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NEWSLETTER ON THE BLACK EXPERIENCE

FROM THE EDITORS, JOHN McCLENDON AND GEORGE YANCY

ARTICLE

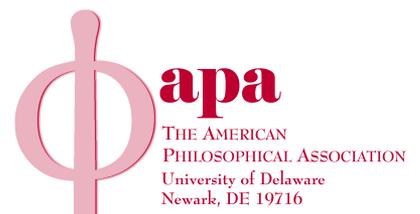
JOHN H. McCLENDON III

“Dr. Richard Ishmael McKinney: Historical Summation on the Life
of a Pioneering African American Philosopher”

BOOK REVIEW

Cornel West: *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*

REVIEWED BY ROBERT E. BIRT





Philosophy and the Black Experience

John McClendon & George Yancy, Co-Editors

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FROM THE EDITORS

Throughout the course of our editorship of the *Newsletter*, we have insisted on the significance of and need for the reconstruction of the history of African American philosophy. In the Fall 2004 issue of this *Newsletter*, John H. McClendon III in his article, "The African American Philosopher and Academic Philosophy: On the Problem of Historical Interpretation," presented a challenge to all of us to seriously undertake the tasks of recovering the role of the African American academic philosopher. In keeping with this challenge this issue of the *Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* seeks to highlight the neglected topic of the history of African American academic philosophers by focusing on the contribution and legacy of a key figure, the late Dr. Richard I. McKinney. This article by John McClendon is entitled, "Dr. Richard Ishmael McKinney: Historical Summation on the Life of a Pioneering African American Philosopher." Dr. McKinney, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Morgan State University, recently died at the age of 99 years old on October 28, 2005. Within our next issue, we will include an unprecedented interview essay by eminent philosopher William R. Jones based upon a set of clearly formulated questions set forth by George Yancy.

Also included within this issue is African American philosopher Robert Birt's review essay of Cornel West's new book, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*. Birt's review provides an appreciable overview of the text and raises significant questions that at once call into question and push the conceptual assumptions and syntheses within West's text. For example, in reference to West's claim that a tragicomic sense of hope, which grows out of the Black experience, is a site that challenges anti-democratic energies, Birt asks, "But does not the very idea of 'nihilism' as West conceives it make doubtful the resiliency of tragicomic hope?" And while Birt points out the eloquence and Socratic questioning that West brings to bear upon the imperialistic and plutocratic elements that erode the foundation of democratic practices and militate against the democratic spirit of the demos, he pushes the envelope of West's understanding of democracy, suggesting that "perhaps we must go beyond the limited form of democracy afforded by an imperial capitalist republic, and seek nothing less than the reinvention of democracy itself." Indeed, Birt implies that West brings us to the very precipice of a more radical critique of democracy that eventually falls short of the "radical implications of [West's] own analyses." The inclusion of Robert Birt's review in this issue alongside an article on Richard I. McKinney is quite ironic. Only after we compiled this current issue did we learn that Birt was an undergraduate student of McKinney's at Morgan State University in the mid-70s. Birt remembers that he studied Ancient Greek Philosophy under McKinney, noting that McKinney also taught a course in

philosophy of religion and existentialism. Birt reminisces fondly about McKinney, disclosing that it was Richard McKinney who had an incredible way of teaching philosophy, transforming dry textual exegesis into a living philosophical tradition.

ARTICLES

Dr. Richard Ishmael McKinney: Historical Summation on the Life of a Pioneering African American Philosopher

John H. McClendon III
Bates College

Richard I. McKinney was born on August 8, 1906, in Live Oak, Florida, on the college campus of Farmer Institute (later named Florida Memorial College) where his father was president and both of his parents were alums.¹ Valedictorian of his high school class in 1927 at Morehouse Academy, McKinney stayed on in Atlanta to attend Morehouse College where he graduated with his bachelor's degree in 1931 after maintaining a major in philosophy and religion. After his graduation from Morehouse College, McKinney moved to Massachusetts and enrolled at Newton Theological Seminary. There McKinney expressed his philosophical and scholarly interest in Black life, and its ethical dimensions, as early as the submission of his Bachelor of Divinity thesis entitled, *The Problem of Evil and its Relation to the Ministry to an Under-privileged Minority* in 1934.²

In spite of having a period when African Americans were not admitted to Newton Theological Seminary, we discover that over the years a number of African Americans have attended this institution, which is now known as Andover Newton Theological Seminary. Previously, in 1874, the venerable George Washington Williams matriculated from Newton Theological Seminary as its first Black graduate. Amazingly, Williams was not only a Civil War veteran, lawyer, journalist, preacher, as well as the first Black member of the Ohio Legislature, but he was also the first modern (empirically-based) historian of Afro-American life.³

After McKinney finished his work for the Bachelor of Divinity, he then completed the Masters of Sacred Theology in the philosophy of religion from Newton in 1937. His S.T.M. thesis topic was *The Cosmology of Alfred North Whitehead and Its Bearing on Religion and Theology*. During the 1930s and 1940s, McKinney's interest in the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead was by no means atypical among African American philosophers. For instance, Marquis Lafayette Harris addresses Whitehead in his 1933 Ohio State University doctoral dissertation, *Some Conceptions of God in the Gifford Lectures During the Period 1927-1929*. Albert Millard Dunham (who

studied with Whitehead at Harvard) wrote his 1931 MA thesis at the University of Chicago on *Whitehead's Philosophy of Time*, and we have Cornelius Golightly's 1941 University of Michigan Ph.D. dissertation, *Thought and Language in Whitehead's Categorical Scheme*.

Richard I. McKinney received his Ph.D. in 1942 from Yale's School of Divinity. His doctoral dissertation was entitled *Religion in Higher Education among Negroes*. McKinney's dissertation was primarily a work in the sociology and philosophy of Black education. McKinney's interest in the role of religion in higher education was not unlike that of other African American philosophers such as Charles Leander Hill's "The Role of Religion in Higher Education," and Willis J. King's "Personalism and Race." Before McKinney published his dissertation in book form, he developed an important article from it entitled "Religion in Negro Colleges," which appeared in the *Journal of Negro Education* in 1944.⁴

For McKinney and his generation of African American philosophers, philosophy of education was of no small concern. For example, John M. Smith pursued the Ph.D. in philosophy with a dissertation on *A Comparison of Plato's and Dewey's Educational Philosophies* from Iowa in 1941. As with McKinney, Smith was at a historically black college and university (HBCU), serving on the faculty of Elizabeth City State University in North Carolina. Francis A. Thomas, the long-time chair of philosophy at Central State University (Wilberforce, Ohio), received his doctorate in education rather than in philosophy. Thomas's doctoral dissertation, from Indiana University in 1960, was on *Philosophies of Audio Visual Education as Conceived of by University Centers and by Selected Leaders*. All three philosophers, McKinney, Smith, and Thomas, considered their roles as philosophers to be inextricably tied to the educational aims of the HBCUs.⁵

Although Thomas Nelson Baker earned a Ph.D. in philosophy from Yale as early as 1903, McKinney was just the second Black person to earn a doctorate from Yale to go on and become an academic philosopher. In the nearly forty-year span from Baker to McKinney, no other African American joined the ranks of academic philosophy with a doctorate from Yale. I should point out that while George D. Kelsey (Morehouse professor of philosophy and religion and mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr.) graduated from Yale with his Ph.D. in 1946, it would take nearly twenty years before the next African American academic philosopher would emerge from Yale with a doctorate. (Kelsey was one of the first African Americans to hold a distinguished chair at a white institution. He was the Henry Anson Buttz Professor of Christian Ethics at Drew University.) After Kelsey, Joyce Mitchell Cook received her doctorate in 1965. Dr. Joyce Mitchell Cook would also have the honor of becoming the first African American woman with a Ph.D. in philosophy.⁶

In spite of the fact that the first African American to gain the Ph.D. from an institution in the United States—Edward Bouchet in 1874 from Yale University—the limited number of African Americans with doctorates from Yale was primarily due to consciously designed forms of racial discrimination. In 1945 the Provost Edgar S. Furniss of Yale actually admitted in a letter to Yale's President Charles Seymour that the racist exclusion of qualified Black applicants had willfully taken place there for a number of years.⁷

