

# Preserving the Democratic Experiment: Moral Courage and the Role of Intellectual Activism

Interview with Cornel West<sup>1</sup>

*Cornel West*

**Edward Carvalho:** In *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*, you cite three “dominating, antidemocratic dogmas—free-market fundamentalism (neoliberalism), aggressive militarism, and escalating authoritarianism”—as power structures currently undermining American (and global) society (1-23). Can you talk a little about the impact of these forces on academic freedom and intellectual activism?

**Cornel West:** It’s a good question. I think that there’s a *sense* in which 9/11 symbolizes the undeniable chilling of intellectual discourse in the academy. It had been in place for a while—I mean, there has always been a deep suspicion of dissenting voices in the history of the academy. Charles Beard at Columbia during World War I; we know about McCarthyism in the ‘50s—so we don’t want to think somehow that 9/11 is new, but there’s certainly an intensifying of that *chill* on intellectual dialogue in the academy of 9/11. And I think that when you actually look at the kind of consensus that *emerged* in the late ‘80s/early ‘90s around free-market fundamentalism in the Democratic Party as well as the Republican Party—which is to say, liberal/neoliberal, conservative/neoconservative—all had the same consensus in terms of the ideology of neoliberalism. So those who found themselves outside of that, found themselves not only marginalized, but degraded, dismissed, dejected, and so on. At the same time, with the PATRIOT Act connected with 9/11—which is the institutional form of the chilling—[they found also] that any critique of the American empire is viewed as *disloyalty*, as *un-American*, and so forth.

The PATRIOT Act really made that law. And so, among the presidents and deans and faculty and staff of universities, the chilling effect became even *more real*. And then with the militarism—the imperial occupation of Iraq and threats against Iran and the war in Afghanistan—there was this sense that America had its back against the wall and therefore that all critics ought to somehow be either silenced or demonized *themselves*. I think certainly it’s not been a good day for

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dissent and dialogue in the academy, especially since 9/11. But these three larger forces are being reinforced and intensified as a result of 9/11.

**EC:** Do you think then that 9/11 provided the opportunity for the administration to really kind of put those elements that were there before more centrally on the table?

**CW:** I think politically the Bush administration did. We have to keep in mind, the academy itself, which has its own kinds of consensus, and its own kind of narrow paradigms and parochial frameworks—[9/11] also became a moment for the academy to become much more diligent in reinforcing the kind of boundaries that were at work.

Now, the other side of this thing, of course, has to do with the Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is very real. Because you really can't talk about liberalism/neoliberalism or conservatism/neoconservatism in the last fifteen to twenty years without talking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the difficulty of there being a robust and uninhibited dialogue about *that* complicated conflict in the academy. And that issue became more and more pressing as a result of 9/11 because Bin Ladin and others are saying, "It's the Israeli occupation and the U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia that upset us": those two issues. So that matter became more *salient* and more *visible*. And it's clear that we can't have a serious discussion about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the academy. It's sad but it's true. Chomsky and Said and other towering figures have tried to be as honest and truthful about this thing [as possible]—you just can't do it. I found out in my chapter in *Democracy Matters* that if you write some critical reflections on the Middle East and the Israeli occupation, and so forth, you get demonized. Michael Lerner—brother Rabbi Michael Lerner—the same way. We know it's going to take a little while for there to be the kind of open-ended, serious, and substantive discussion about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. So you've got these three forces—you've got 9/11 connected to the PATRIOT Act, which is political; connected to the larger academic context, which is neoliberal consensus, in terms of economic ideology, and so forth; and then, of course, you've got the military presence and imperial occupation, *with* the Israeli-Palestinian issue *looming large* in relation to 9/11, and the academy unable to have a Socratic dialogue about it.

**EC:** Because the academy is economically tied to these forces?

**CW:** Well, I think it's both economically tied, but it's also a matter of the very significant and substantive presence of brilliant Jewish intellectuals in the academy who find it difficult to engage in Socratic self-examination concerning their own allegiance to the state of Israel.

**EC:** Which, in a tangentially related sense, is what we find with the Finkelstein case [and Alan Dershowitz's influence on same].

**CW:** Finkelstein is one grand example of that, but we've got many others. Columbia—you saw the piece in *The New Yorker* two weeks ago, on the tenure case of the Palestinian sister at Barnard?

**EC:** No, I did not.

**CW:** Oh, man—you've got to read that, man. It's called "The Petition" [and focuses on] the tenure case of Nadia Abu El-Haj. It was just *vicious*, man. I mean, it's just *ugly*. But I find this in so many different places. And the thing about it is that I always not only welcome, but I also praise the degree to which our great tradition of Jewish intellectuals helped to keep the life of the mind *alive* in an anti-intellectual civilization like America. That's magnificent. We can go from the Trillings to the Aronowitzes or from Chomsky to Hilary Putnam and Stanley Cavell—we can go on and on. These are just *towering* figures, who as an intellectual, one can only have a certain deep respect for.

But at the same time, when you have a *consensus* among large numbers of Jewish scholars regarding their allegiance to the state of Israel that doesn't allow the kind of critical reflection on the occupation, on apartheid-like conditions, and so forth and so on, then that has a chilling effect, too!

**EC:** Sure.

**CW:** You see, that has a chilling effect, too. Now, of course, there are always certain progressive Jewish intellectuals who are critical of that consensus among large numbers of Jewish neoconservative and neoliberal intellectuals. But for every Chomsky you've got ten, fifteen, twenty, who are part of the neoliberal/neoconservative perspective when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—maybe more than that.

And so that, also, is another element, I think. It's not the sole element—maybe not even the main one—but it's one that must be talked about, if you're concerned about academic freedoms and liberties in the American empire in the early part of the twenty-first century.

**EC:** Certainly. And that really ties to the following in a significant way: Another point of interest from *Democracy Matters* relates to the many literary Socratic questioners you cite, from Walt Whitman to Toni Morrison, Ralph Waldo Emerson to Ralph Waldo Ellison. How do we teach the "democratic subversive" tradition to our students when the very rights for free speech, an open society, and the freedom to be subversive and voice dissent are in and of themselves called into question? For me, that's a central paradox.

**CW:** Mmm . . . that's true. That's very true. See, I think there has to be—and this is why somebody like Socrates is, for me, a starting point (at least in the West). I'm sure there are some other Socratic figures in the East that I'm ignorant about. But the thing about Socrates, he teaches us that there's something about intellectual integrity, in terms of deep questioning. There's something about the *reward* of a life of intellectual questioning, which *always* already pits you up against the powers that be. That the fundamental commitment to unarmed truth—that we never possess but that we ought to be in pursuit of perennially—always pits you against those concerned with the preservation or the expansion of power.

Now, truth has its own kind of power, but it's different than political power or economic power. And so we have to tell our students, "You know what? When Socrates is wrestling with the hemlock, this means that the life of the mind is connected to life and death!" If you want to live a certain kind of life with a certain kind of concern about virtue, character, and you're concerned about integrity—*never perfection*, because it goes hand-in-hand with intellectual humility—Socrates teaches us this, right? This is what I mean when I say we never have a monopoly on the truth—we're in quest of it. But if you want to live that kind of life, then from Socrates to Chomsky you're going to be against the powers that be. You've got to expect this.

If you want to be well-embraced by the powers that be—if you want to become well-adjusted to injustice—don't opt for the Socratic alternative. That's not the one you want. You want to be Donald Trump? The Socratic option's not the one you want! You see? Now, if you find this life attractive, appealing—if you think it has a certain kind of moral substance to it, if you actually believe that there are political effects for ordinary and everyday people in terms of the witness you can bear in light of the texts that you write and the words that you utter—then opt for the Socratic alternative.

**EC:** In the case of Churchill, for example . . .

**CW:** Yeah, brother Ward.

**EC:** We find in the case of Churchill a tenured professor who *engaged* thoroughly in Socratic questioning of the American empire, and I think most of us agree, he was punished for speaking out about it.

