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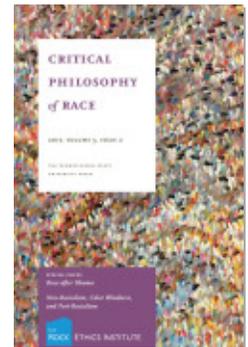
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**“WHAT IT MEANS TO  
BE HUMAN!”**

*A Conversation with  
Cornel West*

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**Abstract**

This conversation with Cornel West about his views on philosophical anthropology, race, U.S. history, tragedy, German philosophy, and theology includes lengthy discussions on former U.S. president Barack Obama, his policies, and his failure to live up to the promise of black prophetic thought.

**Keywords:** Cornel West, prophetic pragmatism, tragedy, humanism, paideia, philosophy

The following conversation was conducted on May 9, 2011, in the late afternoon, at Princeton University, in Cornel West’s office, the walls of which were lined with bookcases, stuffed two and three layers deep with books, some hidden by pictures—to which West would occasionally signal as we conversed—the laboratory of an alchemist of ideas. The occasion for the interview was a book that colleagues in Hanover, Germany, were writing to introduce Cornel West to the German-speaking audience. Professor Jürgen Manemann and Yoko Arisaka (a former colleague of mine), of the Forschungsinstitut für Philosophie Hannover (Hannover

Research Institute for Philosophy), had contacted me to ask whether I could be a consultant on the book, and whether I could also mediate a dialogue with West. Having known West for over a decade and a half, and having been deeply influenced by his thought, I enthusiastically agreed. The interview was edited and translated, and it appeared as chapter 5 of the book *Prophetischer Pragmatismus. Einführung in Das Denken von Cornel West* (Prophetic Pragmatism: Introduction to the Thought of Cornel West),<sup>1</sup> authored by Jürgen Manemann, Yoko Arisaka, Volker Drell, and Anna Maria Hauk and the product of research seminars conducted at the Hannover Research Institute for Philosophy. The book is an excellent, substantive, and synoptic introduction to Cornel West's thought. A quick overview of the contents can give a sense of its usefulness and breadth. Chapter 1 offers a biographical overview of West's life. Chapter 2, titled "Philosophy as a Form of Life," surveys West's engagement with the figure of the public intellectual, focusing on Gramsci, Dewey, and the tradition of the Black Organic intellectual (there are lengthy discussions of West's typology of Black intellectuals). This chapter closes with a section dedicated to the pillars of pragmatism: voluntarism, fallibilism, and experimentalism. Chapter 3, "Racism and Democracy," focuses on West's engagement with the inheritance of slavery in U.S. democracy and the way it has thwarted the promise of democratic hope. Chapter 4, "Tragedy and Hope: Building Blocks of Radical Democracy," surveys what one could call the lexicon of West's prophetic pragmatism: on being recognized, anti-democratic dogmas, tradition and democracy, propheticism, radical finitude, *paideia*, the tragic, the ethic of love, prophetic leadership, hope, and transforming the world—themes on which we touch in our conversation.

The conversation, however, remains profoundly relevant for several reasons, and merits being published in its entirety and in English, the language in which it was conducted. First, and above all, because here we have access to Cornel West's impressive philosophical, intellectual, artistic, and literary range. His mind is capacious and voracious, as it is generous and gentle, appreciative while also critical. Here, we can witness West the philosophical virtuoso who models an intellectual cosmopolitanism that has become extremely rare in our days of fragmented politics and fractious publics. Second, because the interview took place a few months before West and Travis Smiley would undertake the "Poverty Tour" that would take them across eighteen U.S. cities to engage Black,

Brown, and white citizens about the growing poverty in the United States, and how the financial crisis of 2008 had affected not just the middle class, but disproportionately people of color. The “Poverty Tour” was articulated as a counterpoint, a counter movement, to President Obama’s rescue package for Wall Street and the financial oligarchies.<sup>2</sup> Third, because this interview, interestingly, was intercalated into a series of other interviews West has holding with Crista Buschendorft, professor and chair of American Studies at the Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main—the home city of the Institute for Social Research, and the university where T. W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and later Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas taught. The conversations West had with Buschendorf became the book *Black Prophetic Fire*.<sup>3</sup> The conversations focus on what we can call the tradition of Black organic intellectuals. They cover Douglass, Du Bois, King Jr., Malcolm X, Ella Baker, and Ida B. Wells. This is without question one of the best introductions, overviews, syntheses of the critical, democratic, socialist, revolutionary, prophetic, tradition that is the “gift of black folk” to democracy and human rights in the U.S. democracy but also to all radical, social, and civil rights movements across the world. Fourth, and finally, this interview remains extremely relevant because of what West says here about then-President Obama, and because of what we face in a post-Obama age. In fact, as I collaborated with colleagues to publish this special issue of *Critical Philosophy of Race*, “Race after Obama,” I recalled my interview with West back in 2011, and what he had said then. As we think about Barak Hussein Obama’s legacy in the age of a Trump presidency, I think it is important that we keep in mind what West says here, but also what he writes in *Black Prophetic Fire*, which merits quotation:

The age of Obama was predicated on three pillars: Wall Street crimes in the financial catastrophe of 2008; imperial crimes in the form of the USA PATRIOT act and National Defense Authorization Act, which gave the president sweeping and arbitrary power that resembles a police or neofascist state; and social crimes principally manifest in a criminal justice system that is in itself criminal (where torturers, wire tappers, and Wall Street violators of the law go free yet poor criminals, such as drug offenders, go to prison). This kind of clear and direct language is rare in political discourse precisely because we are accustomed to be so polite in the face of

crimes against humanity. . . . The profound failings of President Obama can be seen in his Wall Street government, his indifference to the new Jim Crow (or prison-industrial complex), and his expansion of imperial criminality in terms of the vast increase of the number of drones since the Bush years. In other words, the Obama presidency has been primarily a Wall Street presidency, drone presidency, mass-surveillance presidency unwilling to concretely target the new Jim Crow, massive unemployment, and other forms of poor and Black social misery. His major effort to focus on poor Black men was charity and philanthropy—not justice or public policy. (162–63)

President Trump was inaugurated in front of the Lincoln Memorial, over the steps where Martin Luther King Jr. on August 28, 1963, gave his “I have a dream” speech. Cornel West’s thinking and prophetic witnessing urge us to think about the prophetic fire that shines from the heights of that memorial, but also to look along the moral line of vision that looks beyond the Capitol that crowns the Mall to the Black, Brown, Latino/a, LGTB and transpeople, and poor white people of our democracy.

**EM: Brother West, what is philosophy, and do you think we need a new definition today in light of what we can call, in shorthand, a globalized planet?**

CW: I would want to conceive of philosophy grounded in the very long humanist tradition of the best of the West that is open to the East and North and South, but what I mean by that is that I began with “humando,” which means burial. I begin with the *humanity* and the *humility*, which is very different than the biological species like *homo sapiens*. Humanity versus *homo sapiens*. Very different things. We are biological creatures, we are animals, no doubt, but when you talk about *humando*, you’re talking about those particular *kind of animals* who are aware of their impending extinction, who have the capacity to be sensitive to catastrophe and disaster and calamity and profound crisis. . . . The question for me is, how do we love wisdom—*philosophia*—in the face of impending catastrophe given the kind of thinking, loving, caring, laughing, dancing animals that we are? So that it’s a very, very historicist, contextualist, fallibilist, concrete, fleshified conception of philosophy.

**EM: So philosophy is a response to human finitude?**

CW: That's right.

**EM: But does globalization impact the way in which we live, experience, and confront that finitude?**

CW: Yes, because when we think of globalization we are thinking in part of structures and institutions that have been developed over time that allow us to become more interdependent and interrelated, but the development, the *extraordinary* development, of those structures and institutions have not fundamentally transformed our humanity. We still are these animals with fears and anxieties and insecurities in the face of death and dread and disappointment and disease. So that my connection to what I'm calling this long, grand humanist tradition that goes all the way back to Socrates through Augustine through Erasmus through Vico through Marx through Gadamer. . . . It's an old style of humanist tradition, but it's one that I take quite seriously.