After Yale, McKinney conducted post-doctoral work at the University of Chicago, Columbia University, and the Sorbonne in Paris. McKinney was a member of Phi Beta Kappa, and we find that throughout his academic career he was an active faculty member and administrator with several HBCUs. In 1935, for example, McKinney went to Virginia Union as assistant professor

and director of religious activities. Although he planned to serve only as a short-term replacement, his stay was extended and hence his teaching and educational administrative career was launched. Eventually, in 1942, he assumed the post of Dean of the School of Religion.¹

Despite his outstanding credentials and training, and with the exception of visiting positions at the University of Pennsylvania, and the Medical College of Georgia, along with Bicentennial Lecturer at the College of Notre Dame, his academic career would essentially remain behind the shadow of "The Color Line" of segregation and Jim Crow. McKinney's Bicentennial Lecture at Notre Dame—"A Philosophical Paragraph: 'We Hold These Truths' ..."—expresses his abiding interest in overcoming racism. The lecture was later revised and published with the same title in Samuel L. Gandy's anthology *Common Ground, Essays in Honor of Howard Thurman*.⁸

In 1944, McKinney left Virginia Union and became president of Storer College in West Virginia. Storer College was the first institution established that served as a teachers college for African Americans in the state of West Virginia. From its beginnings as a secondary school, Storer, by 1934, had developed four-year college-degree granting programs. Located in Harpers Ferry, the historic spot where John Brown led his raid on the federal arsenal, the area gained a sizable African American population in the wake of Brown's armed crusade against slavery.⁹

From its founding in 1865 until 1944, when McKinney assumed the helm, Storer was headed by white men. In fact, Henry T. MacDonald, the second head and the first "official" president of the College (in the words of Dawn Raines Burke) had "a lingering paternalistic predisposition" in as much as he thought that only white people could properly educate African Americans and that African Americans were not equally equipped to educate themselves. In fact, MacDonald was president of Storer for 45 years, and he argued that special efforts should be made to attract white faculty there. Students complained about the atmosphere of racist paternalism and the paucity of Black professors on the faculty. Eventually, MacDonald resigned and thus McKinney became president. In that capacity, McKinney was not only an able administrator but also a mentor and inspiration to the African American student body. Additionally, McKinney had to have an abundance of courage to assume the position of president of Storer. For instance, when he first arrived the KKK burned a cross in his yard. McKinney, nonetheless, would not be intimidated by racist violence and terrorism. Along with founding a student government organization, McKinney even instituted a student branch of the NAACP on the campus.¹⁰

McKinney's presidency from 1944 to 1950 was pivotal to the College's academic expansion into a four-year college. McKinney increased the number of Black faculty to 11 of the 18 instructors. He recruited more foreign students and particularly advanced the number of African students at Storer. In this particular recruitment drive, McKinney worked closely with former Storer student Nnamdi (Zik) Azikiwe, who would become the first president of Nigeria. Azikiwe gave generously to his *alma mater* and regularly corresponded with McKinney. Later we discover that McKinney's close association with Zik would be manifested in McKinney serving as a visiting professor at the University of Ife in Nigeria.¹¹

Yet despite McKinney's gallant efforts to establish Storer as a first-rate four-year college, it never gained accreditation. Sadly, McKinney also had to face an uncooperative West Virginia state legislature and a white Board of Trustees at the College that was not in sync with building Storer into a first-rate college with African American leadership. McKinney woefully remarked,

“We couldn’t get the required facilities because we didn’t have the money. We couldn’t get the money because we weren’t accredited... We were in a vicious cycle.”¹²

From a historical standpoint, it is important to note that McKinney was just one of a number of Black philosophers who were presidents at HBCUs. Besides McKinney, those in this capacity included: Joseph C. Price at Livingston College (North Carolina), John Wesley Edward Bowen and Willis Jefferson King at Gammon Theological Seminary (Georgia)—King was also president at Samuel Huston College (Texas)—Marquis L. Harris at Philander Smith (Arkansas), William Stuart Nelson at Shaw University (North Carolina) and Dillard University (Louisiana), Broadus Butler was president at Dillard University as well as Texas Southern University, and Gilbert Haven Jones and Charles Leander Hill at Wilberforce University (Ohio).¹³

Keenly aware of the difficult plight of the African American presidents at HBCUs, McKinney would later publish a book on Howard University’s first African American president, Mordecai Johnson. The book, *Mordecai, The Man and His Message: The Story of Mordecai Wyatt Johnson*, was published with Howard University Press in 1998.¹⁴ Indeed, much of McKinney’s published work centered on African American education and religion. We have the following book, *History of the Black Baptists of Florida, 1850-1985*, with Florida Memorial College Press in 1987, and his doctoral dissertation, *Religion in Higher Education among Negroes*, which was published in book form in 1945. In addition to the above, there is the more historically anchored monographic text that he published in 1981 under the title of *Keeping the Faith: A History of the First Baptist Church, 1863-1980, in Light of Its Times, West Main and Seventh Streets* with the Michie Bobs Merrill Press.

When McKinney departed from Storer in 1950, he headed for Morgan State University where, starting in 1951, he spent the majority of his academic career. Prior to McKinney’s arrival at Morgan’s Department of Philosophy, William T. Fontaine was chair of the philosophy department until 1947, and Marc M. Moreland was on the philosophy faculty when McKinney arrived. Fontaine was the first African American to receive the Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania, and he was the first Black person to gain tenure at Penn. Moreland was a fellow Morehouse alum and earned his doctorate in philosophy from University of Toronto in 1938.¹⁵

McKinney became the chair of the Department of Philosophy and the Division of the Humanities in 1951 and ultimately served as acting dean of the College of Arts and Sciences before his retirement in 1978. After his retirement from Morgan State, McKinney assumed another administrative post as acting vice president for academic affairs at Virginia Union. McKinney was not inclined to “retire” literally and so he returned to Morgan and taught philosophy well into his 90s. In fact, it was reported that he had given a lecture just before he died.¹⁶

In an interview given in 1996 with Joan Morgan (in *Black Issues of Higher Education*), “Teaching the Young Keeps Him Young—90 Year Old Dr. Richard McKinney of Morgan State Still Going Strong,” McKinney stated, “I like to be around young people and if I stay around just older persons I will tend to think and act that way...and seeing me, they learn that age can be just a number.” A productive scholar and insightful teacher, McKinney published his views about teaching philosophy in an article entitled “Some Aspects of the Teaching of Philosophy,” *Liberal Education* V. XLVI (December 1960). Professor McKinney held that his philosophical viewpoint was essentially rooted in phenomenology and existentialism and he offers his insights into existentialism in an article entitled “Existential Ethics and Protest Movement.”¹⁷

No doubt Dr. McKinney’s joy as a philosopher was in teaching and in progressively changing young people’s lives. He stated, “A former student who is now in her thirties came to me while I was attending a concert to say she still had the textbook from when she was in my class and now she is teaching it to her 13-year-old daughter. I think that is the payoff for teachers—seeing the change in people for the better.”¹¹

Indeed, not only have his former students gained from his teachings but also all of us have reaped the harvest of his contributions to the history of African American philosophy. Without a doubt, today we all stand on higher philosophical grounds, and this is especially so given the contributions of this pioneering African American philosopher and educator. Quite fittingly, Dr. McKinney’s passing on October 28, 2005, at the age of 99 years old, is marked by the establishment of the Dr. Richard I. McKinney Philosophy Scholarship Fund. You can help continue the legacy of Dr. McKinney by sending your contributions to the Morgan State University Foundation.

