

# Cornel West Fights the *Unjust Whiteness* of Harvard



Cornel West speaks during a press conference at The National Press Club on September 15, 2016, in Washington, D.C.

Cornel West has implored his fearless speech to call out injustice wherever he feels it exists. Notwithstanding, West isn't your typical professional philosopher. As a professor at Yale in the mid-1980s, he was arrested for attempting, (primarily through protest), to get the university to withdraw its investments from any and all companies they were doing business in Apartheid South Africa.

The supposed big news which spawned the interview with George Yancy was that he was recently denied the option of being considered for tenure at Harvard, where he currently teaches, and where he had previously held tenure.

Some brainwashed liberal students at the university gathered in a massive outcry, students at the university have mobilized in support of West, describing Harvard's refusal to consider West's bid for tenure as "an urgent matter of equity and parity" and a blatant devaluation of Black scholarship that could lead to "a mass exodus of Black scholars."

George Yancy, from *Truthout* interviewed Cornel West and published an article of their conversation on March 5, 2021. Below are a view **excerpts**. The actual conversation was slightly longer, thw writing below has almsr half the paragraphs removed, and still there was this much mentioning of the poor black people with an unfair shot at success in society. - *S.P.*

West stated,

“Yes, that’s a very important place to begin my brother, because, for me, intellectual vocation and prophetic witness sit at the very center of my work. And for me, I am just building on Max Weber in many ways, especially two great essays of his from 1917 and 1919. What it is to have a *Beruf*, a calling, is very different than having a career. When you are wedded to a vocation, when you are wedded to a calling, it is tied to the Negro National Anthem; you are lifting your voice. You are not just lifting an echo, you’re not a copy, you’re not an imitation. Rather, you have a distinctive, unique and singular voice to be brought to bear and that voice is found only by bouncing up against earlier voices, the voices of the dead and the voices of the quick, but it’s the best voices, the most courageous voices, the most visionary voices. And it means then that you’re always going to be over against establishments, over against status quos — no matter what color.

Every vocation is connected to a sense of history in which you are involved in an invocation. And every calling that you have is tied to a certain kind of recalling and interpretation of the past. And every interpretation of the past is an interpretation of the present. Or, as Michel Foucault used to say, every history of the past is a history of the present and vice versa. And, therefore, you situate yourself within a particular vocation and tradition headed toward — for me — *revolution*.

But all of us are always already in circumstances not of our own choosing, and so we have to situate ourselves in particular historical traditions, and my traditions come from the magnificent West family, Clifton and Irene West, from the Shiloh Baptist church, and from the Black radical tradition. But it also comes from the best of my teachers, Hilary Putnam, John Rawls, Tim Scanlon, Thomas Nagel, Richard Rorty, Martin Kilson, Preston Williams, one can go on and on. So, I am a fusion, I am a hybrid of the best from whence I come, and the best of my formal education, but all of them are just feeding into a particular vocation and witness, an intellectual vocation and a prophetic witness.

\_\_\_\_\_The catastrophe is bodily, it is corporeal, psychic, spiritual. It’s where one wrestles with forms of death — spiritual death, psychic death, social death, civic death. All of those continually bombarding you. So, when I say that I’m a bluesman in the life of the mind, some people say, “That’s kind of interesting.” No! That is a particular tradition of a way of being-in-the-world.

So, if I put my cemetery clothes on every day, if I’m coffin-ready every day, it means a particular kind of catastrophe, like physical death, is always already there on a continuum with the other forms of death. *And to be a Black man in a white supremacist civilization, where Black love is a crime, where Black hope is a joke, where Black freedom is a pipe dream, and Black history is a curse, then I’ve got to fight that no matter what.* So, I’m going to love and be willing to

be criminalized. I'm going to fight for freedom and be willing to be crushed. I'm going to try to provide some kind of hope and be willing to be laughed at as a joke.