**EM: You use the word *style*. Could you say that it is a practice? In *Democracy Matters* you talk about *parrhesia* and *parrhesia* as a practice, so philosophy is a practice. What is your practice?**

CW: I would go with Pierre Hadot. I would say that the love of wisdom is a way of life; that is to say, it's a set of *practices* that has to do with mustering the courage to think critically about ourselves, society, and the world. Mustering the courage to empathize, the courage—I would say—to love, the courage to have compassion with others, especially the widow and the orphan, and the fatherless and the motherless, and poor and working peoples, and gays and lesbians, and so forth. And the courage to hope. So it is a way of life, a set of *practices*, no doubt, but at the same time, I call it a kind of *focus on the funk*. And what I mean by that is, you remember that wonderful letter by one of my great heroes, Samuel Beckett, where he says, "Heidegger may talk about being and Sartre may talk about existence, but I talk about the mess. And my fundamental aim as an artist is to try to find a form that accommodates the mess"? Well, Beckett's mess is my funk. And by funk what I mean is, wrestling with the wounds, the scars, the bruises, as well as the creative *responses* to wounds, scars, and bruises. Some of them

inflicted because of structures and institutions. Some of them themselves being tied to our existential condition in terms of losses of loved ones, in terms of diseases, in terms of betrayals of friends and so forth, all of these are wounds and scars and bruises. And it's at that very concrete level that my concept of philosophy operates. That's one reason why I spend as much time with poets and musicians as I do with philosophers in my love of wisdom, in my particular conception of philosophy. So it's Chekhov, Beckett, and Kafka as much as Beethoven, Stephen Sondheim, and Curtis Mayfield. These are persons who in their conceptions of their vocations are trying to make sense of the world at this very, very—what would be the right word?—ground-level engagement with the mess, Beckett's term, or the funk, my own term.

**EM: You mentioned some German authors and musicians, composers. Are there any German philosophers that you found inspirational in getting to the funk, that get the funk?**

CW: It's fascinating, for me, I first begin with the German poets. I think Hölderlin for me is a unique figure in my own formation to the degree to which he wrestles with line 607b5 of Plato's *Republic* in book 10, the traditional quarrel between philosophy and poetry. And he grounds his conception of poetry in a very philosophically sophisticated way, but is always tied to this very ground-level—humano—wrestling with wounds, scars, bruises, death, dread, despair, and disappointment. So someone like Hölderlin, on the one hand, means so much. And that takes me to Wilhelm Dilthey. In *Poetry and Experience*, from 1909—a wonderful book he wrote right before he died—there are wonderful essays on Hölderlin and Novalis and Goethe and Lessing. The essay on Hölderlin is very important because at the end of his life he's reflecting on mortality, reflecting on burial and extinction, and so forth, and he finds Hölderlin's wrestlings to be quite powerful. Of course, there's the classical treatments of Hölderlin by Heidegger himself. Another German philosopher means much to me, George Christoph Lichtenberg, the great comic writer. He means very much; you see his picture right here in my office, next to Sondheim and Duke Ellington. His aphorisms, of course, meant much to Nietzsche as well. Very Anglophilic writer, but still German—very tied to the natural sciences and mathematics and physics and so on, but had this concern about the pretenses or pretentiousness of philosophizing that tried to gain distance from the very concrete forms

of lived experience. So he resonates deeply with me. On the other hand, I must acknowledge that Gadamer is someone who means very much to me. I was blessed to study with him for one year. I had lunch with him once a week for a whole year. He taught a course from Hegel to Heidegger. We read from *Truth and Method*, and we read from his book *Hegel's Dialectic*, on the Lordship-Bondage section of the *Phenomenology*; we read from some of his earlier works on Plato. Gadamer meant very much to me in terms of the subtle forms of historicizing. Now, I rejected his traditionalist conception of tradition and I substituted my own much more prophetic conception of tradition, but I still understood the centrality of tradition, so in that sense I've got some deep Gadamerian sensibilities, I really do.

**EM: Indeed, his influence shows throughout *The American Evasion Philosophy*.**

CW: Absolutely and on through. And a lot of people didn't even understand him. I talked in my memoir about Gadamer being in some ways my favorite philosopher, even though politically and ideologically, he and I used to battle every week.<sup>4</sup> Because when I thought of tradition, I thought of Martin King, Fannie Lou Hamer, Frederick Douglass, John Brown, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and so on. But the inescapability of tradition is always something that has struck me as fundamental to my own work, which is profoundly Gadamerian.

**EM: You're also a man of religion, of theology. Are there any German theologians that you've been influenced by? What about the political theologians?**

CW: I think Moltmann has hit me very hard early in life, going all the way back to his theologies of hope. Who would be some of the others?

**EM: Dorothee Sölle?**

CW: Dorothee Sölle, who was my colleague at the Union Theological Seminary. We talked together for many years. She and I had a common interest in the Frankfurt School and I would teach a lot of Walter Benjamin—the ninth thesis of the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” and history as catastrophe and so on. She was very, very influenced by the Frankfurt School of Adorno and Benjamin *as* a German theologian herself

*in* New York City, in the United States. I was very blessed to be a colleague of Dorothee Sölle. I shall always remember her. Moltmann and Sölle are probably the two most influential; probably because, you know, I have such a profound suspicion of theology.

**EM: I was going to ask you next about that, the relationship between philosophy and theology.**

CW: Absolutely, because my suspicions of philosophy, of course, are very deep given my Gadamarian sensibilities and Wittgensteinian proclivities. The ways in which philosophy becomes a form of escape, a form of abstracting from our lived experience, and how do we sustain our critical engagement with the everyday, with the quotidian, with the commonplace, with ordinary sense, a common sense, in Wittgenstein's language. So theology, for me, becomes even twice removed; it's a kind of double pretentiousness. Here you're talking about *God*, oh my God. It reminds me at the very end of Aquinas's life, after writing the *Summa* and writing these volumes of theology, he had a mystical experience and said, it's all straw. It's like straw in the wind, almost wishing as if he'd never even embarked on it. Theology as a science, but there's no living scientist to get at. Now what does that mean? What it means is that when you're talking about theology, you're essentially talking about the fallible claims of mortals generating various kinds of stories and narratives to impose some kind of meaning on a world of profound mystery in which God is an agent in those stories. There's a whole host of other kinds of stories in which God is not an agent, but God is an agent in those stories that constitute religious traditions that accent our intellectual humility and try to get us to be much more preoccupied with the kinds of persons we are, rather than the kind of transcendental claims that we make about the world. And again, I've got a kind of historicist, contextualist, fallibilist, antifoundationalist stance that pushes us toward the kinds of persons we are, the kinds of praxis we enact, the kind of context [in which] we find ourselves.

**EM: But don't you think that religion requires something like theology to articulate that experience of, to use Schleiermacher's expression, "utter dependence"?**

CW: Yes, I think that theology is inescapable to religious communities to make sense of itself and its changing view about the world in light of what

is perceived to be revelation, but, at the same time, that theology can have a pretentiousness, or double pretentiousness if it is acontextual as opposed to contextual, if it's foundationalist as opposed to antifoundationalist, or ahistorical as opposed to historicist, you see.

**EM: Is this why you call your thinking prophetic pragmatism?**

CW: Absolutely. Absolutely. Because by prophetic what we are talking about is the funk, the suffering, the evil, unjustified suffering, unmerited pain, and how will we respond, what will be the quality of our response. Not measured in terms of a utilitarian calculus—not measured just in terms of some consequentialist calculation of effects and consequences—but in terms of personal integrity of human beings, of collective integrity of communities and nations, what kind of persons we are. What kind of nations are we or do we want to be? Or what kind of human family do we want to be in the face of our mistreatment of nature in the impending catastrophe of ecological character? . . . The catastrophe takes an ecological form. In that sense, again, I tilt much more toward the artists because they tend to have an intellectual honesty. They tend to have an existential candor about our finitude—back to your wonderful term—back to our finitude.

