

JA JI of Cultural Studies
v. 12 (1993)

AN INTERVIEW WITH CORNEL WEST

Don Davis

Cornel West is Professor of Religion and Director of African-American Studies at Princeton University. Among his previous publications are *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (1982); *The Evasion of American Philosophy* (1989); *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* (1991); and, with bell hooks, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (1991). Dr. West is regarded as one of the foremost intellectuals in the U.S., as well as a key spokesperson for the African-American freedom struggle. He is well known for his unique blending of incisive intellectual critique with an explicit passion for truth and justice. This interview with Professor West was conducted the morning after his talk on the University of Iowa campus in February 1993.

The question of identity is central for African-Americans today. What is your opinion as to the making of a credible and meaningful black identity?

I do think there is a very sharp distinction between what I understand to be a mature black identity and any black identity in regard to rioting black identity. What I mean by that is given that white supremacist bombardment I was talking about which produces a colonized mind, body, and soul for black folk, the question becomes how do we move for a de-colonized mind, body and soul? One of the ways of doing that is to respond to having whiteness on a pedestal by putting whiteness in the gutter; and what that means is you proceed by defining yourself as a black person by still using whiteness as a point of reference even though it may be whiteness being put down. That to me is not mature

because it still reflects a degree to which one is still obsessed with whiteness, preoccupied with whiteness. And it's just the flipside of putting whiteness on a pedestal. It's like you got a lot of highly assimilated black folk who can't conceive of themselves from anything but defined over and against whiteness. And a real, for me, mature step, you see it in jazz, you see it in the best of the black church, where whiteness itself is not a point of reference. And therefore white persons, and white thought, European thought, what have you, is not the basis upon which you're gonna define yourself, negatively or positively. And what happens there is that one searches for those black spaces, in which like I was talking about yesterday, you know, masks are no longer necessary, the game is no longer to be played as if one is only responding or reacting to "the white context." And that is a way of first recognizing that white folk are not that important, they're just human beings like anybody else and it allows you to ultimately respond to them in that way. They're not so important that they have all the power and therefore you have to play games with them. On the other hand, they're not demonized either as if they're in full control. Then you're paranoid, you think they always have some move to make against you, and so forth. And I think when we look at jazz and we look at the black church, we see attempts of black people to define themselves from their own reference point. And when you do it in that way, it no way excludes white folk; in fact it allows you to relate to them on a much more equal and humane basis; but you can only do that when you begin to take your own humanity for granted. And that's, of course, one of the most difficult things for a dehumanized people, you see. Once you take your humanity for granted, you don't have to doubt yourself, you don't have to wonder what the grounds of your self-confidence are; you don't have to wonder whether you can do it because you're black, and all that other. I was alluding to that briefly with that temptation to doubt that Du Bois talks about, which is really a quite haunting treatment of this.

One of the things that I get from reading your work is the sense that no matter how difficult the situation is, when it comes to justice and peace, there can never be a closing of the door to a real, genuine possibility of openness. Your writings, for me at least, have wooed me to a future, a possibility that is attainable. But I wonder, despair is so powerful. How does one move towards a new future, a more egalitarian, a more just society when one's heart is gripped by despair? What can trigger a person towards hope?

Well, of course, the only way out of despair is through it, you know. You have to face the tragic facts of the past and present. If you don't face them, you fall into deeper despair. And if you try to present some

kind of little, optimistic program, and act as if those tragic facts aren't real, then it has no real substance to it. So for me, it's really a question of what I was talking about before—how do you generate motion and momentum in one's life? How do you generate motion and momentum in politics? Because you can only get through despair by moving and feeling as if some kind of movement is taking place, some kind of ground is being covered, you see. And I mean, one reason why I read so much Ralph Emerson is because Ralph Waldo, you know, he said everything good is on the highway, and that's very real, because it means that mobility, movement, motion, are a reflection of the energy which is necessary to move through the despair. Because if you're despairing, and you also lack energy, then you're in deep trouble . . . then you're in deep trouble. But the despair is real. And you know, we were talking about that last night, regarding the Garveyite skeleton that sits in one's closet, and it sure is real, it sure is real. Now, true, Garvey's pessimism didn't lead to despair because he was trying to get the folk on the move too. He was trying to get the folk movin'.

