: We're going to have to leave it there, Michael Eric Dyson. Thank you so much for being with us. His latest book is *Know What I Mean? Reflections on Hip Hop.* Now at Georgetown University, where he teaches Theology, English and African American Studies.



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