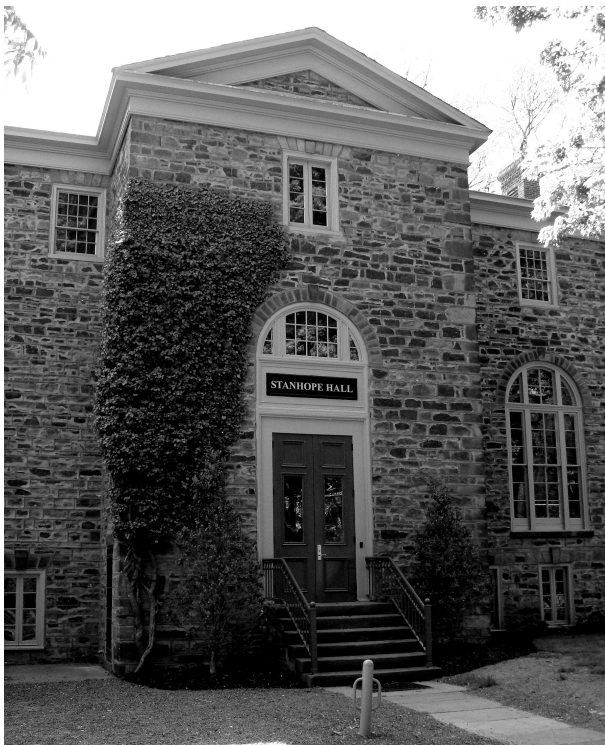
**CW:** Oh, yes. Absolutely.

**EC:** Where does that leave you? Where does that leave anybody [in the academy]? Are there certain protections of tenure that have now become provisional?

**CW:** I've never met brother Ward. I've always tried to keep up with his texts and I've learned much from him. So I can't really talk about him and his case on intimate terms, but I would think that one of the differences between myself and him—and no one of us ought to be *models* to imitate, you know what I mean? "All imitation is suicide." But I think one difference is that for myself, who tries to make the world safe for the legacy of Martin [Luther] King, [Jr.] and Fannie Lou Hamer, is that the *language* I use tends to be a form of immanent critique. So that if you look at *Democracy Matters*—(or, they sent me this thing today, the Spanish translation of my *American Evasion of Philosophy*)—it's Gramscian. Namely, I'm always looking at what is indigenous in the history of America. Not just for indigenous peoples and their rich history of their civilizations—but all the way through Emerson, Whitman, Louis Armstrong, Muriel Rukeyser, and others—what's immanent in that history that I can pull from. So my critique of the empire, of the white supremacy, of the misogyny, of the homophobia, of the class privilege, and so forth, is put forward in the form of a tradition that is indigenous to the emergence and development of American civilization.

That mode of thinking and writing and presenting tends to make it difficult to view that as completely trashing America, you see? Now, in Jeremiah Wright's language [laughs], the *damning* of America. You see what I mean? Because these folk are themselves exemplary Americans who are damning the injustice *in* America as Americans building on an indigenous American tradition, which is part of the legacy of Martin King. So I can say I have said *many* things that are very, very similar to brother Ward Churchill. He tends to be tied to much more indigenous peoples' traditions, but he's in love with other exemplary Americans *after* or *beyond* Amerindians. But he doesn't speak *through* them as much as I do. You see what I mean? That gives me a little more wiggle room.

The second thing is that having come from an Ivy League context—Harvard undergrad, Princeton grad, tenured at Yale, and now I'm teaching at Princeton, having gotten mistreated at Harvard (just by the president, not by the institution)—that I do have *friends* in powerful places that would make it much more difficult for me to be mistreated and abused, in the same way that he was mistreated and abused.



Center for African American Studies, Stanhope Hall  
Princeton University, 5 May 2008

Photo Credit: Edward J. Carvalho

**EC:** True.

**CW:** And that's just a question of placement and power. Now that doesn't mean that I still cannot be mistreated and abused. Because I was mistreated and abused at Harvard—but I landed at Princeton. See? Because I've got this cultivated set of friends who are open to my being in these places. Now, it may change, you know? You can't anticipate how long these things will last, especially if Sheldon Wolin and the others are right in terms of the expansion of the inverted totalitarianism that's at work. You know Sheldon's latest book, man? He's one of my great mentors. You might remember that when I dedicate *Democracy Matters*, I say he is "the greatest theorist of democracy" we have. This is a new book [*Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*—it'll be out in a month or so. But if he's right, about us living in a postdemocratic age (and it's just a matter of looking at the various ways in which these inverted totalitarian forms are creeping in and becoming shot through every nook and cranny), then we are *all* headed toward Ward Churchill-like situations. It's a real possibility. It depends on how much we struggle against it, and so on.

But let me say this, in all honesty, that the academy is a great place to be and it's a tremendous space and privilege, and what have you. But academicians have never been on the cutting edge of any serious social movement in America.

**EC:** Why do you think that is?

**CW:** Because the subculture of the academy does not put a premium on moral courage. It just doesn't.

**EC:** It's become more "crass careerism," to quote David Downing.

**CW:** In some sense, it always *has*. It was just more aristocratic in the past in terms of who had access to it. But you see, the forms of socialization in the academy tend to be those in which you come up under a mentor; you're deferential. You learn the language, the nomenclature, the vocabulary that allows you to gain access to a visible space. And so that just reinforces a hierarchy of mentor and mentoree, but it doesn't put a premium on not just innovative thinking, but also moral courage for people to identify with those outside of the academy who are suffering. And so the academy itself has to be *shaken* by social movements outside. And intellectuals are then, academicians are then, cognizant because they're concerned about trying to understand what's going on in the world, you see?

But especially in terms of my own tradition in the struggle against white supremacy—Oh, my God! If it was up to the academicians *only* in the struggle against white supremacy, brother, Jim Crow would still be in place, believe me.

**EC:** I do believe it.

**CW:** Jim Crow would still be in place. Which is to say, it could actually be reestablished, too—because we've got some brilliant academicians who have responded to social movements in creative ways, but generally speaking, the raw stuff of any social movement is *moral courage*. Not just social vision, which is important, but it's *moral courage*. And that is always in relative paucity in the academy, as well as the whole tenure system, and so forth. If you can socialize these folk—you mainstream them, you *streamline* them—so anyone who wants to get tenure, they think they're free now—no: they've got the *next* step now. Next, they want the *chair* . . . they want a *bigger chair*. They want acceptances in the American Science Academy, they want acceptances in the *prizes* like the Pulitzer, etc., all the structures of *rewards* that reinforce the streamlining, you see. And that's been true for a long time. You always have your Bohemians and your renegades, but they're the exceptions that make the rule.

**EC:** It then becomes insular in the sense that it creates a different kind of classism that reflects that which is happening in the larger society. But yet, the walling off is just what [these same academicians] are not able to see. Hence this is how the neoliberalism, as I see it, comes into the corporatizing of the university. People are just not paying attention to the forces at work around them or the social conditions, for that matter. Do you think that's a fair statement?

**CW:** It's true that in the '60s you had these ivory tower institutions that were far removed from the realities of everyday life. And it was primarily pressure from the left with the struggle against white supremacy, male supremacy, struggles against American imperialism in Vietnam, and so forth. But under the Reagan years, you actually then had right-wing social movements and right-wing organizations penetrating the academy in such a *powerful way*—learning their lessons from the left, but using it for right-wing purposes, with their independent networks of think tanks and various foundations, and so forth and so on. It's an ironic kind of thing, because before you had the *walls* separating the academy from the rest of society. And the rest of society is very much market-driven—it really is. You therefore have a deep anti-intellectualism. Richard Hofstadter's right about that in America. Americans love intelligence, but fear intellect. Intelligence—a manipulative faculty; intellect—a Socratic questioning faculty, you see. And a business civilization *loves* intelligence: "Thomas Edison—*WE LOVE YOU!* [laughs]. More inventions, more money, more profits, more cash!" Very much so. "Sheldon Wolin—*WE'RE SUSPICIOUS OF YOU!* Chomsky—we're suspicious of you; Said, we're suspicious of you—too many deep questions. We don't have time to deal with these things. We've got other things we've got to do."