See, I will argue in fact that the basic themes of Afro-American history are not so much integration and separation. We've been locked into this dialogue: You got Du Bois vs. Booker T. and Elijah vs. King, and all of that, and that to me is the limited imagination of intellectual historians of the black past. For me, the major themes of Afro-American history are migration and immigration, which is true for peasants around the world. Trying to get out, you see, trying to get out, and that's what we've been trying to do. We're always on the move, we're trying to get out of slavery, but we couldn't do it. Then we're trying to get out of Jim and Jane Crow. And where do we go? First we go to Kansas and Oklahoma. Kansas is a very important exodus. Oklahoma, we're going to make Oklahoma a black state. That doesn't work; Chief Sam says, let's go to Africa. Marcus Garvey hears about Chief Sam, he's going to Africa, maybe I'll go later and take these negroes to Africa. We gotta get out of here.

And, of course, black folk are like peasants, like any other peasants, in search of self-sufficient production, trying to escape the marketplace and trying to escape dependency. And this sense of movement and ultimately of flying away, you see that in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, you see it in Ralph Ellison's short stories. A sense of wanting to fly away. Because we could not get away, territorially speaking, there was never a land that we could reach in our mobility in which we finally reach home. As an exilic people, we were forced to make language and music our home. And our language and our music are as mobile and motion-centered as any cultural production of the 20th century, you know what I mean? Our church music, our preaching, our praying, is a fascinating attempt to generate an energy in a language that was not "ours" but we made ours

by making it distinctly both our own but also based on the larger tradition that was English, or Spanish in the Dominican Republic, or Portuguese in Brazil. Always as an exilic people, in search of home, never finding home, but on the road. But on the road. In some ways, it's very American as well: you got Huck on the boat, and Ahab on the ship, and Kerouac on the road, I mean, these are basic motifs in American life. Henry Ford is all about mobility and individuality; distinctly American the automobile, you see. But our search for home has to do with the fact that we're running from *their* mobility—they're running after us kicking our behinds, you know! So that it's a different kind of mobility in terms of social location, but it's still this motion and I think that Keats said it well, actually, in one of his letters to his brother in Kentucky—the same letter in which he talked about negative capability. He said the fundamental question of the modern age is energy or despair. That's the great Keats. And I think he's onto something. Now, of course, he represents a certain strand of romantic reflection, and so he's about transformation and change and how imagination can fundamentally reshape how we perceive as well as live, but. . . .

One of the things that really intrigues me about your own life and scholarship is your ability to integrate realms that seem, on the surface, to be utterly contradictory. I mean, justice-seeking alongside your own sense of balance, especially with the academy. I would be completely interested in what you think truly the role of the academy might play in this movement towards justice. Is the academy a hindrance, a barrier, or should we look at the academy as a resource? Should we encourage young, despairing, black men and women and others who are hurting, to enter into the academy as a way of gaining the requisite power to make some sort of fundamental change in the future? Or, rather, should we avoid the academy? Your reputation as a good academician qualifies you to speak to this.

Part of the problem is, we live in such an anti-intellectual culture and civilization, that the academy has pitfalls, real limits and silences. But it also has a commitment to the life of the mind, to quality conversation. Whether it actually fulfills that is a separate question, but it has a commitment that runs against much of the culture. American culture is one in which intelligence is accented, accepted, but the intellect is viewed in a very suspicious manner, a very suspicious manner. The whole notion of living off ideas as opposed to living for ideas is a crucial one. In a business civilization, people who live for ideas are viewed with tremendous suspicion because they're raising fundamental questions, you see. And the definition of intelligence that I'm using is manipulating, and reordering, and adjusting

ideas. Intellect is about fundamental questioning, examination, pondering, wondering, and evaluating evaluations, as it were, as opposed to intelligence—evaluating certain particular, immediate situations in order to reach a particular end. So that the university is one of the few spaces in a business civilization that is committed to the intellect and the life of the mind.