Endnotes

1. For an insightful interview of Dr. McKinney in his later years see Joan Morgan, “Teaching the Young Keeps Him Young—90 Year Old Dr. Richard McKinney of Morgan State Still Going Strong,” *Black Issues in Higher Education* (August 22, 1996).
2. “Morgan Scholar, Long-Time Professor and Author Dies,” Morgan State University Office of Communication and Public Relations, *University News Desk* (November 2, 2005). Also consult the fine electronic entry simply entitled Historymakers, “Richard McKinney” State University Office of Communications and Public Relations Morgan State University Relations.
3. After graduating from Bates College, Benjamin Mays applied to Newton and he was denied admission because he was a Black person. Mays went on to earn the Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1935. See “Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship, Biography of Dr. Benjamin E. Mays,” <http://www.seo.harvard.edu/resprog/maysbio.html>. The race-based admissions policy at Newton was instituted by President George Horr in 1913. All records seem to indicate that this policy terminated at the end of his tenure as president in 1925, which would have been five years after Mays graduated from Bates. I want to thank Ms. Diana Yount of the Archives and Special Collections of Andover Newton Seminary for providing me with this information. John Hope Franklin, *George Washington Williams, A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). Also read Earl E. Thorpe, *Black Historians; A Critique* (New York, Morrow, 1971).
4. Richard I. McKinney. “Religion in Negro Colleges” *Journal of Negro Education* V. 13, n. 4. (Autumn, 1944). Charles Leander Hill. “The Role of Religion in Higher Education.” Undated manuscript in Folder 39 of the Charles Leander Hill Collection at Wilberforce University. Also consult John H. McClendon III, “Charles Leander Hill: Philosopher and Theologian,” *The A.M.E. Church Review* V.CXIX, n. 390 (April-June 2003). Willis J. King. “Personalism and Race.” In *Personalism in Theology: A Symposium in Honor of Albert Cornelius Knudson*, edited by Edgar S. Brightman (Boston: Boston University Press, 1943). Also see Robert F. Herrington, “Bishop Willis J. King,” *Journal of the Louisiana Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church* (1977).
5. John H. McClendon III. “My Tribute to a Teacher, Mentor, Philosopher, and Friend: Dr. Francis A. Thomas (March 16, 1913 to September 17, 2001),” *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* V.3, n. 1 (Fall 2003). John H. McClendon III. “The African American Philosopher and Academic Philosophy: On the Problem of Historical Interpretation,” *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* V. 4, n. 1 (Fall 2004).
6. Along with McKinney, Kelsey was also both a Morehouse and Newton graduate. See the biographical note, George D.

Kelsey Collection at Drew University. On Cook consult chapter 13, 'Joyce Mitchell Cook'. In *African American Philosophers, 17 Conversations*, edited by George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 1998).

7. On Bouchet, see Caldwell Titcomb, "The Earliest Members of Phi Beta Kappa," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 33. (Autumn, 2001). Garry L. Reeder, "The History of Blacks at Yale University," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 26 (Winter, 1999-2000).
8. Please see "Morgan Scholar, Long-Time Professor and Author Dies." "Richard McKinney" webmaster@thehistorymaker.com. Samuel E. Gandy, ed., *Common Ground, Essays in Honor of Howard Thurman on the Occasion of his Seventy-Fifth Birthday, November 18, 1975* (Washington, DC: Hoffman Press, 1976).
9. "Transcript of interview with Ancella Bickley for the film 'West Virginia'," *WV History Film Project* (West Virginia Division of Culture and History).
10. Dawn Raines Burke. *Storer College: A Hope for Redemption in the Shadow of Slavery* (Doctoral Dissertation: Virginia Polytechnic and State University, 2004) 344, 351-53. McKinney served on Dawn Raines Burke dissertation committee.
11. Dawn Raines Burke. *Storer College*, pp. 352-53. "Morgan Scholar, Long-Time Professor and Author Dies."
12. The quote from McKinney can be found in Marc Bailes, "Storer College: Storer College Room Historic Exhibit Unveiled," *Martinsburg Journal* (February 25, 1996).
13. See "The Tradition of White Presidents at Black Colleges," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 16, (Summer 1997).
14. McKinney was not just interested in Johnson, but he wrote about other Black ministers as educator/leaders within the framework of the Black Church. See Richard I. McKinney, "The Black Church: Its Development and Present Impact," *Harvard Theological Review* V. 64, n.4. (October, 1971).
15. T. Ross. "William T. Fontaine 1909-1968," Memorial Minutes, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 43. (1969-1970), 200-202. Marc M. Moreland's dissertation topic was *The Theory and Problem of Liberty in New England, 1636-1700*, also see his *The Tolono Station and Beyond* (Boston: Christopher Publishing Co., 1970).
16. The reader should please consult the following electronic sources, "Richard McKinney" webmaster@thehistorymakers.com. On McKinney lecturing just before his death see the Andover Newton newsletter, *Andover Newton Alumni/ae E-News* (December 22, 2005) <http://www.ants.edu/alumnews/alumnews12-16-05.htm>.
17. Richard I. McKinney. "Existentialist Ethics and Protest Movement," *Journal of Religious Thought* V. 22, n. 2. (1965-1966). Joan Morgan, "Teaching the Young Keeps Him Young—90 Year Old Dr. Richard McKinney of Morgan State Still Going Strong."

BOOK REVIEW

Democracy vs. Empire: Cornel West's Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism

Cornel West (The Penguin Press HC, 2004). 240 pages. ISBN: 1594200297

Reviewed by Robert E. Birt
Morgan State University

Dr. Cornel West's book *Democracy Matters* is, though steeped in philosophical thought, much more a work of cultural criticism and moral critique than of systematic philosophy. Written more in the manner of the man of letters than the academician, its narrative voice is that of an American moralist, imbued with Christian and socialist sensibilities. The subtitle—*Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*—may suggest a Marxian perspective, and West's intellectual itinerary has involved an intimate, complex, and conflicted encounter with Marx. Yet the reader will not find the intricate institutional analysis and structural critique of imperialism as a *system* that is so characteristic of the Marxist tradition.

So, what we find is not a formal treatise but a critical narrative echoing prophetic cadences reminiscent of the Old Testament, Dr. Martin L. King, Jr., and the black churchly tradition of sacred rhetoric. In this respect, West's own rhetoric reflects his commitment to his deeply cherished "prophetic" Christianity. There is a somber optimism in West's new book. *Democracy Matters* is an eloquent paean to America's "deep democratic tradition," and a somber jeremiad lamenting the erosion of "democratic energies" by the corrosive power of a "market-driven" empire. But far from being a mere sermon, *Democracy Matters* is the *critical* narrative of an African-American philosopher who favors the Socratic spirit of critical inquiry as a force essential to the renewal of the democratic spirit. West seeks to employ this critical spirit in union with the voice of prophetic witness and the spirit of a tragicomic sense of hope as part of his critique of racism, economic injustice, militarism, and the nihilistic spirit of profiteering imperialism.

One quickly finds within *Democracy Matters* a certain continuity of themes (and manners of addressing them) that ties this book to earlier works. This is apparent in the first chapter wherein West introduces most of the central concerns which the book will address. West specifically identifies *Democracy Matters* as a sequel to his 1993 book *Race Matters*. In that earlier book he explored and sought to demystify race, "racial reasoning" (as opposed to "moral reasoning"), white supremacy, and "nihilism" as a "disease of the soul" in Black America.¹ He now insists that the pivotal link between these two books is a concern for the future of democracy. *Race Matters* sought to spark a national conversation on "the ways in which a vicious legacy of white supremacy contributes to the arrested development of American democracy."² Analogously, *Democracy Matters* will attempt a critical look "at the waning of democratic energies in our present age of American empire." For West believes that the "rise of an ugly imperialism has been aided by an unholy alliance of plutocratic elites and the Christian Right, and also by a massive disaffection of many voters who see little difference between two corrupted parties, with blacks being taken for granted by the Democrats, and with the deep disaffection of youth."³ In short, there is a shift of emphasis from

racism to imperialism (though racism remains central) as the primary antithesis to democracy.

Does this apparent shift of emphasis from racism to imperialism imply that race matters less? Does class or economic forces take priority over race? That is a view long common within much of the Left, and one not exactly foreign to West's own thinking. As early as *Prophecy Deliverance* (1982), West writes that "racial status contributes greatly to black oppression" and that "class position contributes more than racial status to basic forms of powerlessness in America."⁴ Yet there's a delicate tension. Imperialism is "market-driven" but also profoundly racist. And its racism is no mere accidental feature. In fact, West writes in his chapter on American nihilism that the "pursuit of empire and racist oppressions and exclusions have been intimately interlinked."⁵ Far from declining in significance, race "is the *crucial intersecting point* where democratic energies clash with American imperial realities...."⁶ Moreover, West holds that the "fight for democracy has ever been one against the oppressive and racist corruptions of empire."⁷ When West identifies "the dismantling of empire and the deepening of democracy"⁸ as the "great dramatic battle of the twenty first century" it may seem that empire has replaced the color line which W.E.B. Du Bois once saw as the problem of the 20th century. But democracy cannot triumph in America without the defeat of imperialism, and American imperialism cannot be defeated without the defeat of American racism. Hence race matters are of vital importance to democratic life as West conceives it. And the color line remains an essential problem of the 21st century.