Now, in the '60s you did have a breakdown. And this is what upset Allan Bloom, and the others, because they liked that ivory tower. In the '60s, the academy had to *respond* to what was going on in the rest of society, because it was *spilling over!* Students taking over the buildings, and all of a sudden these social movements from Jim Crow America and apartheid America began having an impact on these little private spaces called the university. And that was a positive thing,

but it was continued by the right. So you had the walls more and more coming down with right-wing impingement. And that's a real threat to rights and liberties, too.

**EC:** Absolutely.

**CW:** Oh, very much so. Very much so. And there the market model comes to play, because what you get is the corporatization of the university—not just in terms of its money and funds flowing, but also in terms of tying certain kinds of professorships and certain kinds of courses and curricula to the money that flows. And the good presidents and deans try to resist it, but they know it's hard to resist somebody offering you, you know, \$50 million for studies in the Middle East, if they've been part of the Jabotinsky tradition<sup>2</sup>—Chomsky-like figures are not going to gain access to those positions. You can rest assured of that!

So that in an interesting kind of way, the marketization of the academy is part and parcel of the walls falling down, but it was a right-wing version. I mean, I sit here at Princeton, in part, because some of the walls fell down as a result of the social movements in the '60s—the antiracist movements in the 1960s. And I view that as a positive thing. But on the other hand, if you can imagine that in an antiracist movement you try to curtail rights and liberties of other faculty members who themselves have right-wing positions, then I disagree with that. Because as a deep democrat, I have libertarian sensibilities. I think there ought to be a number of different faculty members with different views about things, even ones I have deep disagreements with. Because the university is not a site for political pedagogy, but it is a site for *intellectual dialogue* with a variety of different political perspectives made available, arguments put forward, visions put forward, and so on.

But what are the conditions in which a robust, uninhibited discourse *takes place*? That's the fundamental question. Where do you find that in America? You certainly don't find it on television. You certainly don't find it on too much radio—aside from Tavis Smiley's show: there you get right-wing, left-wing in the way that William Buckley's *Firing Line* used to be. His show was actually very good. Buckley actually performed a *very important* public service.

**EC:** YouTube is a great place for archival footage and a quick way to access some of those shows—particularly for those who were not alive to witness these debates. You have the famous Buckley interview with Chomsky . . .

**CW:** Chomsky, Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, Gore Vidal, you know. When I first met Buckley—and I was on his show a number of times—we had some great exchanges, and so forth. And I told him, “Man, I just want to thank you for the public service you've performed over the years,” because it's one of the few places in the culture where there was some serious exchange.



**EC:** Whereas now, say, you have Marc Lamont Hill going on to the *O'Reilly Factor*—you've dealt with O'Reilly. It's not even a discourse, it's a shouting match. It ties in with Chomsky's theories on the concision of language, that you can basically only repeat the same politicized rhetorical position between commercial breaks, because no one wants to deal with the deep penetrating questions.

**CW:** That's exactly right. No time for historical context to be set in place. No time to highlight nuance and subtlety in terms of the present moment, to understand the present as history, as opposed to some isolated issue that everybody's for or against [snaps fingers], then on to the next issue. You know, the typical kind of, what I call . . . What was the term I used for this decadent corporate media? I think it was "sentimental nihilism" . . .

**EC:** Yes, sentimental nihilism. You also cite "paternalistic nihilism," such as what we find with Senator Clinton and many other democrats [who cater to Republicanism by way of modulated rhetorical packaging]; and you cite "evangelical nihilism," as well.

**CW:** Yes! Which is Bush and company, where at that point it's all about power; you're open about that. You don't care about argument, critics. You don't care so much about, "So what if they're marching in the streets. It doesn't mean a thing to me." Power, force, coercion. It's Thrasymachus, it's the Grand Inquisitor at that point.<sup>3</sup>

**EC:** Let me ask you this, while we're on that subject. It deviates off the question a bit, but it's still related. What kind of nihilism is at work in the academy? What category of the three we just discussed is most overt?

**CW:** Yeah, it's a good question. It would probably be close to what's going on in corporate media. That's what I would think.

**EC:** That's what I thought, as well.

**CW:** I think that would be the closest—I really do. But, again, it has to do with a certain lack of backbone; it has to do with a certain cynicism; it has to do with a certain cowardice that's shot through so much academic culture these days.

**EC:** Speaking of nihilism in the university, one of the many things I learned in *Democracy Matters* was that [former Harvard President] Larry Summers had ties to the World Bank.

**CW:** Oh, Lord, yes.

**EC:** Now, the kind of nihilism that exists there, obviously, is another way political agendas penetrate the academic space.

**CW:** Absolutely.

**EC:** It makes me wonder—What would possess an institution such as Harvard to allow someone with these kinds of connections to the World Bank to lead the university? It seems rather contradictory to the pursuit of academic freedom.

**CW:** It had a lot to do with Robert Rubin [former U.S. Treasury secretary]. I met him when he was at the White House (he struck me as a decent person)—but he was the one who made the case for Larry Summers vis-à-vis the board. There was strong opposition to Summers because of his personality. [Summers is] Robert Rubin's good friend, who ran into him as friends in the White House—made him secretary, or facilitated [his role] as under-secretary to the Treasury secretary, I think it was, and then Summers made the transition to the World Bank. But he [Rubin] made the case [for Summers]. Now, why would that be so? One is they wanted an anti-Rudenshtine candidate. Neil Rudenshtine had made African American studies his real pearl, the jewel in his *crown*, in a certain sense. And they wanted access to big money. And they wanted someone who was no-nonsense—who wouldn't take any kind of mess from the left [laughs]. They did get the right person for that last point.

But most interesting was that even some of those folk who ideologically agreed with Larry Summers couldn't put up with the *shift* from the Washington/World Bank subculture into Harvard subculture. Because there are different ways of responding, different *styles*, even if they have ideological agreement. Because Harvard's a *different kind of place*, with its own distinctive feelings, structures, and values, and so forth. Whereas this Washington style, in some ways, is closer to the evangelical nihilism.

**EC:** Right.

**CW:** Just *power*—"I said [claps hands], 'Move' . . . that's it! I don't need to argue. What I said is definitive—let's move!" That's how they work it in D.C. You don't sit there and have any Socratic discussion for an hour and a half about so-and-so. "I'm over you, man! I *hired* you! You do what I say!" [Sarcastic effect] "No, we don't do that at *Harvard*. No, we don't proceed in that way—we're *gentlemen*. We all have *equal status*," and so forth and so on. "I'm a prima donna, you're a prima donna; everyone here is a prima donna—everybody here deserves a certain kind of *respect*." No Thrasymachus-like mentalities *here!* Or if you do have them it's [by way of] your graduate students and students, not faculty-faculty.

**EC:** Right.

**CW:** Of course, he could do it with me and get away with it, because Negroes don't count that much. But by the time you do it to women; by the time you do it to Koreans; say things about indigenous peoples and *then* begin to penetrate with the *white male elite*—then you've got a problem. He just went too far. But he was just being himself. I mean, Larry Summers was just true to himself, you know. He just lacks social skills—he's got Thrasymachus-like sensibilities. He just runs

roughshod over folk, whoever they are! That's just the way he is, just what he's used to.

**EC:** You touched upon something earlier here when you spoke about the presence of the right in the academy. Of course, we have to talk about David Horowitz.

**CW:** Oh, yeah.

**EC:** Horowitz has repeatedly endorsed the divorcing of politics from the classroom, and yet, simultaneously, puts to practice a return to McCarthyian sensibilities.