Now, I view the intellect as one fundamental weapon in the freedom struggle, because the freedom struggle is concerned with raising fundamental questions about society—not just incremental ones, just nooks and cranny kinds of things. And, so the question becomes, how do we get in contact with conversations that are raising fundamental questions about society? Well, it's true, I don't believe the academy has a monopoly on this, but it is committed to raising these kinds of questions, in a way in which very few other institutions are in our society. You've got slices of the church, slices of synagogue, slices of mosque, that are willing to do this. But we're all deeply acquainted with a very, very pervasive anti-intellectualism of churches, and of synagogues, and of mosques, you see. We won't even begin to talk about the various professions. If you can get the American Medical Association to talk about fundamental issues of health care then God certainly exists. You've got a small little slice of the AMA that's willing to raise that, but most of them are just narrow professionals, and they're highly intelligent, but not intellectual, most of them. Lawyers are the same way, you see. So that the academy, out of default, becomes one of the resources that we must use because there are some conversations going on there that are raising some fundamental issues. There are some social theories through which we're raising issues about what is the nature of capitalist society? What are its limits? What is the good life? Now it's true you've got a lot of anti-intellectualism among the intellectuals in the academy, you've got a lot of professionalism among the intellectuals, and that is one of the problems because it suffocates much of the refreshing engagement. But there are a number there, I mean, we can talk about feminists in this regard, we can talk about a number of historians who have reshaped how we view the past: you think about the impact of a Genovese, or a John Hope Franklin, or an Eric Foner, or a Barbara Fields; I mean these are fundamental texts one has to come to terms with, in terms of understanding freedom struggle. And you can read them outside the academy, but they are being produced by people who are there. It's my people who are there, you see. So that the academy does become one important terrain for contestation, but by no means the only one. We might reach the point where most of the fundamental questions are raised outside the academy. Who knows, journalism might become a terrain; I don't hold my breath, but it could.

You know, I spoke with someone on the bus today who heard you last night, and the thing she said was so striking in your presentation is how openly spiritual you are in your comments. She said that was just incredible, that she was struck that you felt so at home with it. What is the nature of spirituality? What is the connection between religion and the role that religion can play in a real freedom struggle, and what does spirituality mean in that?

That's a good question, this fundamental question of how to live. The old quest for wisdom that we associate with the origins of philosophy, wherever it is—Egypt or China, or Greece. I don't want to engage in a petty little fight about who were the first philosophers and so forth. We got hunter-gathers raising the question, why am I here? What can I hope for?—those philosophical questions about how I treat other people. For me, that's a starting point, and I can't for the life of me come up with responses. I don't think there are any definitive answers or responses to the question of how to live without coming to terms with issues of death, dread, and despair, disappointment and disease. All of these are inescapable realities that all of us have to come to terms with in our short sojourn here. Usually, the various stories, narratives, legends, symbols and rituals that we have thrown up against the cosmos and history that give us some sense of negotiating and navigating through these issues are deeply spiritual. You know, profoundly spiritual. And I think that the spirit of crisis in the West has been going for a long time. I lectured yesterday morning on Matthew Arnold and we start off reading, "Impeticles at Aetna": what does it mean for this particular fifth-century Athenian philosopher to so despair truth that he jumps into the crater at Mt. Aetna and commits suicide? What is the significance of the suicide of Impeticles and how does that reflect the spiritual impotence and melancholia that one sees in the early Arnold that reflects larger issues in Victorian Britain at the time and says something about what it is to deal with modernity? That's true for all of us, that's *our* spiritual impotence, you see. Why did he exclude it in the 1853 preface of his poems?—because now he was moving on to some notion of deliverance, intellectual deliverance. But then how was that circumscribed by issues of class and empire and gender and so forth? People who I read a lot, Arnold, Du Bois, Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, Hakahaum, Octavio Paz; all of these folks realize that the spiritual dimension, while not the only one, is a very important one. Then of course, I'm so deeply shaped by the black musical tradition; that's probably my major tradition, to tell you the truth; when all the tales are told it's the bottom line. . . .