But for West the market, with its growing dominance—its virtual devouring of American social, political, and cultural life—is the primary culprit undermining democratic energies. The market is the engine of empire and its militarist adventures abroad. The same market forces undermine democratic life at home. "In our market-driven empire," West argues, "elite salesmanship to the demos has taken the place of genuine democratic leadership."⁹ The tendency is to turn the citizenry into mere consumers, and the demos into passive recipients of stupefying amusements. Citizens largely abandon political life as they see political leadership confined to Republican and Democratic parties, both of which are subservient to corporate money and interests. But what becomes of democracy when the demos are disaffected? Perhaps it shrivels and dies as the people become, in West's favored Emersonian expression, a comatose nation of "sleepwalkers."

Yet for West the disaffection of the citizenry, though dangerous, is not the greatest danger to democratic life in America. He thinks the greatest dangers are the three "anti-democratic dogmas" of "free market fundamentalism," "aggressive militarism," and "escalating authoritarianism."¹⁰ Free market fundamentalism, which West likens to religious fundamentalism, "makes an idol of money and a fetish of wealth."¹¹ The capitalist market—Holy Grail of the Right—takes on all the mystical qualities of sacredness. Major corporations "are delegated magical powers of salvation rather than relegated to democratic scrutiny concerning both the ethics of their business practices and their treatment of workers."¹² Free market fundamentalism, whose ethos pervades both Democratic and Republican parties, promotes gross polarization of wealth and a vision of life which glamorizes narcissism, materialistic gain, and a "pursuit of narrow individualistic preoccupations," which "trivializes the concern for public interest."¹³ By valuing profit over the common good and consumerism over civic consciousness, the fundamentalism of the market devalues community and drains the democratic spirit from American society.

Aggressive militarism, like free market fundamentalism, is viewed by West as a kind of obscene idolatry. And the dangerous policy of preemptive strike against potential enemies is only a part of it. The militarist dogma as described by West seems to have quasi-religious qualities. For it "posits military might as *salvific* in a world in which he who has the most and biggest weapons is the most *moral* and masculine, hence worthy of policing others."¹⁴ This militarism allows elites to sacrifice in foreign adventures thousands of American soldiers who are mainly working class and youth of color. It takes the form of unilateral invasions and occupation of other countries, and also the shunning of international cooperation. And there is a severe domestic cost as well. At home the militarist dogma expands police powers, augments the prison-industrial complex, and legitimates unchecked male power and violence at home and in the workplace. In short, militarism deepens or unleashes authoritarian forces and tendencies raging within the body of the republic.

West sees "escalating authoritarianism" as rooted not only in a fear of terrorism but in "our traditional fear of too many liberties, and our deep distrust of one another."¹⁵ By escalating authoritarianism, West seems to mean a curtailing or "repression of our hard-won rights and hard-fought liberties." The Patriot Act, which has been supported by America's Supreme Court, is only a part of the picture. For that piece of repressive legislation coincides with a general "loosening of legal protection" of civil liberties and a "slow closing of meaningful access to the oversight of governmental activities" in the name of a security that trumps liberty. The already mentioned expansion of prisons and police powers is perhaps the most obvious indication of growing authoritarianism. But even the "media," which since the Enlightenment has been seen as an essential bulwark of freedom, has become a market-driven corporate institution that feeds authoritarianism by narrowing the range of political dialogue. West fears that we are even losing the value of dialogue "in the name of sheer force of naked power."¹⁶ But this substitution of force for dialogue is for West, as for classical Greeks who called it tyranny, the "classic triumph of authoritarianism" over the kind of critical questioning essential to democratic life.

Yet, on a more optimistic note, West claims that there is a deep and abiding love of democracy among the American people. There is a "deep democratic tradition" which is also a tradition of critique and resistance to American imperialism and authoritarianism. In opposition to the three anti-democratic dogmas, there are three vital traditions that fuel democratic energies. There is the Socratic tradition of critical inquiry invented and bequeathed by the Greeks—a tradition emphasizing reflective self-examination and critical questioning of authority and dogma. There is the tradition of prophetic witness and commitment to justice for all humankind inherited from the ancient Hebrews, and foundational to the Christian and Muslim faiths as well as the Jewish. Finally, there is the tragicomic sense of hope, the ability "to laugh and retain a sense of life's joy—to preserve hope even while staring in the face of hate and hypocrisy—as against falling into the nihilism of paralyzing despair."¹⁷ For West the profoundest expression of tragicomic hope is found in "wrenchingly honest yet compassionate voices of the black freedom movement," and in African-American blues and jazz. Thus, while many Western cultural critics have esteemed Hebraism and Hellenism as foundational to Western civilization and democracy, West emphasizes the African or African-American pillars of the democratic tradition.

The democratic value of the Socratic tradition lies in its tendency to empower citizens "in the face of elite manipulations

and lies....” Socratic questioning calls forth “relentless self-examination and critique of institutions of authority, motivated by an endless quest for intellectual integrity and moral consistency.” For West, the Socratic spirit expresses itself in “fearless speech” that “unsettles, unnerves and unhouses people from their uncritical sleepwalking.”¹⁸ West sees the Socratic spirit as implicitly democratic and the dialogical form of discussion as a deeply democratic form of discourse. And this is despite Plato’s use (born of fear of the masses) of this “essentially democratic genre for antidemocratic ends” and the furtherance of “aristocratic conclusions.”¹⁹ The Socratic praxis of critical questioning and dialogue is “predicated on the capacity of all people...to engage in a critique of and resistance to the corruptions of mind, soul and society.”²⁰ This critical questioning spirit is seen by West as part of America’s deep democratic tradition, a democratic force essential to our resistance to the deceptive sophistry of imperial elites and the corporate media.

West sees the prophetic tradition as a democratically valuable force in the face of the callous indifference to the suffering wrought by American imperialism. The prophetic tradition, a Jewish invention inherited from the Old Testament, is a tradition of commitment to justice for an oppressed people. This tradition, a vital part of the legacy of Islam and Christianity, has been especially prominent in African-American religion since slavery. One easily recalls James Baldwin’s observation that the “more devout Negro considers that he is a Jew, in bondage to a hard taskmaster and waiting for a Moses to lead him out of Egypt. The hymns, the texts, the most favored legends of the devout Negro are all Old Testament....”²¹ What is important for West is that prophetic witness does not focus solely on personal morality and individual salvation. Rather, it calls attention to the causes of “unjustified suffering and unnecessary social misery.” Prophetic witness, as West interprets it, “highlights personal and *institutional* evil,” including the evil of indifference to such evils. And it does not countenance “individual conversions that precludes collective insurgency.”²² Thus it is hardly surprising that West esteems most of all the life and vocation of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose leadership (like the Movement he led) resounded with the language and themes of prophetic witness and a message of deliverance—one that “should inform and embolden us in revitalizing our democratic fires.”²³

The tragicomic spirit is vital to democratic life insofar as it is a kind of spiritual armor against the temptations of a “cynical and disillusioned acquiescence to the status quo.” Tragicomic hope is a “profound attitude toward life,” which West thinks discernible in works of artistic genius from various lands and times. But in America it has been most powerfully expressed in the black invention of blues and jazz. What West calls the “blues sensibility” (a black interpretation of tragicomic hope) is an expression of “righteous indignation with a smile and deep inner pain without bitterness or revenge.”²⁴ Indeed, West thinks that the black American interpretation of tragicomic hope in the face of dehumanizing oppression and hatred “is the only kind of hope that has any kind of maturity in a world of overwhelming barbarity.”²⁵ The barbarity against which tragicomic hope steels the soul is found not only in the form of physical violence but also a certain spiritual emptiness of life—an emptiness or meaninglessness, which West often calls nihilism. West regards the tragicomic hope expressed in the blues to be “a great democratic contribution of black people to world history.” Its essence is “to stare painful truths in the face and persevere without cynicism or pessimism.”²⁶