**CW:** Absolutely. It's a *joke* that he calls for a divorce of politics from the classroom. My God, my God.

**EC:** Exactly. Therein lies the irony.

**CW:** That's exactly right.

**EC:** How and to what extent can academics contribute to the project of building a more democratic society in light of this? To what extent should principles of academic freedom protect the social and political work of teachers and scholars?

**CW:** Much of what we do as teachers or as persons who enact *paideia*—p-a-i-d-e-i-a (which means so much to me), that deep education—is draw attention to the move from superficial to substantive issues. The cultivation of self and the maturation of souls dealing with history and reality and mortality. We're in conversations with voices from the *dead*, and it is impossible to not have some kind of *robust* conversation with voices from the dead that cut across political and ideological lines. You begin in philosophy and political theory or in educational courses with Plato. Here, you've got a towering figure, reactionary to the core with democratic enactments in terms of questioning various forms of authority in the dialogues. So you get this hybrid figure, complicated figure—already a conversation with this *towering voice* from the dead—that locates you in a robust dialogue across political and ideological lines, because very few people are going to be arguing for philosopher kings; very few people are going to argue for hierarchies the way he does (let alone infanticide and other ugly things in the *Republic*).

But we know there's something there that we've got to come to *terms* with: the beginnings of philosophy, the displacement of dialectical thinking or dialogical thinking with what he understands Homeric *paideia* to be with the poets (and also why philosophy needs to displace poetry as he understands poetry in the Homeric form, and so forth). Those are foundational questions necessary to wrestle with what it means to be human; what it is to talk about liberty; what it is to talk about democracy; what it is to talk about equality. And so, from the very beginning, you've got politics part and parcel with the discussion. But you have to have an openness to it because you're going to be

in dialogue with people you radically disagree with. That's just one example. It could be Rousseau in the modern period. It could be John Stuart Mill talking about liberty, but with a footnote: "For barbarians, despotism is the only form of government."<sup>4</sup> Who you have in mind, John Stuart?! [laughs]. Indians, Negroes—hey, that's most of the world when you start including all these people of color! Oh, so your 1859 classic "On Liberty" is only applicable to a *small portion of the world*. We need to know that! It's still a classic—we still need to wrestle with it. The arguments are complicated; they're still a challenge. But we put it into a larger context of imperialism in the mid-nineteenth century, and we need to be honest about where John Stuart Mill and his lover Harriet Taylor Stuart stood on these variety of issues: empire, race, gender. Sometimes [those examples] are better than others in terms of our twenty-first-century standards.

But in the end, it's about the *conversation* with the Mills, the Platos, the Rousseaus, the Virginia Woolfs, the Goethes, or whoever or whatever it is that we want. The DuBoises, and so on.

**EC:** And teasing out those footnotes as part of the *parrhesia* is what leads us to the *paideia*. Is that correct?

**CW:** That's right. Absolutely. And in that sense, it's just a matter of being honest, candid, truthful—recognizing that *all of us* are in some sense children of our age. That we all, as human beings, find ourselves in circumstances not of our own choosing, but of our own set of presuppositions and prejudices that we carry with us. We want to be Socratic in examining our own presuppositions and prejudices, but we never are Socratic *all the way down*. And therefore, when people come after us, they will acknowledge the degree to which we had willful blindness, deliberate ignorance on certain kinds of crucial issues. They did, we did, people who come after us will.

But we do have, I think, as vocation, as teachers, to be honest with ourselves and our students, in terms of understanding these figures in relation to their context, even as in these texts we find conversations that oftentimes have arguments better than [what] we have. Because Plato is just basically brighter than most of us, *all of us*, in that sense [laughs]. Even though we argue—and rightly so—that he's wrong about democracy, he's wrong about rights and liberties, and a lot of other things in his authoritarian state, be it the *Republic* or the *Laws*.

So that it's not just a question that Horowitz's view of politics is so narrow and truncated, but also that it's hard to know *what he means* about taking politics *out*. We know that, in fact, he has an ideological commitment to a right-wing form of *education*. So in that sense, it's both ironic and mendacious, which is to say, he's saying something that he really doesn't mean *and* he's doing it intentionally—he's lying.

**EC:** Precisely. Because you can't say that McCarthyism was apolitical. It's just not an apparatus devoid of political interest.

**CW:** Absolutely. Very much so.

**EC:** Shifting focus for just a moment, I wanted to ask you about Marc Bousquet and his recent video interview with AAUP President Cary Nelson on the rise of contingent faculty and the administrative and economic influence on academic freedom.<sup>5</sup>

**CW:** Oh, yes. Adjunct professors and that kind of thing?

**EC:** Yes. Nelson talks about the differences between job security and academic freedom as well as, “Teaching in a climate of fear vs. teaching in a climate of freedom.” He also goes on to make the observation that contingent faculty members are in a “state of schizophrenia”—that they basically have a deep belief in the commitment to preserve academic freedom, but are fearful of job loss should their pedagogical approach be deemed too “controversial.”

**CW:** And that one job is the one thing that’s paying your rent, though.

**EC:** Exactly. And so he says that in 1975, U.S. higher education faculty was close to 75 percent tenure/tenure-track vs. 25 percent nontenured; today it is roughly reversed: 25 percent tenure/tenure-track and 75 percent contingent faculty. To what extent would you say that such dramatic shifts in the academic workforce compromise academic freedom? And related, how can academics begin to rebuild the university and reclaim spaces of freedom from the corporate-driven agenda of profit-loss margins that often determine educational value?

**CW:** Oh, man, that’s a very good question. I remember old Cary Nelson from the Marxism and Interpretation of Culture conference way back in 1984. I think he edited that book, actually—it’s a great collection of essays from Perry Anderson, Stanley Aronowitz, Fredric Jameson, Stuart Hall, and a host of others. I haven’t kept track of a lot of his recent stuff, but as you can see, he’s gone to some pretty high places now in terms of running things, in terms of running the whole association. Good God, Almighty. This 25 [percent] to 75 [percent] reversal, though, is really disheartening. The degree to which market factors have penetrated the academy, such that you’ve got a gullible, insecure, manipulable labor force in the form of contingent professors who find themselves understandably *reluctant* to speak freely, owing to their financial and professional situations. Man, that’s a very bleak scenario, it seems to me.

**EC:** Definitely some frightening prospects. And I don’t even think that takes into full account, as Nelson mentions, the inclusion of teaching associates and graduate students in that mix, who admittedly have less power than adjuncts.

**CW:** That’s true. I know there’s been significant movements at NYU and Yale and other places that have unions. Brown, too, I think.

**EC:** Emerson College in Boston has an adjunct union as well.

**CW:** I was even thinking about a union of graduate students. But it's been very difficult. Very difficult indeed. I was in New Haven supporting them years ago. But, I mean, I don't know how to respond in terms of how we both democratize the academy against the market model and, at the same time, give the kind of professional and financial security for those professors who are now adjuncts who ought to be on the tenure line or have tenure itself. I'd probably have to know much more about the internal dynamics of the academy in general and specific universities in particular as to how you engage in the kind of structural transformation to get things a bit closer to what they were before.

The sad thing is, though, even when you have 75 percent tenure—which would be a positive thing in terms of security—that doesn't ensure or guarantee that there's going to be robust, uninhibited *dialogue!* It's better off in terms of finances—and I don't want to downplay that—but if you can't make moral courage (that is, the willingness to take a risk, an openness to paying a cost, as part and parcel of what it means to be an intellectual and what it means to be an academician), then you can have 75 percent tenure and still end up with a Horowitz-like situation.

**EC:** And in some sense what you're saying is that *we had that!* And because there wasn't moral courage, this is part of what led to the erosion of tenured faculty positions.

**CW:** Absolutely. That's a good point, man.

**EC:** So this is always the dichotomy for me—and I ask myself, "*How did we not see this coming?*" For me, that's a significant question. People are working in the environment and they're just not politically or socially aware enough of their surroundings to see such dramatic paradigm shifts in play—almost a complete reversal. So it's the lack of moral courage? Now, you're doing something unique insofar as engaging with youth movements—you're committed to social and intellectual activism, whereas most other people in the academy, clearly, are not.