**EM: Your thinking is grounded in the American experience, in the Afro-American experience.**

CW: Absolutely.

**EM: Do you think that prophetic pragmatism can have anything to say to Europe?**

CW: Oh absolutely. I think that the African-American experience is one that puts catastrophe at the center of the conception of philosophy, at the center of what it means to be human. That's one of the reasons why when the Holocaust hit highly civilized Europe and people went into shock. From my perspective, it's just part of the normal order of things, you see. Because there's 244 years of slavery, American Terrorism. Ninety years of Jim Crow Jane Crow, another ninety years of American Terrorism. And up to this very moment, even to the age of Obama with the present military-industrial

complex, another form of domination. So that it's not some sort of aberration, or anomaly to wrestle with catastrophe. That was a problem for Europe in the twentieth century. And so I think that one of the ways in which prophetic pragmatism, at least my version of it, is that it forces us to wrestle continuously, incessantly, with forms of catastrophe. It wasn't just slavery and Jim Crow. It could be immigration policy vis-à-vis Turks in Germany. It could be women dealing with domestic violence and patriarchy in Germany. It could be a class subordination with unaccountable bosses or the predatory proclivities of oligarchs or plutocrats in Germany or France or America or any other place. All of these are ways of generating forms of catastrophe. Catastrophe with which we must come to terms if in fact our societies are to survive and endure.

**EM: One of your most well-known books, *Race Matters*, has as a key word, *race*. Does this word have anything to speak to Europe? Can it translate well?**

CW: Well, of course, the title itself primarily means that *everyone* counts. Every person has significance and ought to be treated with dignity. So that "race matters in America" simply meant that black people count. Black suffering ought to be attended to, that black social misery ought not be rendered invisible and overlooked and downplayed and devalued. So in Europe what that means is that everybody counts! Poor people in Europe count! Gypsies count! Turks count! Kurds count! Muslims count! Women count! The gay and lesbian count! That Jews count in Germany, whether they are there or not! We ought to have a universal vision and a cosmopolitan sensibility such that everyone counts so that we are suspicious of those who have been cast as Other.

**EM: So when you talk about "race matters," what you mean is a preferential option for the oppressed, the suffering of those among us?**

CW: Well, the procedure would go as follows. Everyone counts. In dominant discourse, certain people don't count. Therefore, those that are perceived as not counting in the mainstream discourse ought to have a certain kind of priority. Or at least we ought to attend to, we ought to have a certain kind of focus and attention to those who do not count. Why? Because for so long they have been rendered invisible.

**EM:** At the center of your thinking is the concept of tragedy. You talked about the funk, the mess, existential finitude.

CW: Yes. That's right.

**EM:** So now this conception that you sometimes refer to the Greeks, and the Greeks are very important, specifically the Greek tragic writers. . . . Does this concept mean anything else today in the context of what happened in the twentieth century? The catastrophe of the twentieth century? Wouldn't it be better to use something like "evil"? So tragedy or evil?

CW: I think that I would like to hold on to the language of not just the tragic, but more and more I talk about the tragicomic. The shift in *American Evasion* in '89 talking about the tragic and since the '90s and thereafter is really more tragicomic. That's why Chekhov, and Beckett and Kafka, have come more to the center of my thinking as opposed to, let's say Sophocles, who's part of a great tradition as it were. Even Nietzsche talked about the tragic in his early work the *Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*. But it's been more tragicomic. Evil is integral to both conceptions. But because I want to stress this more concretized, ground leveled conception of agency of response to tragedy, you see, I *am* a blues man in the life of the mind. And the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of a personal catastrophe expressed lyrically in tragicomic terms. So that I'm a jazz man in the world of ideas. Jazz is a free exercise of creative expression in the face of a darkness, a catastrophic darkness that tends to be playful as well as, at its best, profound. I consider myself a funk man, too. In the tradition of James Brown, George Clinton, and Bootsy Collins because the funk acknowledges that we all emerge from the funk in our mother's womb. And there's freedom and love in that funk, in that womb. We wouldn't be here without our mother's love push. So we become an embodiment of that love in that mess, in that funk. Our bodies will be the culinary delight of terrestrial worms one day; that's a different kind of funk in terms of death. In between that short amount of time, that light between both darknesses that Beckett talks about in *Waiting for Godot*, that's where we have our possibilities of agency, of existential agency, or radical democratic agency. So in that sense the tragicomic has always been about what? Godlike possibilities of free agency in the face of constraints. And the comic is the preoccupation of the limits, the constraints, and how do you cope with the limits and constraints

after that tragic character has gone under. And you bring the two together—the *tragicomic*—and you get ordinary people, not just the well-to-do as in Sophocles or Shakespeare; ordinary people exercising a certain kind of free agency always under severe constraints, but a sense of style, or a sense of smile, or a sense of laughter. . . .

**EM: So it's this comic, the laughter, the lightness that you're talking about. Is that the reinscription of the pragmatist, ameliorative, hopeful, but now tempered, weighted, with the recognition of human finitude?**

CW: Wonderful question. Well one, of course, is the wonderful moment in William James's great Gifford Lectures where he says that the core of the religious problem, and in some ways I'd say the core of the human condition, is the call for help. The acknowledgment of the need of another. It's not just looking in the face of another like Levinas talks about it, but it is a guttural, visceral call for help. Literally as a baby coming out of the womb, metaphorically as human beings who have need for love, need for recognition, need for protection, need for association, and, in the end, the acknowledgment of our interdependency . . . it's the same in any kind of social experiment. Let alone in those very rare democratic experiences in the history of the human condition—in those very rare democratic moments where you can sustain some kind of voices of ordinary people so that our call for help is transformed into conceptions of citizenship in which voices are raised to shape the destiny of the community as a whole. That kind of moralization of kinship into citizenship in which now we view ourselves as first and foremost voices, voices to determine how in fact resources are to be distributed, how in fact status is to be allocated and so forth.

**EM: The concept of evil—do you think there's any place for it?**

CW: Evil is integral to my conception of the tragic; it is integral to my conception of the tragicomic. It's just that the problem with talking about evil is that it's so easy to move to the abstract and you end up with a generic problem of evil as opposed to more concretized, fleshified forms of responding to evils in the world. This is of course John Dewey's move, and I think that there is very much to it. It's not that the problem of evil doesn't exist; it's just that because there is no theoretical or philosophical resolution of it, that the question becomes, again, philosophy as a way of life, what is our

concrete response to it in our day, in our time? And it could be looking at the capitalist mode of production and the asymmetrical relations of power of bosses and workers. It could be looking at patriarchal forms of domination. It could be looking at the ways in which white supremacy remains very much operative. All of these are concretized forms of evil and the question becomes, how then do we respond as concrete agents? Again, you see the move toward the tragic and the tragicomic is a way of keeping us on that humando level rather than allowing us to ascend so high that it becomes a kind of grand philosophical discussion that is severed from the kind of concrete lives we need to live and, most importantly, more than anything else, the concrete courage we need to foster, the concrete courage that we need to enact.

**EM:** And that concrete courage, does it enter into a practice of inquiry? Because, for Dewey, and you just mentioned Dewey, we had to engage in experimentation and he took philosophy, in a certain sense, to be modeled after the scientific project of inquiry which is trying out different things. So how does that courage to try out different things, translate perhaps, to the pragmatist conception of experimentation?