So, one is radically cutting over against oneself. And then when you add the cruciform character and the tragic-comic content to it, it means that you're in but not of this empire, **you're in but not of this white supremacist society, trying to be in but not of this predatory capitalist society, you're in but not of this patriarchal, homophobic society**, but you know all that's inside of you, too. And that is part of the paradox, the white supremacy that is inside of me. I grew up within a patriarchal empire, so I'm going to have the patriarchy in me. So, I have to fight that every day. That's part of learning how to die. That needs to die daily in order for me to emerge as a stronger love warrior, freedom fighter and wounded healer.

*My particular voice is one that has been deeply shaped by critiques of empire, predatory capitalism, and white supremacy in the ways in which all of these are interwoven.* But what makes me a little different from some of my brothers and sisters is that I tend to look at the world through the lens of the cross, through a moral and spiritual lens. So, I'm very tied to the prophetic voices of Hebrew scripture. I view Hebrew scripture as one of the great moral revolutions in the spreading of *hesed*, which is a steadfast love and loving kindness of orphan and widow, the hungry, and the shelterless, the homeless and the oppressed.

**A little crisis of the professional managerial class of Black folk, yes, it's important, but it still pales in the face of the catastrophes of our brothers and sisters who constitute the masses of Black and poor working people.** We always have to work with what we have, and we have to use what we have in order not to sell our souls for a mess of pottage. The saddest thing that happens is when those folk who adjust to injustice then parade around as a success. We're talking about greatness here.

So, I would hope that my example, given all of my privileges and all of my blessings, will communicate the message that young people should be fortified. Don't be disrespected. We come from a great people. ***Black people are a world historical people whose gifts have disproportionately shaped the cultures of the world.*** And there's just no doubt about that, so you've got to be true to that, and you are true to that with your humility and your tenacity. And you have to be willing to speak the truth — to the powerful and the powerless.

***When Harvard treats me in this way, that's a sign of its spiritual and intellectual bankruptcy.*** Now, it could bounce back, but you have to call it for what it is. You have to acknowledge that there's new styles of Jim Crow in the life of the mind and the country. It's just a fact.

***\_\_\_ We have to be honest about that and say that we can do better. And we must do better. And, in fact, if you subtract the number of Black people in the Department of African and African American Studies at Harvard and only include Black folk in other departments, Harvard looks like the National Hockey League. There's hardly any Black folks at all. That's how Wall Street looks. That's how elite formation looks. That's how Silicon Valley looks, especially at the top.***

\_\_\_ Intellectual vocation and prophetic witness is tied to integrity, not popularity. It is tied to quality, not quantity. And it is tied to substance, not superficial spectacle. The very way in which you look at a problem is going to be informed by important levels of integrity, quality, political, spiritual and moral substance. So, all the talk about identity these days will not mean much at all if it is not rooted in integrity and high quality and solidarity. ***You see, racial identity and gender identity could just be weaponized for another middle-class project that would reproduce neoliberal politics that will unleash Wall Street greed, generate high levels of poverty, no accountability of the elites at the top, and everybody walks around with a smile, because you got some Black folk and Brown folk at the top.*** And it just means that the class hierarchy is more colorful, and the imperial hierarchy is more colorful, but people are still suffering. King comes from our tradition, brother. He's a wave in our ocean. You and I know about 400 years of being chronically hated and yet we keep dishing out love warriors like Martin Luther King, and Stevie Wonder, who's thinking about going to Ghana. Four-hundred years of being terrorized and yet we keep dishing out freedom fighters like Fannie Lou Hamer. Traumatized and yet we keep dishing out wounded healers like Aretha Franklin. That's a great people with a great tradition. We're human beings like everybody else, but I'm talking about the best of who we are. So, when we think of a Martin Luther King, we say, "What would the analogues in the academy look like? What would the intellectuals look like if they were fundamentally grounded in those traditions of love warriors, freedom fighters and wounded healers?" I think that is our challenge. I think that you've done a magnificent job in your corpus and you've been so true to this tradition. And I think this is true for a variety of different thinkers and philosophers, but it just means, in the end, that we love the people, we're servants of the people, that we want to use our gifts to enable others, we want to use whatever we have, to empty ourselves, to donate and give ourselves, to be of service to others, such that they can be stronger, they can be more empowered when the worms get our bodies."



Shaun Prario

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