

# Machete Interview with Cornel West

## First Installment

### The Flickering Light of Performative *Paideia*... in the Night of the American Empire

**Gabriel Rockhill:** An overview of your work to date gives less a sense of sharp turns or breaks than an impression of intellectual intensification. I mean by this that the majority of your fundamental concerns have been present from your very first publications: prophetic pragmatism, radical historicism, genealogy, the critique of nihilism, black cultural democracy, race matters, and social critique. In looking back over your work to date, do you have the same impression? How would you explain your intellectual itinerary from your current perspective? How do you see your research projects evolving in the immediate future?

**Cornel West:** I think you're right about intensification, and I think that when you actually look at what I have done over twenty-five years now, since 1982, it certainly began with a deep sense of existential scars, ontological wounds and psychic bruises of white supremacy. At the core of my work is the issue of what it means to be human and living in a situation where you encounter the absurd as an American in America because you're dealing with these scars, bruises and wounds and yet determined to respond, to resist, to critique, to make some sense out of it. That's why Kierkegaard has always meant so very much to me, because here is somebody who's wrestling with the absurd in the sense of his own thorn in his flesh. Of course, I had a different thorn than he did, but we're both human. I grew up in a segregated America, segregated California, and tried to come to terms with what it means to be human, but my initial encounter was with this white supremacy bombardment. Now from there, of course I would go on to engage in a much larger critical analysis of American empire, capitalist modes of production, patriarchal modes of domination, homophobic modes of degradation, but it was that encounter with white supremacy that sat at the centre. And then there was also the deep prophetic Christian foundation for me, which has always been the launching pad for my conversations with Marxism, pragmatism, various forms of radical historicism, even radical forms of radical humanism (I would consider people like Erich Auerbach and Edward Said humanists from whom I've learned much, though neither one would be in any way Marxist).

**GR:** Given this existential source of your engagement, why was it important for you to articulate your struggle in a philosophic trajectory?

**CW:** Well I just felt that one has to be in conversation with the most sophisticated voices, the most refined viewpoints, and as I matriculated through college I was deeply, deeply affected by Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Hegel, Marx, Lukács, and Simmel. These writers and thinkers constituted not just a challenge to my own sense of wrestling with the absurd in the form of trying to make sense of the white supremacist bombardment coming at me, but they also reflected on *paideia*, which I take very seriously, this deep sense of cultivating a self and a maturation of the soul, and an attempt to somehow generate an energy, an agency, an effort, some kind of resistance before one dies.

**GR:** How does the intertwining of this existential dimension and the philosophic dimension relate to your own discursive strategies and your ability to adeptly navigate between publications that are primarily for the erudite audience of the intelligentsia and less scholarly writing that touch the larger public?

**CW:** I think that for me the deepest existential source of coming to terms with the white supremacist bombardment was music. And I think, in some ways, that this is true for black America as a whole, from spirituals and blues through jazz, rhythm and blues, and even up to hip hop. From the very beginning, I always conceived of myself as aspiring to be a bluesman in a world of ideas and a jazzman in the life of the mind. And what is distinctive about using blues and jazz as a kind of model or source of intellectual inspiration is to be flexible and fluid and improvisational, multi-dimensional, finding one's own voice but deploying that voice in a variety of different contexts, a variety of different discursive strategies, a variety of different modes of rhetorical persuasion as well as logical argumentation in order to make some kind of impact on the world. In that regard, you can imagine, I had to almost reverse the disciplinary divisions of knowledge in the academy. I always had to go up against more academic forms of presentation, even of producing knowledge in a certain sense, and of course as a bluesman or a jazzman it meant that I wanted to be a public preacher of *paideia* and I had to go where the public was. For there's an academic public I take very seriously as a professor at Princeton and teacher to students and so forth. There's a cultural public through television and radio, such as with my dear

brother Tavis Smiley's show, every week now for 5 years we go from Leopardi's poetry to the hip hop music of Chuck D. There is an artistic public that I relate to, and of course there's a religious public which is not simply Christian. There's an organized working class public; I spend time with trade union movements and their various centers. Each one of these publics is a crucial site for the articulation of a kind of deep democratic vision that I have. But in the end, it has much to do with the blues orientation and the jazz sensibility where you're not static, you're not stationary, you're always dynamic and open to speaking in and enacting one's own *paideia* in the light of these different contexts.

To be continued in the next issue of *Machete*

- Excerpted from the interview "A Prisoner of Hope in the Night of the American Empire" in the forthcoming *Politics of Culture and the Spirit of Critique* edited by Gabriel Rockhill and Alfredo Gomez-Muller. Copyright © 2010 Columbia University Press to be published in the fall 2010. Used by arrangement with Columbia University Press. All rights reserved.



# Machete Interview with Cornel West

## Second Installment

### The Flickering Light of Performative *Paideia*... in the Night of the American Empire

**Gabriel Rockhill:** How do your movements across different media of communication and various disciplines relate to the tradition of critical theory? Do you see your work as embracing a similar objective, i.e. a critical engagement with society that breaks down the boundaries of the disciplines and questions traditional modes of communication?

**Cornel West:** I think in many ways it's similar. Adorno and Benjamin provided a poignant analysis of the cultural industry and the former put forward an unbelievable philosophy of music, even though of course I disagree with him on jazz. But Benjamin and Adorno mean much to me, and not simply because they traverse the disciplines so smoothly and with such intellectual agility, but also because they understand—as I experienced it—the centrality of the catastrophic, of the traumatic, of the monstrous, the scandalous, and the calamitous so that the starting point is really the effects of a catastrophe on a mainstream that seemingly is functioning smoothly. And so I identify with those two in a very important way when it comes to early 20th-century views, and of course for Adorno till the 1960s. But I must say the difference here is that I am also a participant in and not simply a critical theorist of culture. I released a CD in 2001, *Sketches of My Culture*, and another in 2003 entitled *Street Knowledge*. In 2007, there's my new CD *Never Forget with Prince*—it's the first time ever Prince has allowed his music on a hip hop CD—, Andre 3000 of Outkast, Dave Hollister, and others. So you see, I'm a participant in cultural creation, not just a critic as it were. Critics can of course be creative in their own ways, but it's very different when you're actually producing the very things that the critics themselves are going to be talking about and trying to make sense of. And this is even true

in some ways as well in film, such as in *The Matrix 2* and *3*. I think one difference would be that I understand *paideia* as tied to the performative, but the performative here is not to be reduced to mere amusement and entertainment, it's to acknowledge enactment, bodily enactment as well as intellectual enactment in the name of still trying to shatter the sleepwalking, to awaken, to unnerve, to unhouse people, that Socratic function that Adorno performs.

**GR:** In addition to being a participant in cultural production, you're also a militant. Is this part of the performative element in your work?

**CW:** Absolutely! I think that the performative as bodily enactment and intellectual enactment has everything to do with trying to exemplify a certain sense of urgency, a certain kind of state of emergency that we find ourselves in. And, most importantly, I think it also tries to highlight the energy requisite for the kind of courage we need, the courage to think critically, the courage to be empathetic and highlight the plight of the most vulnerable in our society and world and the courage to hope, to be alive, to point out light in darkness, the courage to keep the candle flickering in the night of the American Empire.

- Transcribed by Emily Rockhill

- Excerpted from the interview "A Prisoner of Hope in the Night of the American Empire" in the forthcoming *Politics of Culture and the Spirit of Critique* edited by Gabriel Rockhill and Alfredo Gomez-Muller. Copyright © 2010 Columbia University Press to be published in the fall 2010. Used by arrangement with Columbia University Press. All rights reserved.