**CW:** Here, I both agree and disagree with Dewey. Let me begin with the disagreement. I disagree with Dewey in that I don't look primarily to science as a model. Why? Well, because the subject matter of science might be the mystery of the universe—how do we generate high levels of prediction of the future and the past given that mystery?—but, see, that mystery is not the mess. That's why the arts are more central for me. And of course, Dewey wrote a wonderful book, *Art as Experience*, and there's much to be applauded. And this is where my agreement with Dewey is. Of course, Dewey's conception of science is continuous with the inquiry of common sense. And even Quine who is not a Deweyan, but a naturalist, understands the ways in which science and common sense have deep continuities. I *do* want to privilege, though, the arts to the degree to which the arts force us to courageously engage what Beckett calls the mess, what I call the funk and that is different than scientific orientations in which mathematicization of knowledge, quantification of knowledge, limited subject matter because you're able to often deal with homogenous units that can be predicted in various kinds of ways. The mess and the funk can't. It's not subject to that kind of orientation, you see. And so, I must be in some ways one of the few philosophers in the world, past and

present, who would deliberately model myself on musicians. When I say I'm a blues man what I'm essentially saying is that if philosophy doesn't go to school with the arts in general and music in particular that it's going to miss out on some things. What I loved about Gadamer, of course, is that volume two of *Truth and Method* is his powerful work on Paul Celan—probably the greatest post-WWII European poet wrestling with the German condition in the German language coming out of the Romanian backdrop, our dear Jewish brother trying to make sense of the world in light of the indescribable evil of The Shoah or the Holocaust—so Gadamer did come out of his philosophical inquiry right into a poetic wrestling with this grand poet who is dealing with, not the problem with evil, but concrete forms of evil—say yes, say no, split down the middle. Language itself more and more opaque, vague, oblique unable to even mobilize its own resources as a language to make sense of the depth of the evil. that's Paul Celan. There he is right there, looking at you right there. Next to Chekhov, in-between Montaigne, right? In my office! Looking at me every day! Celan on the way to suicide! But I would want to go further and say that you take Opus 131, Beethoven—which I listen to nightly, which I think is the greatest string quartet of any of his quartets and that's just beyond the stratosphere in light of his, not just genius, but unbelievable achievement—where the wrestling, the radical incongruity of this exemplary romantic composer at one point, post-romantic in another, and in the string quartets there is no category, no school of thought, there is no -ism, he cannot be subsumed under anything. It just *is* Opus 131. And that's true for other musicians like John Coltrane. And that's what I mean by trying to get philosophy to become so concretized that when you see how musicians have done it maybe we can learn something from it. I'm not saying philosophers should become musicians, but I think that we not only need to be conversing with it, but that we need to enact and embody the styles, the courage, the adventurousness, and the openness to failure, because I think that even in the later Beethoven there's a sense of profound failure, given the goodness of that failure.

**EM:** It sounds to me that against Heidegger's the thinker, the warrior, and the poet, you're juxtaposing the musicians, the poets, and the prophets.

**CW:** That's a nice way of putting it. I think that's true. You see, for me, the poets, the prophets, and the musicians are warriors of the spirit. It reminds me of Nietzsche's athleticism of the mind. So you do get some Greek resonances of Achilles, this grand warrior performing his role and so on, but it's

fundamentally transformed and transfigured. Especially for me in light of the Black experience, but it's transformed and transfigured in musical form, in moral and spiritual form. So that, yes, we are warriors against poverty, we are warriors against domination, we are warriors against bigotry. We are militants for tenderness. This is another set of concerns that I have that come out of the music. I love this in Whitehead. Alfred North Whitehead is one of the few philosophers to talk about the tone of a thinker's thought or a figure's thought or a philosopher's thought, you see. So that there's a tone in Schopenhauer that is not reducible to the argument. There's a melancholic tone in Pascal that's not reducible. The tone in Montaigne and so forth. And if you follow musicians it's the tone and temper as well as the arguments. There's a tone in Reichenbach in his logical empiricism. And right now I'm writing an essay on Hilary Putnam for the library of living philosophers volume and so he's on my mind having been trained by Hans Reichenbach. You see the shifts in the tone of Hilary Putnam. Early functionalism, he's got it right! Now later Putnam, very humble. How did we get ourselves into a situation where we think we have this arrogance, where early on he had it and he's critical of that, you see. I think the musicians can teach we philosophers, we lovers of wisdom something in this regard. So I want to be a militant for a tender tone. I want to be a militant for a loving tone. I want to be a militant for a humble tone. It almost sounds paradoxical. How do you become a warrior for a humble tone? Well, that's the kind of war I want to fight! You see what I mean? I love Chekhov's quote where he says, to hell with the philosophers because most behave like generals in the army and they just want to enlist you in their army. See I don't want to join an army! I want to wrestle with what it means to be a human being! So I don't want to be lined up: Platonist, Aristotelian, Epicurean, Stoic, Hegelian, Nietzschean, Marxist, Heideggerian, Derridian! I say, yes I like that. That's what the musicians say and do. "Hey Coltrane! What are you?" "No, no, I'm just trying to lift my voice." "Well are you an Ellingtonian?" "Well, I learned much from Ellington, but I'm not an Ellingtonian . . ."

**EM:** But we associate with prophets, a certain kind of determination, you might even call dogmatism and certitude. So the question arises, how can we differentiate between true and false prophets?

**CW:** Yes, well the first thing, for me, is that you can't talk about the prophetic without talking about the tragicomic. That means that every dogmatic quality of the prophetic needs to be radically called into question and, yet, still

come to terms with what the prophetic is about, which is identifying various forms of social misery and trying to see where it comes from, what are the structural institution conditions under which it emerged and is promoted and sustained, what are the conditions under which it can be changed and transformed. But they are still all fallible claims. And so in that sense my conception of the prophetic is radically different than the more orthodox conceptions of the prophetic. I mean, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel does mean much to me because his great work on the prophets is still something I read and reread all the time, but my conception of the prophetic has been dipped in the blues, the jazz, Dewey, Gadamer . . .

**EM: So how do we articulate the true prophet out of the tragicomic ground, out of that reference to human suffering and the funk?**

CW: I think in the end it has to do with a fundamental moral choice. Does it zero in on the plight and predicament of the weak and the vulnerable at any historical moment? You know that wonderful sentence in Emerson when he says that our conception of the world itself has a moral character, or when James says, our very metaphysics is a species of our moral life. That's one of my links to pragmatism. See, the very claims about the nature of the world is in and of itself a normative commitment in terms of a certain way of life. And at that bedrock moment, almost in Wittgenstein's sense when we have to just take your stand, will it focus on the weak and vulnerable in all the various forms of weak and vulnerable that you know? And does it have the capacity to highlight that plight and predicament of the weak and vulnerable in such a way that they can be better off, back to the ameliorative claims of William James.

**EM: Are there any modern prophets?**

CW: Sure, I think there's a number of modern prophets, definitely. For me, Noam Chomsky is a modern prophet. Of course, Chomsky is as Cartesian as they come in terms of his commitment to rationality, absolutely. I think that Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was one. And, of course, my fundamental aim of my intellectual vocation is to make the world safe for the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. And I think that Brother Martin was a modern prophet. Of course, there are women prophets too. This sister right here, Muriel Rukeyser. She's the great Whitmanesque figure of twentieth-century

American culture. I think Walt Whitman was a great prophet, but she's a great twentieth-century Whitmanesque. Muriel Rukeyser, the great poet and cultural critic and, of course, the teacher of Alice Walker, the teacher of Adrienne Rich at Sarah Lawrence for many years. I think she deserves recognition. I teach her every year, no matter what . . .

**EM: I have to completely confess my ignorance of her work.**

CW: *The Life of Poetry*—oh man, this text here—work prefigures and anticipates so much . . . you can just see the analysis of blues, poetry, back to Shakespeare, tend toward democracy, Melville and the problem of evil, Whitman and the problem of good, poets of outrage, poets of possibility. I mean, she's unbelievable. This is in 1941. Nineteen forty-one. She's one of the great ones. I've been kind of an evangelical promoter of Muriel Rukeyser for a long time. And I think philosophers need to wrestle with her.

**EM: What is the relationship between the prophet and the organic intellectual? The conception of the organic intellectual that Gramsci developed. The concept that you use so well in *American Evasion of Philosophy* and, of course, in other texts. But what is the relationship between the prophet and the organic intellectual?**

CW: Well, one is of course when Gramsci acknowledges that the organic intellectual can be right-wing. That you can be organically tied to the traditional Catholic Church, in which your ideas are used and deployed to sustain an institution that is inflicting great domination on peoples. So that the prophetic organic intellectual is concerned with the plight and predicament of the weak and the vulnerable. For me, Gramsci is the brook of fire through which we all must pass in terms of his analysis in terms of the prophetic organic intellectual, but because he's using the organic intellectual in a sociological way, in terms of how certain intellectuals are tied to various institutions rooted in communities, it can go left or right or centrist and so forth.