Well, as a jazz lover myself, with every allusion you made to jazz, I wanted to stand and applaud you . . .

And it's so difficult, oftentimes in the academy, to make that particular element of our lives a serious intellectual issue, when it actually is, because it means so much, you know? It sustains us. . . .

You know, one of the things that I think is perhaps most important in trying to harness the energy you talked about that is key to this motion towards justice is the whole question of how do we, as African-Americans, begin to interpret our legacy? One thing that I find personally really moving is when yesterday you were talking about your connections: you see what you do as being placed in a legacy, an ongoing tradition. And these figures of the African-American freedom struggle, you're at home with them, you allude to them, and you're in their train. They have sort of burned the way, you have participated in that, and that's very meaningful. And yet, how to describe the legacy that now is so up for grabs? You know, your clarity in that is very, very important. I think for anyone who is going to be engaged in the movement and have an ongoing role in a very fluid movement that has been going on for many, many years through the efforts of all kinds of people, you have to see yourself moving into their train, representing the best of that alternative. I find this singularly important, and yet elusive. How do you define the legacy, or is it better to state it in the plural, as legacies?

I'd say it in the plural, actually, because there's no doubt that there's a lot of criss-crossing and traversing. I mean, for example, when I talk about Garvey who, to me, is very important. Or like when the sister last night (I was thinking about that when I was sleeping, you know) said I didn't give Malcolm X enough attention, she gave me an occasion to say more; because the early Malcolm, as much as I disagree, he's still a fundamental stream that traverses to a particular stream that I'm a part of. There is so much in that early Malcolm that I still resonate with. Even though there are the other things that I'm critical of, you see. So you're absolutely right, we've got to talk about streams and legacies in the plural. And yet, most importantly, we try to see what the common denominator is.

That reminds me of a question that I wanted to ask you. One of the things that, practically speaking, is really important is the need to form more alliances among those striving for justice—without ratios. I mean coalitions of like-minded individuals who are willing to pursue what you call all-embracing moral vision. And yet the common condition today is that people are so . . .

All over the place.

Yes, and activists appear to disagree about even what room we're going to meet in. I was wondering what sort of insight you could give to the necessity of forming a new coalition for peace and justice.

I understand. History works in such a messy manner—I'm talking about the 1890s, 1930s, 1960s. What happens is that you actually create various kinds of motions that begin to overlap so that they all find themselves in the same room. Some of them come in kicking and screaming, but they find themselves in the same room because they've discovered that what they're interested in can in fact be enhanced by coming together with you—though without an abstract agreement on the program because of all kinds of tension. But as long as there are enough people around who are saying look, there's an ethical character to our mood, and we're going to uphold that—which means you've got to make sure that the xenophobic elements of the various programs are always criticized. You're going to have the xenophobes in there. Because, you've got someone who's big on race but deep into the patriarchy; and somebody else is also big on race but homophobic, or whatever. You see, you're going to have some folks who can't stand homophobia but who don't like black folk. You lift up this vision, so that you can try to pull up the best of them. But they only come together in very unique historical conjunctures, and you have to keep open the possibility for that, because as I say, America is very much a conservative society, even given its fluidity. Its deep xenophobia is connected to the economic system with its corporate priority, which means you can't raise issues of distribution. But you can't have that prophetic movement if you're not talking about distribution of wealth, you just can't have it.

This is a problem in the black context, you know. I speak to Farrakhan's people all the time down there in Atlanta. Oh yeah, we have a huge crowd, we go at it for hours, and I come at them, not first just by calling them anti-Semites, ought to be ashamed of themselves, and all that stuff. I say, "Look, you're talking about the treatment of black folk, I'm interested. Let's see how we're going to get through this. Let's look at your black business nationalism. You want more entrepreneurs, you want more black business, small business, medium-sized business, I'm all for that too, I really am. But is that sufficient to deal with the level of social misery and black poverty?" You see, given the way the corporate sector of the economy functions, given the limited weight of small businesses and entrepreneurs in a corporate capitalist economy, it's inadequate. So I say, "If you'll look at black business nationally, this is just one particular drop in the bucket, it might be the right drop, but it ain't going to fill the bucket up. You should be talking about redistribution of wealth." They say, "Of course, we are all aiming for that." But then I say, "You can't get