**CW:** Yeah. You know, it's a funny thing. I think that part of it is that, for most academicians—I mean, even my dear brother Edward Said used to say this—the academy was the one place of home . . . a real haven from the rest of the world. And most people, when they have those kinds of romantic conceptions of home, they rarely want to understand that context as an object of serious critical investigation. So that the deliberate blindness and the willful ignorance *of* one's own context of home is part and parcel of becoming an academician who's studying other subject matter.

Whereas for me, the academy has always been a context for intellectual engagement, political struggle. *Never home*—at all. A wonderful day job, but only a moment in my life's task. So I could be in the studio with hip-hop artists; I could be on the street marching; I could be in the church with my own Christian sensibilities; I could be in the mosque, the synagogue, with my religious orientations; I could be in the trade union movement—these are other contexts of

struggle. All while I'm engaged in the *same commitment to paideia*, even though it's a different kind of challenge, you know. And of that same commitment in the struggle for love, truth, and justice, you see. But it's context. And so I become *multicontextual* in that way, and each context is understood in an historical way as a contingent moment that has its own past, present as history, and it could have a different future based on the kind of courage and commitment people have. I think in a certain sense it could be a matter of being a black man in the white academy. That is to say, knowing the history of the academy, its fundamental role in legitimating the most vicious forms of white supremacy. I know that in forty years, it's not all of sudden going to become home or haven! So as blessed as I am to be here at Princeton, I know that the black community only sixty years ago, that's across the street, couldn't set foot in Princeton. Couldn't step foot on the *green grass!* A black foot, black people pollute the grass! Well, that's my people. That's my grandfolk. You see what I mean? So I'm here now, I appreciate it—we've got wonderful presidents and faculty members, and colleagues, and so forth, but it's still in context of an object of investigation that has its history, has its past—that present is shaped by the past (not reducible to it, but is shaped by it), and the future could be worse or better depending on what we do.

For example, I think in my own case at Harvard, man, that it was interesting to me that in the midst of all of the demonization—all this stuff about, "he ain't nothing but a black version of Eminem on the *Charles* [River]. He's only published one book, *Race Matters*, blah, blah, blah." I mean, all the lies that *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *San Francisco Chronicle*—I mean all the lies across the country and the world! There was no attempt on the part of any academician, any academic body, to question that—at all. And when I was being pushed out, there wasn't any major defense of it. The only folk who came to my defense really were everyday black folk, whom I met. And then there were some people like Richard Rorty, who loved me as a person. You know, I was his student. Or Stanley Aronowitz who loved me as a brother—I'm his dear brother, too. But that was very isolated—nothing organized. It was clear to me that the fundamental commitments to academic integrity, liberty, and freedom were pretty empty. When you think about it, it was pretty empty. And when the story came out, there was no concern about revisions, corrections, apologies—nothing at all. See what I mean? So you kind of say to yourself, "Oh! This is very interesting to me."

Now, of course, I had never been duped by the language in the first place. But when you experience it in a very palpable manner, where your whole career could easily be destroyed because of the demonization of your work and your character. And when very few come to your defense, you say, "Where are the people who are so concerned about the truth?" I'm not perfect, but, hey, I've been out here for twenty-something years. I have fourteen texts. Tenured at Yale and Princeton, and then all of a sudden, you're just a buffoon, and everybody is talking about it on TV and radio, and so forth: not just here, but around the world. I'm getting stuff from China and Britain: "When are you going to publish your second book?" and "Isn't it true that you never had any academic reviewers?" because that's the line

Summers and other folk were putting forward, you see. But there were no attempts to *counter* those voices given all of the evidence that was out there.

And I myself really didn't lay it out there until *Democracy Matters*, which is, as you know, about two, two and a half years after. But I address all that to say on a personal front that I have enough experience and evidence to know that the academy is really not that *serious* about a strong defense of liberties. And that's why the Horowitzes are so dangerous: they really are. Because once they organize, you get Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity and these folk who have their people out there organized, and when those walls have come down, then you've got folk like me pushed out easily.

**EC:** It's interesting to me that part of why Churchill was so damned stemmed from the "little Eichmanns" comment. And then you have Ann Coulter comparing the economic sensibilities of John McCain with Adolf Hitler, when she says that at least "Hitler had a coherent tax policy" (qtd. in Stein n. pag.). She's somehow able to grab onto the same kind of discourse without any punitive measures put in place against her. Obviously, she's a news celebrity, he's a professor, but it is interesting that a similar invocation of rhetorical strategies is used, and one [Churchill] is witch-hunted, while with the other [Coulter] is immune from critical scrutiny—it's permissible, and sometimes even lauded.

**CW:** That's absolutely right.

**EC:** That was one of the more obvious comparisons for me.

**CW:** I'll give you an example of what I also have in mind, in terms of the academy/journalism world. That we've had recent deaths of two towering figures on the right: Ronald Reagan and William Buckley, Jr. And you had commentary all around the country—and the world, but especially the country—on both of those figures. Buckley's on the cover of either *Time* or *Newsweek* and you had a whole section devoted to his life, his work, his impact, and so forth and so on. Now, there's not a mumbling word about either one that they defended Jim Crow; they were against Martin; against civil rights; against voting rights; against open housing—and never apologized. Buckley supported the Southern Manifesto that said, "We will use violence against any attempt to actually institutionalize *Brown v. Board [of Education]* (1954)]. We'll use violence to do it."

Keep in mind, you see, Jim Crow's a form of American terrorism.

**EC:** I would say so.

**CW:** So that after all these years, here we are in the late 1990s, early twenty-first century, two towering figures die (and there's nothing wrong with saying good things about them). Buckley supports Jews in Jew-hating Russia—I give the cat a standing ovation. I'm against anti-Semitism, too. When he supports victims of communist regimentation, as a deep democrat, I give the cat a standing ovation. That's nice to be supporting rights and liberties in a totalitarian regime, you see.



But *not one mention* of the fact that he supports Jim Crow and never apologized. Reagan, the same way.

Now, what does that mean? It means that the impact of the academy and the impact of the journalism world on the larger public is such that, in that kind of public discourse, black people don't count; black suffering doesn't matter at all. You see? It's just clear. And you say to yourself, "Well that's where you can tell whether there's been a glacial shift or not." So it's not a matter of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, or so on and so on—you have to say something about black people and race and so forth. Well, *no*. Has it entered your consciousness? Remember, both of them had Mandela on a terror list all their careers.<sup>6</sup> But now the world loves Nelson Mandela. Well, there ought to have been a shift that took place, but the shift really didn't take place. It was that "Mandela didn't do to us what we thought he'd do to us, so we love the black man." But in terms of the deeper issues, *not at all*. "We love Martin because he somehow made America, pushed America into a post-racial world," and so forth. But the things that Martin was concerned about with black suffering—they have no weight and gravity. So when you talk about the people who were against Martin, it's not even a blemish at all. Whereas you can rest assured when Jesse Jackson dies, they're going to talk about "Hymietown."

**EC:** No doubt about it.

**CW:** When Farrakhan dies, they're going to talk about anti-Semitism for half the obituary.

**EC:** They'll smear David Dinkins, also.

**CW:** Exactly—on and on. I mean, these are very linguistic references that were wrong, and so forth. But that doesn't defend terror or a terroristic way of life in the way Buckley did (the way Reagan did). There's not one person who mentioned it. Black people were sitting back—watching all the celebration—watching the discourse. Black and white voices come on television. Nobody wants to tell that truth! And you say to yourself, "Well, *here we go again!*" Invisibility! How much progress have we made in terms of the discourse? Of course, we made progress with the black middle class and teaching at Princeton and all that, but intellectually, not a whole lot of progress if you can't have a discussion about towering figures who actually supported some crypto-fascist ways of life connected to black people! And you say to yourself, "Hmmm . . ." You know, it could be, brother, that the American empire has always had a fundamental problem questioning it: namely, does it have the capacity to undergo the kind of fundamental transformation necessary to treat the masses of black people decently and equally, and does it also have that capacity for the masses of working people, to treat them with respect and dignity?