**EM: So would you agree, then, that existential and social ties are indispensable for critique?**

CW: Oh, absolutely, I think that in some ways they are the very sources of critique when you really get down to the bottom of it. Why is it that

Beethoven's Ninth is such a powerful critique of modern repression, like the Congress of Vienna, as opposed to Bruckner, who's also a great artist, who's right-wing Catholic to the core? So you don't get the kind of sensitivity to the weak and vulnerable in Bruckner, but you do in Beethoven. And that's not just a matter of artistic genius, because artistic genius cuts both ways, you know what I mean? You can be a philosophical genius, you can be a Heidegger, who is an indisputable philosophic genius, I don't care what people say he is. As Ezra Pound was a poetic genius. They just happen to be gangsters when it comes to their politics. And at the same time you have artistic genius. T. S. Eliot would be another right-wing artistic genius. At the same time, you have philosophic genius that tilts toward the other way. Now someone like Diderot was not a philosophic genius, but he was a great progressive intellectual: anti-imperialist, antiracist, truth-teller, a fine poetic prose stylist and so forth . . . but he's not at the level of Heidegger. And we just have to be honest about that. And I know that one of the things that upsets me in the German context, and I tell my students this all the time, that the tradition that produced Lessing, Kant, Schiller, Beethoven, Brahms, Wieland, the great translator of Lucian, and Shakespeare, or Ludwig Tieck . . . All of these get wiped out with the Holocaust. People think of Germany, think of Hitler. And you say to yourself, wait a minute! Hitler was Hitler and we need to attend to this evil, but this great tradition all of a sudden just gets completely eliminated? I can't conceive of myself without Lessing, Wieland, Tieck. I haven't even talked about Nietzsche! Schopenhauer, who is probably my favorite philosopher of the nineteenth century other than Kierkegaard . . . and so forth. So you say, wait a minute, somehow we've got to be able to stay in contact with the great intellectual treasures and the great existential treasures of German, modern German culture, even as we come to terms with the twenty-first century because without those resources we're not going to make it in the present day. Keep in mind there's no Dostoyevsky without Schiller.

**EM: Right. Let me ask you the other side of that question, which is, to what extent do the existential and social commitments of a thinker compromise their ability to speak truth to power?**

CW: That's a good, powerful question. I think that given our finitude we all find ourselves caught in certain kinds of partialities, certain kinds of prejudgments and prejudices, so therefore in what you call a certain kind

of compromise. I mean, we can say that categories are a compromise with chaos. There's simply no way that we're ever going to fully capture what's out. And therefore our existential commitments, even my own existential, even my own preoccupations with the plight and predicament with the weak and vulnerable, in some ways must generate certain kinds of blindness, they just must. And I have to be honest and candid about that. I try not to fall into the pit of a cheap didacticism or a kind of missionary attitude toward making the world better, or a naive sentimentalism about just being in uncritical solidarity with the poor and so forth, but it means that I have to be courageous enough to acknowledge that, for example, I have much to learn from a Nazi like Heidegger. Whereas you would think, well, no given a certain existential commitment, you just completely turn away. No, no. Heidegger taught me too much. Or a white supremacist like my favorite philosopher in the English language, David Hume.

**EM: Yea. [laughter]**

CW: You see what I mean? You think it's a living contradiction, how can David Hume be your favorite philosopher in the English language when he is one of the major propagandists and defenders of white supremacy in his essay "Of National Characters." And I would say the sheer quality of his mind and the subtlety of his philosophic intelligence, and the fact that he's one of the rare philosophers who reached a conclusion of radical incongruity which is a comic conclusion. So that he understands that skepticism if pushed far enough could generate wholesale incongruity. So when he shifts from philosophy to backgammon or back to common sense, he says, he wants piecemeal skepticism, not wholesale skepticism, to use John Dewey's distinction. And I'm with Hume *all the way* on that. And so you find yourself having to be jazzlike: protean, flexible, fluid, open-minded and, therefore, in close conversation and sometimes in very close intellectual proximity to gangsters.

**EM: We have to be committed to their genius in order to save them from their own prejudices.**

CW: That's a nice way of putting it. That's a very nice way. But recognizing that whatever we come up with, in years to come people will be able to see even more clearly our own prejudices, our own contradictions, our own

inadequacies. You just make sure you've laid bare the claim that you're going to find more and more as time goes on in my own thought.

**EM: You're bringing us to my next question, which has to do with the relationship between traditionalism and progressivism because we're talking about appropriating figures within a context. So how does this work in terms of tradition and looking forward?**

CW: Well, see I'd want to go with Benjamin in this regard. I think that all we have as persons who are deliberately wedded and consciously tied to the struggles of the weak and vulnerable, the oppressed and subjugated are subversive memories that keeps traditions of subversion alive and personal integrity. And by personal integrity what I mean is attempting to be true to ourselves with a kind of intellectual conscience that would make Nietzsche smile. We have very different political implications, very different moral orientations as Nietzsche, but when it comes to intellectual *conscience*, Nietzsche is still a major benchmark of that, see. That's what really . . . subversive memory tied to these traditions, subversive traditions, and this personal integrity that has an intellectual conscience and, for me, a moral and spiritual high ground, which is to say that it refuses to *ever* drink of the cup of bitterness, revenge, hatred, bigotry, or xenophobia. And those are very strong absolute givens for me. They almost have a priori status. "Hatred is the coward's revenge against those who intimidate you." That powerful line is from George Bernard Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple*, in his early play. Coming out of King's tradition and being a Christian, "love thy neighbor" and, for me, love thy enemy, has as close to a priori status as anything. Anything.

**EM: A testament of hope.**

CW: Yes, that's exactly right.

**EM: Hope tempered by the tragicomic.**

CW: Absolutely. So it's no optimism at all. To be a prisoner of hope is to choose at the level of humando to be a certain kind of lover of wisdom, lover of justice, lover of neighbor, and, for me, lover of enemy that you keep in motion. Hope is about motion. Hope is about movement. The only way

you keep social hope, social motion, and social movement, the only way that you keep individual hope, individual motion, individual movement—it could be in the form of thought, in the form of image, something that is continuously pushing back against the bombardment of the fabricated and falsified realities that keep alive the lies about working people or poor people or gays or lesbians. Another way of putting it is that—this is why tradition is important—you know, August Wilson, one of the great playwrights of our day who just passed recently, used to say that black people authorize reality by means of performance.

**EM: What a great line.**

CW: Yes, that's a powerful line. Powerful line. Because what he meant was—and that's my tradition—what he meant was, when we came to the United States on slave ships—52,450 of them, between 1444 and 1888, so four hundred years, which meant that when we got off the ship we were taken straight to the slave auction in shackles. We had no control over land or territory. We had no rights. No liberties. We didn't even have control over our bodies. The black women were raped and violated. The black men were worked from sunup to sundown. So the only thing we really had to authorize our reality was our voices. It was in lifting the voices—which is the national anthem of black people, life every voice and sing—James Weldon Johnson and his brother Rosamond Johnson—all we have is our voices. So that it was in that performance—and it was against the law for black people to learn how to read and write in the United States. Against the law for black people to worship God without white supervision, so we had to steal away at night. We were persecuted Christians in the land of so called religious liberty. We had to steal away at night, hold hands in a ring shout, and lift voices. And those spirituals that came forth of those ingenious and yet nonliterate peoples, that was the only source they had to authorize their reality in the face of the mendacity of slavery, the white supremacist slavery. So that was a tradition, in the face of this ugly reality, this evil—institutionalized *and* structuralized *and* personalized evil. And that began to broaden itself and started lifting voices in a variety of different ways. The preachers talking; they philosophize. The poets! The musicians, they've got European instruments? They vocalized them. The great Art Tatum, the greatest jazz musician on the piano. He made it talk. He made it a talking European instrument. John Coltrane on the saxophone,

he made it a talking European instrument. But he's raising the voice no matter what. Well, see, that authorizes a reality. It's part of a construction of a reality but is a counter-construction given what was constructed given white supremacist of authorities. And we're still wrestling with that today.