it without a multi-racial coalition, and you go around calling white folk names. There's nothing wrong with you trashing white supremacy, I'm all into that myself. That's different than just trashing white folk, you see." And in fact, they asked Malcolm X about this when he came back from Africa. They said, "You got a new organization?" He said, "Yes, a new organization of Afro-American unity." They said, "We're told that you believe that white people are human beings, now." "I guess I've made the breakthrough," he said, "yes, I really do. I haven't experienced it too much with American white folk, but there's some white folk in the Middle East that I really believe are human beings, they must not be devils." Malcolm was so sincere, that's what I like about the guy. He's in their space, he's self-invested in their perspective, you know what I mean? But then they asked him, "Can white folks join your organization?" He said, "No, they can't join my organization, unless they're John Brown." Very interesting. It's in every magazine in 1964. It's a very interesting statement that he makes, you know? He said, "Now look, this man was willing to die for what white folk did to black folk, how could I refuse him?" Now, there might be very few John Browns in a generation so that, for the most part, white folk ought to join their own organizations so that they can fight the racism in their own communities. But I say that to the Muslim brothers, the Islamic brothers in Atlanta. I say, "If you agree with me, then, to be a part of the black freedom struggle, you and I have to respect each other's commitment." I don't believe that my commitment is any more intense than theirs; they spend their lives in the struggle.

I had a debate with Leonard Jeffries; we were there for three hours. I started off saying, "You're dedicated to black folk, me too." Ain't no doubt about it. I don't question the motivation. The question is: do we have the adequate intellectual weaponry? I tell him, "Why sun people vs. ice people?" How can we understand the modern world in terms of climate, as opposed to imperialism, class formations, the nation-state, and so forth? I think climate is one element, but it's in no way determinative. You can't dictate people's behavior based on how much sun they've been under, you know what I mean? [laughter] This ain't going to work, no way. [laughter] So I say, "By giving them that, you're not giving your students weaponry, because they're going around looking at how the sun is beaming on folk in relation to their political behavior; that ain't going to work. We need to give them some tools to understand empire, to understand the state, and so forth. Nationalisms and so on and so forth." So he sits there and says, "Well, I wouldn't want to deny it . . ." But you don't talk about it, man! You're goin' around talkin' about sun people! [laughter]

Well, thank you, Dr. West. Did I hear a general boarding for your flight? One last question: What part did your own personal upbringing play in your ongoing development and growth?

My own personal story is that I had so much love coming at me, man, that I've got enough for generations. Just think about all the young kids that don't have much love coming at them. When I was young and with my family, it was good stuff, unbelievable. But I can't take no credit. I was born in a family not of my own choosing, you know what I mean? It was just there when I got here. When I was coming up I was real bad; I was very bad. [laughter] Later, I used to go back home and tell folk that I was teaching at Yale. They'd say yeah, we figured you were going to end up in jail. They used to call me Little Ronnie, you know. "That little Ronnie's going to jail, we know that." [laughter] And sure, that's where I was headed, that's where I was headed. So then, to use the language of the folk, "Y'all got to meet Jesus." And a conversion did take place. I mean, people would look at me and say, "This is the same Little Ronnie that used to kick behind every week, and he kind of love folk now?" It was real. Jesus really did turn me around. Of course, this was in a community, the Baptist church, you know. Jesus, as rendered by the narratives and the sermons, and the psalms. But I'm a living witness that there is power in that story, no doubt about it. There's no doubt about it, you know, people say you're deceived, it's illusory, and so forth and so on. And I say, well, at the epistemic level you're right, there is no certainty, and there's always a possibility of it being false. But, in terms of fruits and action, with that story in community there is commitment. That story testifies. And it was and is the love of Jesus Christ as I understand it: Bump the law, tell the priest to shove it, and just love thy God, love thy neighbor.