**EC:** As an academician, in the Gramscian sense, then what we face here is a "war of position?"

**CW:** Yes. Absolutely. But even more than that, this is where Wolin's point comes in, you see, that in the end this is what we have to convey to our students: that it's not just a matter of victory. It's not just a matter of utilitarian calculus. It's not just about results and consequences. It's nice not just to have those kinds of results and consequences, when you can see some real freedom and equality and democracy taking place, but in the end, it's an existential question about the kind of human being you want to be, what kind of witness you want to leave. What kind of person do you want to . . . What's the right word? . . . It's not just the person you want to be, but . . .

**EC:** . . . the kind of population you can also influence?

**CW:** Yes, but not so much because America can undergo this great structural transformation, though. There has to be a Chekhov-like or Beckett-like sense of trying again, failing again, failing better. You know, that wonderful line from *Worstward Ho*, Beckett's last piece of prose fiction written in 1983: "Try again. Fail again. Fail better." That is to say, in the end, you can't convince young people to become intellectuals *in* a parochial academy, because you're not going to fundamentally change the world, either in your lifetime or in two or three lifetimes. It has to be, in the end, an existential question of the vocation. What kind of human being do you want to be? What kind of love do you want to express? What kind of service do you want to render? What kind of intellectual engagement do you want to enact, so that if everybody did this thing, maybe the world would be better: but we know that's not going to be the case. And so, therefore, it's going to be a question of your own character and integrity and whatever results and effects follow from what you do.

**EC:** Right.

**CW:** Which is not to say that you won't affect certain students—and each student's precious and priceless, no doubt about that. But, I mean, the American empire—it's not just in deep trouble, it's a sick empire: a profoundly sick empire. And when brother Martin says "the nation is sick" in his last speech, he was right!

**EC:** Well, it's as you have also referred to it: Our democracy is in "horrible disrepair" (*Democracy Matters* 101).

**CW:** Absolutely! And, you know, if it's in the later stages of its own imperial decline, then, ultimately, it might *not* be transformable at the deepest levels. You know, the last sermon he was going to preach, when he called in from Memphis . . . [gets up and goes over to bookshelf] "Why America may go to hell!" And you say, "Good God Almighty, Martin! What do you have in mind?" Here it is on page 622. Nobody has really come to terms with this. Look here, my dear brother. He calls *in*, man, and he says, "This is what I'm preaching." [Reads] "King phoned in to Atlanta to let Ebenezer [Baptist Church] know the title of his Sunday Sermon, 'Why America May Go to Hell'" (emphasis added). That was the last thing he was going to preach, but he never made it. He said, "I'd rather be *dead* than afraid."

**EC:** What book is that?

**CW:** This is David Garrow's great 1986 book on Martin [Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference]. I was just there in Memphis for the whole week. We were there with brother Tavis Smiley, and I was telling folk about this King speech, especially in light of the Jeremiah Wright thing. And he [King] didn't say "America *ought* to go to hell," he didn't say it "*should* go to hell"—he said it "*may* go to hell." Why? Because that's what he was saying in Mason Temple, that "the nation is sick," there's trouble in the land. But only when it's dark enough can you see the stars. And what he meant by that is the notion that utopian energy is always already in place. It's almost a kind of implicit invocation of [Walter] Benjamin's "Angel of History."

**EC:** I think Reverend Wright is another interesting figure in that [his condemnation] mirrors what's happening in the university to some extent.

**CW:** Absolutely.

**EC:** In looking at the speeches, for the most part he's not really saying anything that isn't true. Rather, it's that people don't want to hear it.

**CW:** They don't want to hear it! I mean, we know there's no god worthy of worship that does not condemn injustice. But, God *damn* injustice when it kills innocent people! Has America ever killed innocent people? Well, if you really believe that America has never killed innocent people, then you really believe that God ought never damn America. CIA . . . Chile '73 . . . the Shah. I mean, we can go on and on and on. [Former Congo Leader] Lumumba. We can go on and on and on. God damn America when America treats people as less than human! Well, if you never believed that America really treated people as less than human . . . And you see, Obama doesn't help in this regard, because when you look closely at his speech on race, he begins by saying that "slavery is America's original sin." *That's not true!* That's not true. It was the dispossession and the subordination and the near extermination of indigenous peoples that was America's original sin. I tell black audiences all around the country: "Never allow black suffering to *blind* you to other people's suffering." So you don't start off a speech by saying that "slavery's the original sin," because you already just effaced and erased the imperial expansion of the country.

**EC:** Well, he almost completely dismisses the corporate greed you've spoken of elsewhere as being part of America's original sin.

**CW:** Absolutely. America's a corporation before it's a country with Jamestown. You see? Then all of a sudden you're going to end up with a sugar-coated story because you didn't get your narrative right. And then when you sugar-coat it, then you've got everybody saying, "Oh, we just had a substantive discussion about race." No, you

haven't. It's sugar-coated. And we can go on and on about what was wrong with the speech. But all I'm saying is that's part and parcel of reinforcing the deliberate ignorance and willful blindness of the depths of the issue, which makes it more difficult for the country to *come to terms* with it. And the irony is, of course, that my dear brother Obama—whom I support, you know—says in the speech that we can never ever ignore race. You ignored it up 'til now! And the only reason you can't ignore it is there's no way around it. You're forced to say something. All this time you hadn't said a mumbling word about it, because you're *transcending* race. But now you say, "Well, other people have been ignoring it all the time"—you tried to ignore it, too! You should have hit it head-on a long time ago.

**EC:** I think he's now aware that he's having to pander to a certain constituency, otherwise, if he aligns himself too closely with what the truth of the matter is [with respect to race relations in the country], no one would listen, unfortunately.

**CW:** That's right. It's the kind of society we live in. It's true for almost every society we know. But it's another reason, again, why the kind of vocation of *paideia* pits one over and against much of the conventional morality of powers that be. It's an old, old story. It really is. It's Socrates, it's Jesus, it's Voltaire, it's Chomsky, Said, C.L.R. James, all of these examples of persons that in becoming preoccupied with a certain kind of truth-seeking and witness-bearing and exposing of lies, find themselves against powers that be.

**EC:** Right. Do you have time for one more question?

**CW:** As patient as you've been, too? Absolutely.

**EC:** I appreciate it. Returning for a moment to the "antidemocratic dogma" of militarism, one of the impacts of PATRIOT Act legislation is that there has been an increased fear of speaking truth to power, and the rise of what Henry Giroux cites as the military-industrial-academic complex. For example, at IUP, I've noticed over the past two years of residing there a rise of military propaganda on the campus. Now, IUP—a state-funded public university in Western Pennsylvania with a lower- to middle-income student base . . .

**CW:** And a lot of them first-generation probably, too.

**EC:** Sure. And so I've seen in the past two years the GI enticements go from \$40,000 to \$70,000. Just last week, a couple of sergeants were in the Oak Grove [public commons] area of the campus with a Disney-like oversized caricature of a soldier to entice kids to sign up. And that was the first time I've witnessed open recruiting here. It seems as though the military presence has become very visible.

At the same time, for many citizens, the political climate has noticeably shifted from one of presumed relative freedom (at least a more palatable illusion of it prior to 9/11) to an overt culture of fear, surveillance, anxiety, security/insecurity, and fragmentation.

**CW:** Yes, that's real.

**EC:** We have rampant military recruitments on university campuses, as well as presidential candidates touring these same institutions—each attempting to lure student interest with promises of financial incentives (from sign-on bonuses to other enticements). Yet education and war often stand opposed to each other. In what capacity can the academy resist the recidivistic drumming of war and those who would undermine our commitment to educate?