**EM: Can we call this “democratic hope” to use that expression of Robert Westbrook, this struggling with this funk, this mendacity. That looking forward, is that democratic hope?**

CW: Oh yes, because that is the agency of the *demos*. It's the voices of the *demos*. It's what Sly and the Family Stone calls “everyday people,” or what James Cleveland, the great gospel artist, calls “ordinary people.” Of course, you see it also in Emerson and Whitman and others. I love this theme in the great G. K. Chesterton. And when ordinary and everyday people raise their voices, exercise agencies organize, mobilize, that's a democratic hope, but it's got to be in motion. It can be social motion or social movements. It can be individual motion or individual movement, in terms of the poets and the artists and so forth, but it's certainly democratic hope. But it's most importantly counter-hegemonic, because the term *democratic* has become so bastardized and sanitized and deodorized that when you think of democracy you think of, you know, some bourgeois politician talking about democracy as opposed to the democracy we're talking about, is that threat to the order that that bourgeois politician is talking about. And that includes Obama.

**EM: Well, you brought it up even before I got there.**

CW: Absolutely, I mean, can you imagine he uses in his campaign the language of Martin Luther King Jr. He uses *Audacity of Hope*, the sermon from Jeremiah Wright, that comes out of the tradition that I am talking about, and what does he offer the world? Neoliberal cheap optimism.

**EM: So President Obama has disappointed this democratic hope?**

CW: Oh yes! In fact, he's become one of the major impediments of it, because he's counterfeit. He's one of the false ones to use the language of Martin and then generate policies for investment bankers. He's become the black mascot for Wall Street oligarchs and the black puppet for plutocrats,

then he runs the American empire. He sharpens the killing machine. He tries to define justice in terms of murder and execution and assassination. And you say, wait a minute, you've got Martin Luther King Jr. in the Oval Office and Martin is crying every day. He died for sanitation workers, but Obama's State of the Union 2011 speech, no mention of poor or poverty, and it's the first time a president hasn't mentioned the poor or poverty since 1948. Yet Martin's whole aim was talking about organizing poor people. Not just in the American empire, but around the world and so forth. Same is true of the critique of the American empire in Vietnam, and Obama ends up consolidating some of the most vicious, secretive operations of the American empire with drones. What was it? Forty-five drones with Bush in eight years. While Obama had fifty-three drones in one year and 110 last year and more this year! Killing innocent people! And then redefines himself as American through what? Killing bin Laden! That certifies him as American. That's the John Wayne tradition. The ol' cowboy mentality. Imperial mentality, imperial presidency, and I'm not in any way as you can imagine, I'm not defending a thug like bin Laden, but at the same time you can see that same American imperial orientation of moral regeneration through violence; ethical revitalization through the celebration of murder, and yet the very tradition of *The Audacity of Hope* was about what? Trying to break the cycle of killing, murder, and so on, you see.

**EM:** How can we square what you just said with what some might call “a fact” that Obama represents a rupture in the history of the United States? A black man is elected president after a mass movement elected him and so he did represent, for a moment—for a year, for a month—democratic hope.

**CW:** He became the symbol of democratic hope. Now, I want to distinguish between a movement and a campaign. Because a movement is based on grass-roots organizing and a campaign is based on Astroturf networking. So you see how quick [snaps fingers] the campaign shut off? The democratic party shut it off. See, a social movement isn't tied to a political party shutting them off, you see? So feminist movement, workers movement, black freedom movement, anti-homophobic movement, ecological movement, all of these are movements that are independent of political parties running them. When you have a presidential campaign like Obama[s], what appears to be a movement is really a strong campaign. A lot of activity and so forth is going on is shut off completely. Now certainly, I wouldn't

call it a rupture. I would call it a discontinuity, because a rupture is more close to my notion of a utopian interruption. And a utopian interruption for me is more profoundly subversive. To have a black man as president is discontinuous with the racist past of America, there's no doubt about that. But to be discontinuous with the racist past is not to engage in a rupture that is a lot more structural, is much more institutional in terms of transforming the dynamics of power. We didn't have a transfer of power at all with a black president. As soon as he moved in he chose Larry Summers [as head of the National Economic Council], who deregulated derivatives, undercut the Glass-Steagall Act, allowed commercial investment banks to come together and they can now lend as well as trade in the 1990s. He brought Tim Geithner, head of the New York Reserve system in. Held on to Bernanke, continuous with Alan Greenspan, so it was clear that this discontinuity was not going to translate into a rupture. You've got the continuity of the system, the continuity of the various symbols who were all white men up until Barack Obama. Now, granted I mean even a symbolic blow against white supremacy is a good thing, especially for the children. I've got a daughter, a precious daughter, Zeytun. I've got a son and a grandson, Clifton and Kalen, and it affected their psyche and that's a beautiful thing. But when it comes to these deeper issues of a rupture, it was clear that the drones would increase. It was clear that the torturers would not be brought to justice. The wiretappers would not be brought to justice. So far, what he's done is he's been beholden to investment bankers and he's killed bin Laden. Now, that's pretty American in a centrist and right-wing way. Absolutely.

**EM:** I want to return to it later, but now let me focus on what Obama symbolized and promised. Let's focus on one aspect. Obama's campaign promises were that he was going to repair the U.S. image in the world and also repair the fractured relationships with Europe. Do you think he has managed that? Or has he done something else?

**CW:** I think we'd have to raise the question of which parts of the world we're talking about and which class parts of the world we are talking about because what Obama has been able to do is to allow for a recasting of the old Bush image, which is one of being a cowboy—arrogant, unilateral—with a much more refined, quasi-multilateral, and much more educated and “proud of being educated” image. But the function of both of the images

are still the same. One is this cowboy face of the American empire; the other is this educated, refined black face of the American empire. So very much like the issue of the discontinuity in terms of race, but the continuity in terms of the structure—imperial structure abroad, neoliberal structure at home—that when it comes to Obama’s relation to the world it is still very much one of an American imperial face but with a very, very different kind of a style more than anything else. I think that when push comes to shove, the rest of the world will see it more clearly.

**EM: So his style is different but the substance is still the same?**

CW: I’ll give you a good example. When it comes to Palestinian suffering, Obama in his language would have given the impression that he would have been much more sensitive to it. Because we know that you somehow have to balance the security for our Jewish brothers and sisters in Israel and justice for our Palestinian brothers and sisters under vicious Israeli occupation. There’s got to be some balance. You would think, given his language, he would do better than Bush. On the ground? Not at all. Nah, he couldn’t say a mumbling word when a thousand Palestinians were being viciously massacred by the Israeli armed forces. Not a word! You see what I mean? And yet, he can give another speech and give the impression that, well, he’s more refined than Bush and no, in terms of actual, back to our concrete, ground-level conceptions of philosophy, what’s happening on the ground? He’s not better, and in some ways, as I said before, in terms of drones, he’s worse! And because he’s so clever at more appeal, it becomes even more worse. Because people don’t realize that’s what he’s really doing because of his charisma and his brilliance and so forth. Charisma and brilliance, which George Bush didn’t have. And I know that our Latin American brothers and sisters were able to see this, I think, much earlier than many, because they wished him well. I mean, God, you look at what Lula said and what Hugo Chavez said and what the brother in Ecuador said and Bolivia said and then they look at what he’s actually doing, was a response to the coup in Honduras and say, “oh my God, I bet he’s worse!” You look at what his response is in Cuba. Well, he is making some movement, but then at the same time he pulls back and says, “hmmm” and look at what they are really doing to Chavez in terms of the mischaracterization and lies. And I have my critiques of Hugo Chavez, but still the distortions abound, you know. The fact for example that the Obama administration still calls Chavez a

dictator, but refuses to call Mubarak a dictator . . . before Mubarak's fall. You know Vice President Biden over and over said, "dictator of Venezuela, our friend in Egypt." It's just the same coded lies that the American empire has been using year in and year out.

