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Dr. West, there's a line in social discourse and critique and you, sir, have crossed it.

In your most recent public criticism of President Obama, you said – and I quote – that the president is a, "Rockefeller Republican in blackface." Brother Dr. Cornel West, I ask of you to take a step back and revisit that comment. Brother Dr. West (as you have earned the respect and my admiration so much so that I feel I must refer to you in such a reverent manner) blackface? Surely you of all people know the truly damaging and hurtful imagery that mere word conjures up.

Before I go any further, let me fully state the level of adoration I have for you, Brother Dr. West.

I recall in the early 1990s I got a call from my sister telling me to turn on PBS. "Turn on channel 9 (the PBS designation in St. Louis) I want you to see this man talking," she excitedly said. I not so eagerly obliged. But when I turned to PBS, iconic host Phil Donahue was moderating a panel discussion on race in America. On the panel was an African-American gentleman with a graying, purposely unkempt afro, wearing black-rimmed glasses and a black suit. I believe he had on a scarf. When the gentleman spoke, one could notice a distinctive gap in his front two teeth. Once my sister was sure I was watching, she said, "Who does he look like?"

Sure enough, the man on the television looked an awful lot like my father. Now understand, I did not really "know" my father. We talked on the phone a few times, but I had only seen him twice in my life up to that point in time. Like any child growing up without a father in his or her life, there's always a wanting – searching – for that father child relationship. I didn't have it in real life, but there was this man on the television that reminded me so much of my father that I was

transfixed to the tube.

Then he spoke.

And when this man who physically reminded me of my father spoke, I became enamored with the depth of knowledge this man possessed. The cadence in which this man spoke was entrancing. I instantly adopted this man as my father and his word became gospel. That man was Dr. West.

A couple of years after that first introduction to Dr. West, he released "Race Matters" a hard-hitting, no holds barred critique of race and racism in America. I read it until my eyes were blurry from lack of blinking. I also kept a dictionary close by because every few pages Dr. West was introducing me to a new word, and unlike before when I came across a word I didn't know and glossed over it and read the rest of a sentence for context, with Dr. West, I wanted to know exactly what he was saying. Many of my sentences would start with, "Dr. West said ..."

I was a revolutionary down for the cause. But, unlike many revolutionaries who fought outside the established system, I chose to infiltrate the system. I became president of the University of Missouri's NAACP chapter. As a chapter president I had the great honor to meet such figures as Dr. Michael Eric Dyson (who you, Dr. West, also have publically dissed), Dr. Benjamin Chavis and Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu. I organized a delegation to attend the Million Man March. And much of what I did was because of how inspired I was by Dr. Cornel West.

So imagine my joy when while attending the NAACP national convention in 1996 in Charlotte N.C. it was announced that Dr. West was speaking.

Dr. West gave one of the most powerful, insightful talks I had ever heard. I had to meet this man I so admired and to whom I looked up. Following the speech, a group of young NAACP members and I asked Dr. West to pose with us for pictures. He graciously obliged. After we posed for pictures, our group of about six or seven collectively decided to ask Dr. West if we could take him to dinner at the restaurant in the host hotel.

"Young brothers and sisters, when I'm on the road; after every speech I go to my room and call my wife," said Dr. West. I was momentarily crushed. Then he continued, "But when I get done I'll come back down and I'm taking you (pointing at all of us) to dinner."

Sure enough, Dr. West returned minutes later and we all sat down for dinner. We could not believe the generosity. Not in him treating us to dinner, but treating us – a group of teen and 20-something "nobodies" to his undivided time. We sat and talked for nearly three hours. And as much as we wanted to hear what Dr. West had to say, he wanted to hear what we had to say.

I told Dr. West I was a writer and he gave me his card and told me to call him and he'd get me in touch with his agent. I never called. I was too in awe to take his offer seriously.

Since that time, I've seen Dr. West speak several times – each time more impressive than the

previous. In fact, I was watching Dr. West speak on a Saturday in February of 2007 when C-SPAN interrupted its broadcast of Dr. West during Tavis Smiley's Black Agenda Summit to cover the announcement of then Senator, Barack Obama's intention to run for president.

Smiley and Dr. West both lamented that Obama should have announced at the summit and not on the steps of the Illinois State Capitol. They said the "Black candidate" should be at the Black Agenda Summit. I agreed, but I eventually saw the bigger picture. Barack Obama was not running for president of "Black America," he was running to become president of the United States of America. And while I agree with Dr. West that the plight of African-Americans has seemed to take a back burner under Obama's watch, I do not agree with the personal sniping and attacks. I agree that the president has not focused enough on the troubling unemployment numbers of African-Americans and it seems the word "poor" has become that literal four-letter word in the national dialogue.

You see, I too have had harsh critiques of our president. But, I have also come to understand that by the mere existence of Barack Obama, we as a community are better for it. Previously disengaged African-Americans are taking part in the political process. The once voiceless now sing in chorus.

Is Pres. Obama perfect? No, he's far from it. But is he a shining example of African-American personhood? Absolutely he is. And while the president serves his second term, I will be one of the first to criticize if the issues of "Black America" are not addressed. But I will not disparage the president in such demeaning and derogatory terms as you have Dr. West.

Once again, I ask ... blackface – really?

Dr. West our president deserves better than that. This discourse deserves better. Dr. West, you are better than that.