**CW:** That's a good question.

**EC:** Particularly of concern for most intelligent people is the march toward Iran—abated from last year, but the saber rattling is back to the fore again. And we're watching the administration use a similar rhetorical strategy to push us headlong into that country. But there doesn't seem to be much in the way of intellectual activism or concern from people within the academy on what can be done to organize against this.

**CW:** It's real. The only thing, on the one hand, there is the relative feeling of helplessness in light of the tremendous energy put forward to try and stop the first war—not the first war, but the current war against Iraq. Many of us were arrested and so forth and that bearing witness is very important. So at least other fellow citizens will know, and other fellow human beings of the world will know, that we wouldn't stand for this. But in terms of being able to *block* the military machine, we were not able to do that. Now, you would think, given the imperial overstretch of the U.S. Army, that the war would have to take a very different form. But we just don't have the bodies, so that would be more an air war than it would be soldiers on the ground. But in terms of what strategies and tactics we could use to be successful, it just doesn't look too good. Again, we are right back to bearing witness rather than producing the kind of results that we want to produce.

**EC:** Right.

**CW:** Now, my conception of the prophetic has to do with the former. So that you bear witness whether you're in the concentration camp, whether you're in prison, or whether you're in the academy. That's just the kind of person you want to be and the kind of character you want to enact in your life before you die. You use your death, most importantly, as a particular way in which your character is extended after your life. So that death also becomes part of your weaponry in terms of your struggle, in terms of your vocation.

But let me say this, though. I think in stark contrast to much of the left community, much of my leftist comrades, I don't really have trouble with military recruitment on campus. I never really talked about this too much. But with ROTC and all of those different folk trying to come in—I don't really have trouble with them, just as a libertarian. At the same time, I think that revolutionary groups ought to have the

same right! You see what I mean? So the New Black Panther Party, they've got a right to come on campus and make their case. And the same would be true for the Weathermen before. I wouldn't be attracted by their arguments, but they've got a right. I have no trouble with ROTC, New Black Panther Party, and the Weathermen—all of them on campus trying to make their case, because I believe in robust, uninhibited dialogue in that regard.

Now, we know the structural advantages of ROTC, vis-à-vis the administration, vis-à-vis the ideological atmosphere, and so forth. But I don't have any trouble with the U.S. Army or Marines or anyone else coming on campus and saying we've got a case to make with our students, etc. And somebody else comes along and says, "You know what? You all are thugs, you're gangsters, and I've got good arguments to show that . . . Let's have a public debate." Hey, let's get the debate on! You know what I mean? You're going to have all kinds of academicians who are going to represent the ROTC, given the conservative tilt of so many of your universities. Let's get the argument on. Let's hear the critics—back and forth, back and forth. In the same way, the people come along and say, "You know what, we're organizing to overthrow the U.S. government, God dang it. We think we have constitutional grounds for this; we have a series of abuses that Thomas Jefferson talked about, and those abuses are real; we can list those. We can give concrete examples of those and we want to recruit, and we're willing to debate anybody who thinks we're wrong." *Fine!* Let's get it on!

There's very, very few in the country—in the world—who would agree with me. I think my left comrades would say, "No, you're misconstruing the ROTC as part of a structural military-industrial complex. It has privileges that these other groups would never have. And, therefore, ROTC has absolutely no place on campus, whatsoever." Not so sure about that. I'm not so sure about that. On the other hand, the right-wing would say, "Oh, West wants the Weathermen to come back and wants a New Black Panther Party different than the regular Black Panther Party." I don't know if you saw this new book, man. This is worth taking a look at [goes to bookshelf]. I just wrote the foreword to this: *The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs*—which is so important, because people overlook the degree to which that the old group helped the community. You've got [begins reviewing table of contents] the learning center, the youth institute, the free medical, the sickle-cell anemia, free ambulance . . . here's the one I worked for, the Free Breakfast [Program], free food—we were in all that stuff. You see, they laid out all these things that [the Panthers] did, which is so very important, and I was blessed to be asked to write the foreword.

Now, of course, the New Black Panther Party, with brother Malik [Zulu Shabazz] and company—whom I still have a dialogue with—tend to be much more militaristic. But given their age and righteous indignation, I believe that people do have a right to form groups without engaging in injurious harm to innocent people to state their views and try to recruit. I really do. The FBI tells me that I've got a death threat every day. They've got over 257 white supremacist militia groups and my name's on the list with all of them, for the most part

(only because of TV, and so forth). And I tell the FBI, “They’ve got a right to” . . . *They don’t have a right to kill me!* . . . but they’ve got a right to organize. They’ve got a right to propagandize, and so forth, and make their case. If they want a fascist America, try to make the case. That’s the risk of every democracy that has to do with freedom of expression. See, I’m not going to hold the Klan down or prohibit the Klan from making their arguments. If the Klan can make their arguments and convince the majority of folk, then that’s where we are! I want to be alive, *but* . . .

**EC:** Yeah, [laughs], I was just going to say, “Let’s hope not!”

**CW:** That’s right. I’ll protect my momma and some others, but that’s just where we are! But that’s the risk of a democratic project that’s always fragile and always contingent in that way. And I have a fundamental commitment to the libertarian dimension of a deep democratic project, which is, *freedom of expression*. It’s got to be real. It’s got to be very real. The Klan have a right to march: anywhere they want. They march in Harlem . . . there’s gonna be some trouble! They got a right to do it, but they ought not do it [laughs]. But they got a right to—you see what I mean? And the same is true with ROTC on Princeton, and what have you. But at the same time, as we know, if it’s *only* ROTC and *no* other groups that have any other kind of military connections.

**EC:** Right. And I think part of the other problem relates to the connections to the funding and how that can, and often does, promote a particular ideology at the expense of another. Where you can invite these other groups in, but they’re not going to have access to the same kinds of resources, etc. And I think those are the same types of inequities of resources that are shifting things culturally within the university.

**CW:** I’m going to give you another example that’s going to upset my dear Jewish brothers and sisters. I think Hamas has a right to both make their case and has the right to recruit. They say, “West has lost his cotton-pickin’ mind!” *No*. I am consistent when it comes to a libertarian view within the deeper democratic project. You see? Very much so. And I would be one who would be open to a conversation, part of a conversation with any of these. If they want ROTC and other groups that have a military dimension in their project that’s against the U.S. government, I’ll be part of the dialogue. If you have Hamas [wanting to talk about] the state terrorism of Israel and their army, I would be part of the dialogue. Certain moments, I’d probably be defending Israel vis-à-vis Hamas, because Hamas would be telling some lies about Jewish brothers and sisters. Other times, Hamas might be telling some *truths* about the Israeli state nobody wants to hear! That’s what the conversation is *all about*, in that sense.

In some ways, we’re back to the great Walt Whitman because if we’re going to be honest with ourselves and engage in a Gramscian critical self-inventory—which shows the degree to which society and history has deposited *things inside of us* as we are honest with ourselves—

we're going to see contradictions, we're going to see multitudes of consistency and inconsistency. And that's what *paideia* is all about. And you never in the end reach any moment of purity or pristine status.

**EC:** Why do you think Whitman's poetics are integral here? In an interview that I conducted with Martín Espada on the 150th anniversary of *Leaves of Grass*,<sup>7</sup> he said that as a society we're still not ready for Whitman.

**CW:** He's right. He's absolutely right.

**EC:** Is there a particular aspect of Whitman that you think we're not ready for?

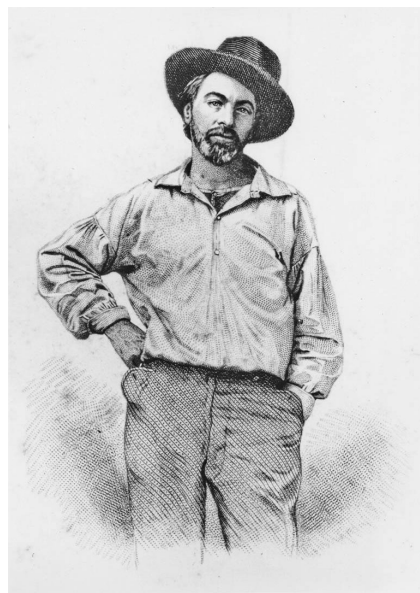
**CW:** I think in a certain sense —[looks to bookshelf]—Just seeing where is my Whitman now? Because I've got him here somewhere and I like to be able to look at that brother when I talk about him. That in a certain sense, I mean *Leaves of Grass* is the grass on the ceiling of the graves and the coffins of each and every one of us.