A number of questions come to mind concerning the three “traditions” West deems so vital to the quest for democracy. How well can the Socratic, prophetic, and tragicomic

traditions work in unison? Do their varying perspectives imply different—perhaps conflicted—readings of the meaning(s) of democracy and social justice? One surmises that West desires a synthesis. Is such a synthesis possible or likely? For example, can the prophetic voice thundering, “Thus saith the Lord!” in demanding that we love mercy and do justice sing in harmony with the critical Socratic voice which queries “Tell me friend, what is Justice?” Perhaps both voices can challenge social injustice and oppression. But how well can they abide with each other? And do they engender reconcilable or antithetical visions of justice? Can the moral fervor of the prophet live with the critical Socratic spirit? Can the inquiring, critical spirit abide the unswerving righteousness of the prophet? One wonders what becomes of the democratic project as conceived by West if the prophetic and Socratic traditions prove incapable of a long-term union. Is it perhaps the apparent *unity* of the prophetic and Socratic traditions in the life and work of Dr. King that elicits so much of West’s esteem, inducing him to describe Dr. King as “the major American prophet” of the twentieth century?²⁷

And how well does tragicomic hope, so movingly expressed in blues and jazz, harmonize with the prophetic and critical spirit? Perhaps West hears a blue note in the heart of Socratic irony.²⁸ Likening tragicomic hope to laughter, dance, and music, Cornel West describes it as “a form of elemental freedom that cannot be eliminated or snuffed out by any elite power.”²⁹ Perhaps he finds this subversive humor and “elemental freedom” in the critical spirit symbolized by Socrates. Yet West writes that “it has always bothered me that Socrates never cries—never sheds a tear.” And he finds woefully insufficient a Socratic rationalism which “refuses to connect noble self-mastery to a heartfelt solidarity with the agony and anguish of oppressed peoples.”³⁰ The critical temper, with its sunny disposition, isn’t always sensitive to the sorrows of the oppressed. But can we imagine the blues without sorrow—without “the guttural cries and silent tears of an oppressed people”?³¹ Surely the tragicomic in blues and jazz embraces both the joys and sorrows of existence. But how well can the tragicomic and the Socratic embrace each other?

Perhaps a smoother unity is possible between tragicomic hope and prophetic witness. Both give voice to the “guttural cries” and “silent tears” of the oppressed. Both live through forms of cultural expression native to America generally, and Black America in particular. Both probably have their greatest expressions in cultural forms invented by African-Americans. If for West the finest expression of tragicomic hope is in Black American jazz and blues, then perhaps the mightiest expression of the prophetic is in some African-American sermons and in the “sorrow songs” so beloved by DuBois.³² And though West speaks more specifically of *tragicomic hope*, the theme of hope also resides in a prophetic witness that prophesies deliverance. The blues-saturated poet Langston Hughes wrote that “The blues are sad songs, but with an undercurrent of hope and determination in them.”³³ And DuBois wrote of the sorrow songs that through all their sorrow, “there breathes hope...The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence.”³⁴ Is it the same (or similar) hopefulness in tragicomic and prophetic traditions? Can the blues and sorrow songs sing in harmony together?

We know that historically there has often been a tension. The same DuBois who celebrated the sorrow songs had no great love for jazz or blues. Among the devout the cultural expressions of what West calls tragicomic hope have often been regarded as ungodly. Whether this reveals an unhappy tendency intrinsic to the prophetic tradition or what West might see as a distortion of faith is certainly open to question. But should we not ask just how well the prophetic vision of “deliverance”

coincides with that irrepressible “elemental freedom,” which West attributes to the tragicomic spirit? Perhaps the subversive humor of tragicomic hope may even seem like obscene revelry from a prophetic perspective. The prophetic tradition may be nobly “fueled by a righteous indignation at injustice,”³⁵ and its heartfelt solidarity with the oppressed may be of inestimable value. Still we might at least wonder if that sacred tradition with its ethic of righteousness isn’t also a bit too severe for the nonconformist freedom of the blues sensibility, or too sacred for the worldly wisdom of the tragicomic tradition.

But more critical is the issue of how well that which West calls the “deep democratic tradition” (with its critical, prophetic, and tragicomic dimensions) can prevail against the antidemocratic corruptions of empire. In *Democracy Matters*, West claims that tragicomic hope is inextinguishable and “inexorably resilient and inescapably seductive....”³⁶ And we saw that for West the most powerful and eloquent American expressions of this hope (which shields the soul against the “nihilism of paralyzing despair”) is to be found in African-American jazz and blues. But does not the very idea of “nihilism” as West conceives it make doubtful the resiliency of tragicomic hope? In language echoing Soren Kierkegaard, West has spoken of the “murky waters of despair and dread that now flood the streets of black America.”³⁷ In *Race Matters*, West defined nihilism as “the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness and (most important) lovelessness.”³⁸ He also alleged there to be a “monumental *eclipse of hope*” and an “unprecedented collapse of meaning” in Black America—a seemingly existential alienation more threatening to the survival of black communities than even oppression and exploitation.³⁹ But how possible is it for a people suffering this *eclipse of hope* to also offer humanity a tragicomic vision with “the only kind of hope that has any kind of maturity in a world of overwhelming barbarity”? Do they offer the world a hope which they have themselves lost? Or has Cornel West shifted his position?

Far from abandoning the idea of nihilism propounded in *Race Matters*, he expands on it in *Democracy Matters*. While in *Race Matters* nihilism is described as a disease of the soul endangering the very existence of black communities, in *Democracy Matters* West describes it as a spiritual and social illness threatening the existence of democracy. The two emphases are not unrelated. Democracies are forms of community, and one can hardly have vital communities in our time without democratic life. West’s description of nihilism clearly pictures it as an antidemocratic force. The nihilistic blight of hopelessness and meaninglessness leads to “a numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition toward the world,” an attitude obviously antithetical to the civic awareness, public spirit, solidarity, and social consciousness essential to democratic community. In *Democracy Matters*, as in *Race Matters*, the ultimate source of that spiritual blight is the socially disintegrating forces of an increasingly hegemonic market and its acquisitive cutthroat morality. Nihilism is not a peculiarly “black thing.” Just as in *Race Matters* nihilism is said to be rooted in a market-induced shattering of black civil society and its values of mutual caring and solidarity, so now in *Democracy Matters* West sees the “saturation of market forces in American life” as generating “a market morality that undermines a sense of meaning and larger purpose.”⁴⁰ Throughout America cynicism replaces civic spirit, and political apathy and cultural escapism abounds. “The oppressive effect of the prevailing market moralities leads to a form of sleepwalking from womb to tomb,” in which the majority of citizens are “content to focus on private careers and be distracted with stimulating amusements.”⁴¹ And it should hardly surprise us that West considers the antidemocratic “dogma

of free market fundamentalism run amok” as an ideological bulwark of nihilism in America.

But the new emphasis in *Democracy Matters* is on what West calls “political nihilism,” which he sees as the “flipside of the nihilism of despair.” This “flipside” is the nihilism of privilege. It prevails when a void left by a “lack of belief in the power of principles” is filled “by the “will to power of the market” and the “drive to succeed at the cost of others rather than the drive to decency and integrity.”⁴² Commitment to truth gives way to “mendacity, manipulation and misinformation in the increasingly unprincipled political marketplace.” The hallmark of political nihilism (exemplified by President George Bush among others) is the public appeal to fear and greed. “A political nihilist” according to West, “is one who is not simply intoxicated with the exercise of power but also obsessed with stifling any criticism of that exercise of power.”⁴³

Political nihilism is the nihilism of the privileged and the powerful. West thinks that there are three forms of it: evangelical nihilism, paternalistic nihilism, and sentimental nihilism. Evangelical nihilism essentially amounts to the idea that might makes right, an attitude classically expressed by Thrasymachus in Plato’s *Republic*, and especially characteristic of an increasingly hawkish Republican Party or at least of President George Bush and his inner circle. Such nihilists tend to be militant and intolerant of dissenting views, drunk with power and grand delusions of American world dominance, and convinced that American might actually determines what is right.⁴⁴ Not only does American might seem to determine right for much of the conservative Republican Party elite, but it justifies refusal to listen to critics among America’s allies or even fellow citizens. Not only is Socratic questioning unwelcome, it is even regarded as unpatriotic and seditious. One can only wonder if West might not have better described this attitude as Machiavellian or (given West’s preferred allusion here) “Thrasymachean” rather than “evangelical.”