**EM: The imperial megaphone. [laughter]**

CW: Ohhh . . . that's a wonderful phrase.

**EM: You just articulated something I think is very powerful: the relationship between the killing of Osama Bin Laden and a couple of days earlier Obama had done a press conference about his birth certificate. And in a way you are saying they converged.**

CW: Oh, they go hand in hand.

**EM: He claims now his American citizenship, his American-ness by killing.**

CW: In fact, the assassination and execution of bin Laden becomes a substitute for his birth certificate, regarding the authenticity of his status as an American. He is now a full-fledged American forever. That's all that he needed to do. And it reminded me of John Brown. Because you remember what John Brown said right before he was hanged? And John Brown and Nat Turner would actually be heroes in American history if you use the same logic that Obama used in killing bin Laden because they would be counter-terrorists fighting terrorism. Terrorists fighting what people perceived as terrorists. And Nat Turner killing innocent people, but he's dealing with American terrorism called U.S. slavery. John Brown killing innocent people, as well as some guilty people, in response to American terrorism. John Brown said, "If I had done this in defense of rich whites, I would be one of the great Americans of all time." Why? Because there was not a nickel in it for liberating black slaves, so I couldn't do it for money. I did it because I finally believed in it. Because slaves are not viewed as human, I go to the gallows.' He said, 'And I can assure you now, slavery will be decided in blood.' That's 1859, eighteen months before the most barbaric civil war of modern times. So you say to yourself, good god. Now, I'm critical of John Brown because I don't think he should have killed innocent white folk, and certainly not innocent white children, and he included

killing innocent white women. I don't believe in killing innocent people at all no matter who they are, but I do resonate [*sic*] with the spirit of John Brown in terms of his willingness to focus on the plight of the weak and the vulnerable and have a level of righteous indignation that would lead him to engage in warrior-like activity in the military way.

**EM: But Osama bin Laden was no innocent person by any means.**

CW: No.

**EM: Is the assumption here that we should have captured him and brought him to trial?**

CW: Well, no. I actually believe that in the context of the war—and I believe in just war. I'm not like Brother Martin; I'm not a pacifist. I would have fought against Hitler. I would have fought against the apartheid, South Africa. I would have fought against the communist regime in Poland. I would have joined Solidarity. Not just nonviolent, I would have been open to joining the violent wing of it. But in that sense, in the context of war, there would be justification for killing a soldier or a general like bin Laden. There'd be no call for grand celebration, and I would never use the language of President Obama, saying "justice has been done." Because war is not a context in which justice is done. This is militaristic. This is revenge and retaliation and so forth and so on. So that I think that was the wrong language to use. Same is true with "closure." There's no closure with a loved one; you're not going to find deeper meaning in the life of a loved one because somebody was *murdered*. That, to me, is a form of spiritual impoverishment. Psychologically I can understand relief. Psychologically I can understand a moment of some consolation that someone remembers that your loved one was killed. But that's not closure! And if it is closure, you've got a very, very limited spiritual capacity.

**EM: But bin Laden declared war on the United States, on the West. You could argue that we are in a context of war and, thus, there was a justification to kill him. He was a soldier. He was a jihadist.**

CW: Yes, that's true. And that would be, for me, the strongest case one could make for the execution and the killing. Absolutely. But would it be

the grounds for the claim of justice done? Grounds for celebration and congratulation? No, not really because the war still has got a long way to go. And there's no victory. And there may not ever be victory. But based on my conception of justice, though, I have to admit I think about the moment in Dostoyevsky's great prose poem "The Grand Inquisitor" in *The Brothers Karamazov*, where he talks about the children who are killed by the dogs when the owners let loose the dogs and kill the kids. I don't think the parents of those children could ever have justice done. Justice becomes, at that point, if not eschatological, just inconceivable. I don't think—this is part of the tragicomic sensibility that I have—I don't think that the world is the kind of place where fundamental justice can be done when you think of those generations and generations of what Benjamin called the pile-age of wreckage upon wreckage of social misery and oppression. The Jewish brothers and sisters will never have justice done even if every Nazi was executed. Black people will never have justice done even if every slaveholder was. Because it's the scope and the depth, and the breadth of the evil does not lend itself to a calculus of evil. And that's part of my tragicomic view of things. I'm just not convinced that justice is to be achieved in that way, in that kind of cheap conception of justice that I'm suspicious of.

**EM:** On the other hand, President Obama and the White House have been quite somber and reticent to engage and be apologetic for a kind of euphoria that we've seen in Washington and New York for celebrating. In fact, he said, we don't do trophies. That is the expression that he used in one of his public speeches.

CW: That was in reference for not showing the body, and that's true. But remember he did say, we as Americans now have something we can be proud of. That is when he lends himself to . . .

**EM:** Celebration . . . jingoism . . .

CW: A jingoism, and narrow forms of nationalism, and very cheap forms of patriotism. But in addition to that I also think we have to acknowledge that—what would be the right word—the tone of Obama's remarks tend to contrast sharply with some of the formulations. When he says, again, when we Americans put our minds to it we can do anything we want. Well you see, for me that's part of the problem! That is sentimentalism. Nothing comic about that at all, because it's a lie! It just isn't true! And some of the

things we could put our mind to: eliminating poverty, fairness for workers, protecting women vis-à-vis violence, dealing with the present industrial complex, having justice—or some sense of justice—on Wall Street with all the gangster activity going on. We don't put our minds to that at all! It's been around for a long, long time, right? So that those things we could do better on . . . but there's no limits! This sense of limitlessness flies in the face of my tragicomic conception of what it is to be human, what it is to philosophize, what it is to love wisdom, justice, and neighbor. We do have limits. There are a number of things we Americans, we Germans, we French, we Japanese . . . we cannot do so the politicians have to lie. It almost makes you want to go with Leo Strauss and say, "You know what? [laughter] These politicians who have noble lies perpetrated all the time. We need some different kind of writing to tell the truth without somehow undermining that sort so that the masses understand they are being manipulated." Now I don't go with Strauss in that regard, but I can understand why he goes in that direction. It's a profound skepticism about the ability of those addicted to power like politicians ever coming to terms with the truth. I'm with Strauss on that. Leo Strauss got a point, man.

**EM: The noble lies.**

CW: Going back to Plato.

**EM: We need those prophets to challenge those nobles lies, right?**

CW: To call them into question. That's exactly right.

**EM: Let me turn to more contemporary issues, although the killing of Osama is very contemporary. Both the United States and Europe face a major challenge, and that is global mass migration. The United States has 12 million so-called illegal immigrants, irregular migrants. Europe faces this same problem, but in Europe the context is different. There, a lot of these immigrants are refugees, are actually people who, one would say, are not enamored with democratic spirit. How do you think Europeans should deal with immigrants who have anti-democratic outlooks?**

CW: Well, I think part of the educational system is to ensure that young people especially are exposed to conceptions of public interest and common good that are tied to democratic sensibilities and libertarian

sensibilities—acknowledging liberties of people who have different views than you have—and democratic conceptions in which persons as citizens have a different status than persons as a religious identity or ethnic identity or what have you. And I would submit, especially in Germany—I mean, Germany means much to me because I literally almost live in Germany in a certain sense because of my precious daughter who lives in Germany and she is of course connected to the very precious, not just Turks but Kurds. She comes out of the Kurdish tradition. And I think that when you look at the history of Kurds and Turks in Germany you do not see any flagrant anti-democratic formations or anti-democratic voices. They come to work. Many aspire to citizenship. When they become citizens, I don't see them constituting any kind of crypto-fascist party that would be a threat to democracy. So just looking at the facts on the ground could shatter some of the stereotypes. Now of course there's a whole host of extremist slices of all immigrant communities, but, Germany and the United States, we've got extremist Nativist groups that far, far out-pace any of the extremist new immigrant groups. So again, stereotypes shattered.

**EM: So you're challenging the assumption behind my question. [laughter] Because there's anti-democratic sentiment across the board.**

CW: Across the board! [laughter] Oh my God! Well, we have right-wing crypto-fascists in America and I *know* they've got those crypto-fascists in Germany, even though they outlaw the Nazi and we don't.