**EC:** "And now it seems to me, the beautiful uncut hair of graves" ("Song of Myself" 6.110).

**CW:** Exactly. You see that there's a deep sense in which *all* or most of the great poets, like Whitman, are concerned about forms of death. And America is a death-denying, death-dodging, death-ducking civilization. Even the way in which we construe that *title* is more about the "leaves of grass" that are flowering and flourishing against the wind and the backdrop of the sunshine, and so forth. That is one way of reading it. He's a great poet subject to multiple interpretations. It's polysemic. But the other reading is the grass on the top, you see? And we know from the "Lilacs"<sup>8</sup> poem and so forth, that Whitman is in some ways preoccupied with the forms of death that he's wrestling with inside of his life, as well as with what America's wrestling with inside its history. That it's not just those soldiers he's administering to during the Civil War—though that becomes a concrete example of it.

Man, I'm sorry I can't show you my Whitman. I hate to talk about these towering figures without looking at them.

**EC:** Well, you do have a lot of books.



**Frontispiece for 1855 *Leaves of Grass*  
1854 Harrison Daguerreotype of Whitman**



**CW:** Because the cat means so much to me. You know, we just changed . . . Oh! there he is! There's my brother! *HA HA HA!* There he is! He's cool. Looks like a black brother, doesn't he? *Soulful!* He's a white literary *soulful* bluesman at the deepest level. But I think that Espada is absolutely right. Neruda understood this as well coming from the Chilean context. Muriel Rukeyser understood it.

**EC:** Isn't it interesting, too? Another thing I asked Espada about relates to the fact that Neruda invokes Walt Whitman in the section of poems where he's railing against the Nixon administration in context with what was happening in Chile during the Pinochet dictatorship. And he says in "I Begin by Invoking Walt Whitman":

Asking the old bard to confer with me  
I assume the duties of a poet  
armed with a terrorist's sonnet. (10-12)

**CW:** Those are powerful lines.

**EC:** They are powerful because Neruda asks us to think about the control and manipulation and subversion of discourse within our times. I often wonder if our government would view Whitman as a terrorist were he alive today.

**CW:** He would certainly be under surveillance.

**EC:** No question about that.

**CW:** And I think actually that to be under surveillance by the U.S. government for progressives is a compliment. It's a badge of honor in a certain sense. Not because it's nice to live with Big Brother looking over your shoulder, but because in the tradition of Socrates and Jesus that you're willing to do things and say things and live and die for things that constitute a threat to a mendacious status quo. But in an interesting kind of way—and this is where the difference between being anti-injustice in America as opposed to being anti-American comes into play—that most of our great artists and writers would actually be forced to live under surveillance, when you really think about it.

Twain's anti-imperialism—there he is right there [points to bookshelf]—his anti-imperialism is just *relentless*, let alone his defense of the humanity of the Negro, which is enough to get you killed at your Thanksgiving dinner with your family. We're not even talking about the government killing you: you'd get killed by your brothers and sisters! You're defending the humanity of the Negro in the 1880's . . . That chapter 31 of *Huckleberry Finn* . . . tearing up the deed! Going to hell because you don't want to give Nigger Jim back! That's one of the great sublime moments in all of American literature. The humanity of Nigger Jim has priority over white supremacist civilization that you are fundamentally invested in?! That's Huck; that's Twain; that's Samuel Clemens, man.

So when you think about it, that would be true for Tennessee Williams: "*mendacity* is the name of the system we live under," he has

Brick say in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. We know it's true for Eugene O'Neill —*The Iceman Cometh*. The most powerful *indictment* of the American Dream as a pipe dream; materialism and hedonism and narcissism just poisoning the whole culture itself so obsessed with power: "What does it profit a nation to gain the whole world and lose its soul?" Just losing its soul. Once it loses its soul, it can *never* get it back. That's the most bleak conception. He's our greatest playwright! Not the most lyrical, but the cat got it. I mean, that's O'Neill! Tony Kushner today. You know *he's* under surveillance. Arthur Miller, my dear brother we've been talking about [prior to this interview], we *know* he was under surveillance. So many, if not all, of our great artists. Even on the right-wing side. The T.S. Eliots, and others.

**EC:** Sure.

**CW:** They'd be under surveillance because they could see a certain shallowness and hollowness there even as they—and I think this is what's very important . . . this is why it resonates with so many of our great artists—that they say it with an agony and an anguish: almost with tears in their eyes. Because the thing about America, and for me, it's not even a question about patriotism. For me, it's a matter of a democratic possibility, so precious, being lost or unrealized, its potentials minimized. That's what brings tears to your eyes. Because you think of those ordinary people, those everyday people whose lives ought to be able to have more dignity and decency, having their lives wasted. Let alone how we might be able to assist [others with] our resources as the richest nation in the world. You say, "Damn!"

**EC:** No greater tragedy than that.

**CW:** Exactly! You say, "Wow!" And all you had to do was have a little less greed, a little less bigotry, a little less fear, a little less cowardice, a little less hatred. Now, we know you're not going to eliminate the greed—hey, we're not in a utopian paradise! For, as a Christian, you know I'm not anywhere near that, you know what I mean? But I do believe we can be better. There's no doubt about that. All human beings could be better. It doesn't matter what their religious or ideological orientation is. But I think that's what brought tears to Eugene O'Neill's eyes when he was writing *The Iceman Cometh*. You can feel the same thing in *The Great Gatsby*—next to last paragraph: "Gatsby believed in the green light" (171).<sup>9</sup> So, even with all the lies about himself, the platonic vision of himself, the definitions of himself, he's still holding on, because tomorrow will be bigger, tomorrow will be better—just wait! Just wait until tomorrow—keep putting it off! Because we live in a world of limitless possibilities and boundless potentialities. You say, "Well . . . not really" [laughs]. Not really! There's certain limits to every person, every nation, every civilization.

**EC:** That's probably a great place to wrap up. Professor West, thank you once again for speaking with me on these issues.

**CW:** Thank you so much, my brother.

## Notes

Special thanks to Professor West's assistant, Mary Ann Rodriguez, for her help in coordinating this interview.

<sup>1</sup> Interview conducted at Professor West's office (Princeton University, Center for African American Studies, Stanhope Hall, Room 205) on 5 May 2008. Interview transcribed by Edward J. Carvalho.

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Jabotinsky (b. 1880, d. 1940) founder of the militant Zionist Revisionist movement during the formation of modern Israel.

<sup>3</sup> See Dostoevsky.

<sup>4</sup> See Mill, ch. 1 "Introductory." "Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end" (272).

<sup>5</sup> See Bousquet's *How the University Works* Web site at <http://howtheuniversityworks.com/wordpress/>.

<sup>6</sup> The African National Congress (ANC) started as a resistance movement in South Africa in the early part of the twentieth century. The organization, for a period of about thirty years, was banned in South Africa. During this time, the ANC appeared on the U.S. State Department Terrorist Watch list and remained there until the ANC assumed leadership of the South African Government in the 1990s. The U.S. and other Western nations used the "terrorist" designation to resist divestment from South Africa and to justify continued silence during the genocidal apartheid regime.

<sup>7</sup> See my interview with Espada entitled "A Branch on the Tree of Whitman."

<sup>8</sup> "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd."

<sup>9</sup> The final two paragraphs of *The Great Gatsby* read:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther . . . . And one fine morning—

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (171)

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