Paternalistic nihilism, which West thinks widespread among Democratic Party elites, is likened to the attitude of the Grand Inquisitor in Fyodor Dostoyevky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. The Inquisitor is well aware of the corruption and tyranny of the Church, but having no faith in the common people’s capacity to live up to the compassionate and egalitarian teachings of the Christ, he is convinced that the ecclesiastical system (with perhaps some minor tinkering reforms?) is the best of all possible worlds. Better to work within the status quo than to rock the boat in pursuit of some fundamental social change to which the people are not equal.⁴⁵ West believes that Democratic Party elites, like the Grand Inquisitor, are “paternalistic nihilists who have become ineffectual by having bought into the corruptions of a power-hungry system.”⁴⁶ Even if some of them really wish to serve more democratic purposes, they believe that a more radical fight for a truer democracy is futile.

Sentimental nihilism, West argues, corrupts the media culture as the other political nihilisms corrupt party politics. Media and news organizations ought to seek out truth, and to expose lies and manipulations of political and economic leaders. Instead, they offer as news what is in fact entertainment. They abandon their duty to act as watchdogs of public liberties and the common good of the Republic. Titillating reportage masquerades as news. West calls the purveyors of this kind of reporting “sentimental” nihilists because they are willing to evade or even “bludgeon” the truth or unpleasant and unpopular facts and stories in order to present an emotionally satisfying show. This, according to West, is “the dominance of sentiment over truth in order to build up market share.”⁴⁷ Again it is the force of the market that thwarts the prerogatives of democracy.

Yet some of the greatest dangers to democratic life come from the Christian faith so beloved by West. One can imagine what a burden this is on his democratic Christian conscience. It is not his deeply cherished prophetic tradition but a rightist authoritarian Christian fundamentalism whose influence most prevails in America today. To underscore its antithesis to the prophetic Christian tradition, West describes the Christian Right as “Constantinian” Christianity. Christianity began in ancient Judea as an egalitarian spiritual/social movement of the oppressed, which (to paraphrase its alleged founder) brought “glad tidings” to the poor, proclaimed release to captives, and sought to set at liberty those who were oppressed. The implicit subversiveness of its liberatory gospel provoked severe repression from the rulers of Rome. But when Roman emperor Constantine decided (for interested political reasons) to legalize Christianity in AD 313 and incorporate it into the Roman Empire, the egalitarian Christian movement became an authoritarian Church. It began to betray its prophetic commitment to the poor and oppressed. It became a bulwark of imperial power and a defender of elite privilege. This same betrayal of the liberatory prophetic tradition, this morally promiscuous upholding of power and privilege, West now sees at work in today’s right wing Christian movements. Here we may recall his concern expressed early on in *Democracy Matters* over the “unholy alliance of plutocratic elites and the Christian Right.” That unholy alliance is a Constantinian dispensation.

In part, fundamentalism is a response to nihilism, and in part a purveyor of it. It is a response to an “emptiness in our political culture,” which has “driven a surge of civically engaged religiosity” via the rise of the Christian Right. Its appeal may derive from “a desire to rise above the emptiness of what strikes its members as a depraved culture that has lost its moral rudder.”⁴⁸ It seeks to fill a spiritual void. Yet by its divisive intolerance it helps to create a void. Fundamentalism is militantly opposed to the tolerance and openness that is so essential to democratic life. West sees the politics of the Christian Right as “violating fundamental principles enshrined in the Constitution” and “providing cover and support for the imperialist aims of empire.”⁴⁹ He also thinks that the three antidemocratic dogmas—free market fundamentalism, aggressive militarism, escalating authoritarianism—which are so conducive to nihilism and which lead to “imperial devouring of democracy in America,” are often justified by the religious rhetoric of Christian fundamentalism. Yet Americans who easily discern the repressive nature of fundamentalisms in the Middle East are often oblivious to the anti-democratic character of Christian fundamentalism in America.

West regards the distinction between this Constantinian Christianity and Prophetic Christianity to be essential to the future of democracy in America. The struggle between an authoritarian tradition and a liberatory prophetic tradition is a struggle for the soul of America. The tension between these conflicting strains within Christianity suggests to him a crisis within Christian identity, which he describes as “religious schizophrenia.” It has existed, he believes, since the new dispensation of Constantine. Puritans who helped lay the basis for America’s resistance to British imperialism also enacted imperialistic subordination of Native Americans. Constantinian strains within American Christianity have defended such injustices as slavery, racial oppression of peoples of color, the subjection of women, persecution of gay people, imperial aggressions abroad, class privilege, and economic injustice at home—all in the name of the faith. Prophetic Christianity has been a democratic force. Its primary commitment is to the disinherited, to those who are (in Howard Thurman’s words) “people who stand with their backs against the wall.”⁵⁰ And prophetic Christians have often led such movements for social

justice as abolitionism, women’s suffrage, trade unionism, and the civil rights movements of the 1960s.⁵¹ Indeed, West thinks that the democratic experiment in America would have been “inconceivable without the fervor of Christians.”⁵²

But isn’t this fervor as likely to be repressive as insurgent, to be authoritarian as to be liberatory? “Constantinian” religious crusaders and persecutors of heretics were hardly less fervent than the heretics themselves and ecclesiastical establishments hardly less fervent than the prophetically inspired peasant insurrectionists during the German Peasant wars of the 1520s. Were not the genocidal wars against Native Americans often waged with unrelenting Christian fervor—with Puritans even imagining themselves as Hebrew children who (as in Joshua’s time) struck down the “heathen Indians” whom they likened to wicked Canaanites? Frederick Douglass noted that the most relentless slave drivers were usually the most fervent ones. Perhaps Constantinian tendencies are more deeply rooted in religious consciousness than West acknowledges—maybe as inherent to religion as the prophetic tendencies themselves.⁵³ Thus it is perhaps not surprising (nor altogether schizophrenic) that the fervent Puritans can prepare liberatory insurgency against British rule *and* impose imperialistic subjection upon Native Americans; that religious fervor can inspire revolutionary insurgencies of Nat Turner or John Brown and also the repressive violence of Edward Covey. And it is probably also not surprising that the prophetic fervor of the civil rights movement led by prophetic leaders like Dr. King is now superseded by fervent rightist fundamentalist movements, guided by the Jerry Falwells, Pat Robertsons, and other theocratic apologists of imperial power. Maybe there is but a thin line between fervor that takes a prophetic shape and fervor that takes on a Constantinian form.

But it is disconcertingly ironic that the prophetic tradition of the civil rights movement may have unwittingly helped to energize the Christian Right. West has described right wing fundamentalism as “civically engaged religiosity.” Could it be that the Right learned the power of such engagement from the powerful civically engaged religiosity of the prophetic freedom movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.? West is not the first to note that the politicizing of Christian fundamentalism “was a direct response to King’s prophetic Christian legacy” or that it began as a racist white backlash to that legacy. If anything, the success of Dr. King’s “democratic Christian-led movement” inspired the political activity of today’s “imperial Christians.” West observes that the “worldly engagement of King’s civil rights movement” inspired the Christian Right to “become more organized and to partner with the power elites of the American empire.”⁵⁴

More ominous still must be the possible decline of the black prophetic tradition itself. West claims that much of America’s prophetic Christianity stems from the black church tradition. And he fears that even the “black church is losing its prophetic fervor in the age of American empire.”⁵⁵ Apparently, the status and rewards of American empire are tempting to the faithful of all colors. Constantinian Christianity is making inroads even within the black church, and with widening class divisions within Black America one can only wonder how far this rightward shift may go—especially within churches of the black bourgeoisie. And West believes that if the “rewards and respectability” of American empire tempts the black church to betray its prophetic legacy, or to be seduced by that free market fundamentalism that makes an “idol of money and a fetish of wealth,” then the future of democratic aspirations in America will be severely imperiled.