**EM: I know that you are very influenced by Werner Jaeger's conception of paideia.**

CW: Yes.

**EM: How would that notion, that ideal of paideia, be translated in the context of democracies made up of immigrants?**

CW: Well, one would be that we'd have to dip any notion of paideia into the context of weak and vulnerable peoples' doing and sufferings, of oppressed peoples' histories. So that by *deep* education and cultivation of heart, mind, and spirit, of the shifts that, let's say, echo Plato in 518CD in Plato's *Republic* where he talks about the art of the turning of the soul as the essence of

paideia and he's shifting from the superficial to the substantial, shifting from the frivolous to the serious, shifting from the life of surfaces and appearances to one of wrestling with the realities of death and dread and sorrow and sadness as well as joy, and a certain kind of wisdom, let's say. That when you look at paideia through the lens of the doing and sufferings of the weak and the vulnerable you get a democratic paideia. And that democratic paideia, which is not just an effort to be included, you see. I mean, you don't just want immigrants to be included in the German social order. You want immigrants to *transform* the German social order, to make it more democratic so that native Germans of deep democratic sensibility can embrace the democratic paideia of the immigrants. And they become allies against those who are calling into question democracy or calling into question further democratization in that regard. I think my dear brother Habermas would agree with this. Of course, our dear brother Habermas, he comes from the Enlightenment crowd! He has a deep suspicion of religious persons like myself and I appreciate his suspicion, because we've got some xenophobic folk within my religious tradition that we need to be very critical of. But I think even given his very subtle enlightenment conception of paideia that he would embrace this democratic paideia even though it is rooted in either religious sources or comes out of communities that are far removed from his German community because he cosmopolitan enough to know that democratic paideia cuts across communities and cultures even though it remains rooted in them in terms of how they come to life and have their life. That was a wonderful moment in our text, wasn't it, with Habermas? Wow.<sup>5</sup>

**EM: But you know that there he recognizes that when he talks about the religious citizen, he has you in mind as a perfect dialect partner and that means for him that he finds the kind of voice that you bring to the public sphere indispensable, a kind of moral North Star.**

CW: Yea, I was very moved by that, really very moved. I was, I really was. That was quite a moment. Not just in the conference, that was a moment in my life. Because as I said before, *Knowledge and Human Interest* really did change my life. Now that was before he made his neo-Kantian move, but still, Habermas has always meant much to me. So that the Habermas-Gadamer debate, for example, that took place in '67, that even though I learned so much from both of them and I was closer to Habermas in

terms of my politics, I ended up opting for the crucial role of tradition vis-à-vis Gadamer, but my tradition is tied to the progressive politics of Habermas, especially at that time. I mean, he's become a little bit more social democratic since then, of course, but he's still progressive in many ways. I'm sorry to just have a digression on that, but that's important . . .

**EM: No, no. It allows me to ask this other question that links us to the German context and that is, in the U.S., community is a dream, a dream that is a resource also. For Germans, many would say community is trauma. How can we have uses for community in postmodern, postcolonial societies? What are the dangers?**

CW: Well, it's very interesting. Here, I think the language of Martin Luther King Jr. is useful because Martin talked about a dream. And he talked about that dream in the context of a person and a people who were terrorized, traumatized, and stigmatized at the same time. It's like the Langston Hughes poem, what happens to a dream deferred? Does it explode or dry up like a raisin in the sun? The very title of Lorraine Hansberry['s] classic [play], in 1959, *A Raisin in the Sun*. So that for me, I come from a tradition where dreaming and being terrorized, traumatized, and stigmatized are inseparable. They are inseparable. And when you can't dream at all, then it becomes, not only a nightmare, but it becomes a perennial and endless trauma and terror and stigma. So the question becomes I think for Germans is, how can one make talk about community in a democratic way—in the economic sphere, the political sphere, and in the cultural sphere—real enough so that the trauma doesn't have the last word? The trauma will always already be there. If you deny the trauma, you live in the world of make-believe. That's been the history of America. That's the American Hamlet, Blanche Dubois, in *A Streetcar Named Desire* by the white, literary bluesman Tennessee Williams, you see. Blanche denies the trauma, denies reality, history, and mortality and ends up in a world of make-believe, ends up in a house of cards, and it comes falling down. Because chickens come home to roost. That's been America. You see, the U.S. Constitution, dreams, trauma for Indians, trauma for slaves. And Civil War. *Nightmare*. Why? Because chickens come home to roost. Living in a world of make-believe. America, the land of liberty! Wait a minute, you have American terrorism of Jim Crow Jane Crow, 1960s. You've got a choice: either work through the trauma—don't deny it!—you've got to work through it. Don't allow it to have the last word in order to make your democracy real enough to keep moving on.

That's what the Black Freedom Movement allowed for America to do. If America didn't have the Black Freedom Movement, it would have been more right-wing crypto-fascist. But this is to say we would still have apartheid thirty, forty years later, which means you have terrorist cells, civil strife, moving toward civil war again, you see. And so there, not just the American experience but the Black American experience provides Germany and the other European nations with a way of dealing with both the trauma and the terror and the stigma. How is it that these black people have all three and yet can still dream without denying the trauma and dream in such a way that it included not just black people, but everybody? The whole, not just nation, but all of humanity. And that's back to the humanist tradition that we started with, you see. But it's been funkified. It's been funkified. It's been put through the brook of fire of the best of the Black experience in the American empire. And to funkify the humanist tradition is to really take Socrates, and Augustine, and Erasmus, and Montaigne, and Hume on through Marx, and Whitman, and Emerson, dip it into the funk and come out with a tragicomic sensibility that is prophetic, but also much more radical and subversive as a deep democratic commitment. As the old folk used to say, if justice is what love looks like in public, and tenderness is what love feels like in private, then deep democracy is what justice looks like in practice and that's love of wisdom as a practice, philosophy as a set of *practices*, but knowing that you've got your limitations and constraints no matter where you end up. And that's the tragicomic conclusion.

**EM: Professor West this has been a beautiful interview. Let me just ask you one last question. Can you summarize in one sentence prophetic pragmatism?**

CW: I would say, courage to think critically, courage to love, and courage to hope against the backdrop of catastrophic darkness, but always ending with a smile.

**EM: Thank you.**

CW: Yea, I think that's probably what it comes down to, brother.

**EM: Beautiful.**

CW: [laughter] We had some fun . . .

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**CORNEL WEST** is a professor of philosophy and Christian practice at Union Theological Seminary and Professor Emeritus at Princeton University. He has also taught at Yale, Harvard, and the University of Paris. Cornel West graduated magna cum laude from Harvard in three years and obtained his M.A. and Ph.D. in Philosophy at Princeton, where he worked with Richard Rorty. He has written over 20 books and has edited 13. Though he is best known for his classics, *Race Matters* (1994) and *Democracy Matters* (2005), and for his memoir, *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud* (2010), his most recent releases, *Black Prophetic Fire* (2014) *Radical King* (2015), *And the Spirit Moved Them: The Lost Radical History of America's First Feminists* (2017), have received critical acclaim.

#### NOTES

1. Jürgen Manemann, Yoko Arisaka, Volker Drell, and Anna Maria Hauk, *Prophetischer Pragmatismus. Einführung in Das Denken von Cornel West* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2012).
2. See Tavis Smiley and Cornel West, *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto* (New York: Smiley Books, 2012).
3. Cornel West, *Black Prophetic Fire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014).
4. Cornel West, *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud, a Memoir* (Carlsbad, CA: Smiley Books, 2010)
5. West is referring to Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, eds. *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 114, where Habermas specifically addresses West's intervention at the public event that included both as well as Judith Butler and Charles Taylor. Habermas said, "I will come back to translation, but let me first express that I feel that I am in a double bind after listening to Cornel West. Only a few hundred meters up from Wall Street here, we hear not someone talking about prophetic speech, but performing it in some way—namely, in a kind of moving rhetoric to which the only possible response would be to stand up and to change one's life. So just to continue academic discourse is somehow ridiculous."