Yet this calls to mind questions I raised earlier about the resiliency of West’s beloved “deep democratic tradition” (with its

prophetic, Socratic, and tragicomic dimensions) and its power to prevail against the antidemocratic corruptions of empire. How resilient and powerful is tragicomic hope if the black people who have given America her most powerful expressions of it are nonetheless afflicted or endangered as a people by a nihilistic blight of hopelessness and meaninglessness, and while America as a whole finds her civic spirit sapped by the political nihilism of privilege? Can the prophetic tradition that inspired King still play a liberatory role amidst the ascendancy of the Christian Right, and without its prophetic fervor mutating into the repressive zeal of Constantinian Christianity? And what becomes of the critical, Socratic spirit, which ought to provoke a *pris de conscience* in society, when the educated classes are so largely characterized by unimaginative academic specialists and an uncritical and conformist intelligentsia? It would be unreasonable to expect West or anyone else to definitively answer these questions. Yet these are issues that one must wrestle with if one embraces democracy and the deep democratic tradition as envisioned by West.

One thing that is striking about West's eloquent invocation of the deep democratic tradition is the special importance he attributes to democratic intellectuals. He claims that "democratic vigilance has been disproportionately expressed by artists, activists and intellectuals in American life."⁵⁶ They play a unique role in highlighting the "possibilities and difficulties of democratic individuality, democratic community and democratic society in America." Indeed West thinks that intellectuals "have been the *primary agents* of our deep democratic tradition."⁵⁷ He especially highlights Ralph Waldo Emerson as the "indisputable godfather" of the democratic tradition, and together with Herman Melville as one of its two "paradigmatic figures." Yet his encomium to American democratic intellectuals encompasses such luminaries as Walt Whitman, Eugene O'Neil, W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, John Coltrane, Lorraine Hansberry, and Toni Morrison. West describes his *Democracy Matters* as (at least in part) an Emersonian work, while praising esteemed black writers James Baldwin and Toni Morrison as, respectively, the most Emersonian and the most Melvillean of "our democratic intellectuals."

Now we need not abide the biases of anti-intellectuals, or the self-effacing attitudes of (bad) conscience stricken intellectuals, who belittle the contributions of intellectuals and the value of intellectual activity in democratic life. The critical, reflective spirit is essential to social freedom, and intellectuals have both a vocational and civic duty to defend it. But if intellectuals rather than the demos are the "primary agents" of the democratic tradition, how bright can be the future of the quest for democracy? It is to the extent that democratic values express the highest aspirations of the demos, and the common people become the strongest pillars of democratic traditions, that the hope for a more just and democratic future has force. Hence, we may want to question West about the role of popular organizations, grass roots movements and associations, and spokespersons thereof as agents of any real democratic tradition. We may wonder why Ralph Waldo Emerson, who, in *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, West numbers among the "highbrow cast of North American cultural critics,"⁵⁸ is more suitable as a "godfather" of the democratic tradition than perhaps a more radical (and radically *engaged*) plebeian intellectual like Tom Paine. And, of course, we may wonder how well an ethic of social commitment (indispensable to democratic intellectuals) can coincide with the inflated ethical individualism of Emersonian thought.

There is perhaps a perplexing irony (or peculiarity) in West's invocation of an Emersonian democratic tradition. *Democracy Matters* lauds Emerson for his support for John

Brown and his opposition to both the Fugitive Slave Act and the forcible removal of the Cherokees. Yet in *The American Evasion of Philosophy* West observed that "Emerson's conception of the worth and dignity of human personality is racially circumscribed."⁵⁹ Emerson not only rejected the idea of human equality—seeing it as "nothing more than a convenient hypothesis or an extravagant declamation"—but he was also inclined to speak of Black peoples in terms suggesting the subhuman: "The Monkey resembles Man, and the African degenerates to the likeness of the beast."⁶⁰ One wonders how honored James Baldwin would feel (if he read those words) to be deemed "the most Emersonian of American democratic intellectuals"?⁶¹ Is it not ironic that the most renowned of America's black public intellectuals sees his eloquent *Democracy Matters* as an Emersonian text?

If nothing else, we ought to ask whether Emersonian individualism is separable from Emersonian racism, and if the democratic tradition of which Emerson is deemed godfather is not also tainted by this racist blot. West once argued that Emerson's "ideal of the human person, though complex and profound, is inseparable from his understanding of race." Apparently, this ideal of the person tacitly assumes a racial hierarchy of personhood. West once wrote that race is central to Emerson's "understanding of the historical circumstances which shape human personality," and also "that this understanding can easily serve as a *defense of Anglo-Saxon imperialist domination of non-European lands and people.*"⁶² Yet in *Democracy Matters* he is taken as the godfather of a democratic tradition that is to aid us in "winning the fight against imperialism."

Of course, Cornel West also invokes the tradition of Melville, a tradition whose special focus is "the excoriating critique of American imperialist and racist impediments to democratic individuality, community and society."⁶³ At least the Melvillean strain within the democratic tradition "explicitly makes race and empire the two major limits of the American democratic experiment."⁶⁴ But maybe this is no longer enough. Perhaps the "two limits" to the American "democratic experiment" are inherent to that experiment. Anyone who is reasonably familiar with the *Federalist Papers* and American history must be aware that the architects of the Republic designed the system to inhibit the actualization of popular democracy. Plutocracy, twinned with racism, was built into the structure of the Republic and remains there despite the extension of the franchise (after generations of popular democratic struggle) to nearly the whole population.

West urges us to "reconnect with the energies of the deep democratic tradition in America and reignite them." But perhaps we must do more. Maybe we must also critically reevaluate the democratic tradition itself. To what extent are the "oppressive and racist exclusions of empire" harbored within the heart of the democratic tradition? America's cherished ideals of democratic freedom, despite the universalistic idiom in which they are expressed, were implicitly predicated on the unfreedom of excluded and degraded people. Toni Morrison notes that the idea of the "rights of man," which ideologically undergirded the republic since Washington and Jefferson, "is permanently allied with another seductive concept: the hierarchy of race."⁶⁵ Morrison even suggests that the idea of freedom is bound up with the practice of unfreedom. "The concept of freedom did not emerge in a vacuum," she writes. "Nothing *highlighted* freedom—if it did not in fact *create* it—like slavery."⁶⁶ If this is so, must we not radically reevaluate our deep democratic traditions and all the social and political practices and institutions so commonly called "American democracy"? Angela Davis once reasoned that "if the theory of freedom remains isolated from the practice of freedom or rather is contradicted in reality, then

this means that something must be wrong with the concept.”⁶⁷ If so, we must do more than reconnect with and reignite energies of our deep democratic traditions.

We must radically transform and reinvent them. We must go a bit further than West takes us.

Indeed, one wonders why he does not take us further. Too often West speaks loosely—almost conventionally—of “our democracy,” “American democracy,” or the “American democratic experiment.” Such expressions often obscure (though not intentionally) the fact that the democratic character of “our democracy” is deeply open to question. It is not a simple matter of defending the democratic experiment against an anti-democratic imperialism, but of critiquing and transcending the undemocratic character of an experiment rooted in imperialism. Imperialism is not alien to our republic. America has always been an imperial republic, and thus not unlike ancient Greek democracies and the Roman Republic. One recalls that the freedoms of those ancient democracies and republics were also predicated on the unfreedom of excluded and degraded peoples. Moreover, American imperialism endangers America’s civil liberties and may destroy the American republic even as ancient imperialisms help bring about the demise of Greek and Roman democracies.

But what if democracy as conceived and practiced in America—indeed in the West for the past 2,500 years—is predicated upon the predations of empire? Cornel West acknowledges this to be the case when he writes that “*the enslavement of Africans and the imperial expansion over indigenous peoples and their lands were undeniable preconditions for the possibility of American democracy*.” There could be no such thing as an experiment in American democracy without these racist and imperialist foundations.”⁶⁸ But is not the “democratic experiment” indelibly marked by its undemocratic and imperial foundations? Perhaps we must go beyond the limited form of democracy afforded by an imperial capitalist republic, and seek nothing less than the reinvention of democracy itself. Hard won rights must be defended, but limitations of such liberties must also be transcended. If democracy is to have a future at all, then we may have to seek and invent radical new forms of it. It may be that unless radical new forms of democracy are discovered and invented which preserve, transform, and transcend the limited formal freedom and equality (while overcoming *social* inequality and unfreedom) of the prevailing social order, there may be no future at all for any form of freedom or democracy. The “preservation” of democracy may mean the overcoming of democracy as we have known it, and the re-creation of democracy without the hierarchy of race, class, or gender that marks the present system.

Part of the value of *Democracy Matters* is that it offers reflections that at least suggest radical new democratic possibilities as part of its moral critique of imperialism and plutocracy. West does this eloquently by drawing upon cultural traditions of the American people, from the high brow works of literary art to popular cultural creations of Jazz, blues, and hip hop. But he talks of democracy in language that seems at times conventional, and he does not draw out the radical implications of his own analyses. Indeed, in contrast to the situation of Russian “democratic intellectual” Anton Chekhov, West writes that “our American context does not require that we try to get a democratic experiment off the ground (as he did); rather, we must sustain and refine ours before it falls to the ground.”⁶⁹ We might like him to question more radically the democratic character of our own “democratic experiment,” especially in light of the imperialist corruptions at its roots that he points out himself.

Yet West greatly differs from and is critical of those who simplistically equate the American status quo with the essence of democracy. He believes that democracy is “more a verb than a noun” and “is more a dynamic striving and collective movement than a static order or stationary status quo.” Far more than a system of governance, democracy is “a cultural way of being.”⁷⁰ In short, democracy is *praxis*—and a communal achievement rather than the idiocy of privatized life. If West does not radically critique undemocratic features of the republic, he does well in his impassioned moral critique of the antidemocratic corruptions of imperialism. For in doing so he is striking at one of the greatest threats to our beleaguered civil freedoms. His impassioned critiques of plutocracy, militarism, authoritarianism, market-induced nihilism, and the racist and exploitative predations of empire glows with the fervor of his deeply cherished prophetic tradition. As a moral critic of imperialism in a text more decidedly literary than academic, West might be more aptly described (given his own framing of the democratic tradition) a Melvillean than an Emersonian intellectual. For we recall that West names Melville as the one whose focus (like West’s) is the “excoriating critique” of American imperialism and racism, and that he designates as “Melvillean” that strain within the democratic tradition “which explicitly makes race and empire the two major limits of the American democratic experiment.” At a philosophical conference in Boston in 2004, Cornel West publicly raised with deep concern the question of whether any contemporary philosophers are addressing the antidemocratic dangers of imperialism. With the appearance of *Democracy Matters*, possibly West’s most eloquent book, we have at least one affirmative answer to that question.

Endnotes

1. Cornel West. *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 18.
2. Cornel West. *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 1-2.
3. *Ibid.*, 2.
4. Cornel West. *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 115.
5. *Democracy Matters*, 40.
6. *Ibid.*, 14. My italicization. Race and racism are distinguishable concepts and realities; and while West often seems to use the terms interchangeably, I do not presume that he is assuming a simple identity between them.
7. *Ibid.*, 15.
8. *Ibid.*, 22.
9. *Ibid.*, 3.
10. *Ibid.*, 3-8.
11. *Ibid.*, 158.
12. *Ibid.*, 3-4.
13. *Ibid.*, 4.
14. *Ibid.*, 5. My italics.
15. *Ibid.*, 6.
16. *Ibid.*, 7.
17. *Ibid.*, 16.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*, 210.
20. *Ibid.*, 17.
21. James Baldwin. *Notes of A Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 67. Though I’m not as sure as Baldwin that devout blacks identify so much with the biblical Jews, the prominence of Old Testament themes is obvious in black religious music and oratory, as is the persistence of prophetic longing and dreams of deliverance.

22. *Democracy Matters*, 17-18.
23. *Ibid.*, 19. People who are familiar with his writings may also notice that Dr. King had little patience with a “dry as dust religion” which professed concern for the salvation of human souls in the afterlife while sanctioning or ignoring social misery which “damned the souls of men” in this life.
24. *Ibid.*, 19.
25. *Ibid.*, 20.
26. *Ibid.*, 20-21.
27. Cornel West. *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 272. Of course, Dr. King directly invoked the examples of Isaiah and Socrates in his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail” as part of his critique of segregation and as moral justification for his campaign of civil disobedience. It is interesting that West does not very often allude to Malcolm X as a prophetic figure despite Malcolm’s practice of “prophetic witness” for justice as a Muslim minister, and his apprenticeship and practice of critique beginning with his intense studies in prison. Could it be that West feels less affinity these days with a so openly *revolutionary* prophetic figure?
28. At an address delivered at Morgan State University, I’ve heard West draw a parallel suggesting spiritual affinity between Socrates and Coltrane.
29. *Democracy Matters*, 217.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 213.
31. *Ibid.*
32. The “sorrow songs” is the name Dr. W. E. B. DuBois gave primarily to the spirituals and other religious music invented by the African-American people. Having their origins in the cultural life of the slave (and roots in African musical beginnings), DuBois saw the sorrow songs as the finest expression of Black America’s “gift of the spirit” and of the “spiritual strivings” of the Black people. DuBois’s most famous description of them appears in the last chapter of his *The Souls of Black Folk*, entitled “Of the Sorrow Songs.”
33. Quoted in Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 145.
34. W. E. B. DuBois. *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), 186.
35. *Democracy Matters*, 215.
36. *Ibid.*, 217. The italicization is mine.
37. *Race Matters*, 12.
38. *Ibid.*, 14.
39. *Ibid.*, 12 & 15. Yet it is remarkable that West sees this nihilism as a greater threat than oppression and exploitation since he identifies the growing hegemony of the market and market values over social life as the ultimate source of this nihilism. Isn’t this “nihilism” a particular feature of the *oppressiveness* of capitalism, or a form of superfluous social alienation induced by that system?
40. *Democracy Matters*, 27.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*, 28.
43. *Ibid.*, 29.
44. *Ibid.*, 30-31.
45. Actually it is freedom more so than (as West suggests) Christian virtues of compassion, humility and equality that the Inquisitor thinks most people incapable of. What Dostoyevky’s 16th century Inquisitor actually says to a newly returned Christ seeking to awaken the people is: “Thou wouldst go into the world, and art going with empty hands, with some promise of freedom which men in their simplicity and their natural unruliness cannot even understand, which they fear and dread—for nothing has ever been so unsupportable for a man and a human society than freedom.” But the point is well taken that since elites don’t believe in the capacity of the people for self-determination, the most that even the most generous can offer is working within a corrupt system and hoping to do some good (even when it involves deceiving people “for their own good”) within the limits of the status quo. For the quote from Dostoyevky’s Inquisitor, see: Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: The New American Library, 1957), 233.
46. *Democracy Matters*, 32.
47. *Ibid.*, 36.
48. *Ibid.*, 66.
49. *Ibid.*, 146.
50. Howard Thurman. *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 7 of Preface.
51. *Democracy Matters*, 149-52.
52. *Ibid.*, 149. One wonders why. Is it simply because America is too religious a country for democratic struggles to win popular support unless shrouded by the aura of religion?
53. While it may be true that the authoritarian tendencies within the Christian religion could not be so thoroughly developed before Constantine, there may well have been tendencies to be accommodating to the status quo long before then. Perhaps Jesus did proclaim release to captives and liberation to the oppressed. But who hasn’t heard of Paul’s counsels to wives to be submissive to their husbands, slaves obedient to their masters, and the Christian community to be obedient to the ruling authorities who are supposedly established by God? Maybe the very “otherworldliness” of religion carries the seeds of the “Constantinian” by disvaluing this life compared to the beyond, thus making struggle for justice (and defiance of unjust authority) a matter of secondary (or less) importance.
54. *Democracy Matters*, 164.
55. *Ibid.*, 158.
56. *Ibid.*, 67.
57. *Ibid.* My italics.
58. Cornel West. *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 11.
59. *Ibid.*, 34.
60. *Ibid.*, 28-29. There are numerous other comments in Emerson’s journals and other writings which express similar racist sentiments and conceptions. Time and space will not allow extensive reference to or discussion of them here.
61. *Democracy Matters*, 68.
62. *American Evasion of Philosophy*, 34. The italics are my own.
63. *Democracy Matters*, 86.
64. *Ibid.*
65. Toni Morrison. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 38.
66. *Ibid.* The italics are mine.
67. This quote is from a pre-published lecture given by Angela Davis in 1969. I am unsure whether the revised published version in Leonard Harris’s *Philosophy Born of Freedom* retains that statement.
68. *Democracy Matters*, 45.
69. *Democracy Matters*, 102.
70. *Democracy Matters*, 68.