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**Living and Loving Out Loud: A Conversation with Cornel West
The Substance of Truth
By Tolu Olorunda
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"When arrested, threatened, or persecuted, I give myself permission to be full of righteous indignation and moral outrage but I try to never allow righteous indignation to degenerate into bitter revenge, or let moral outrage become hateful anger. ... I retain a painful simile on my face even as I respond to the undeniable hurt with intense ethical energy."

-West, Cornel. [Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud, A Memoir](#). New York: Smiley Books, 2009, p. 125.

Many know him as The Scholar, The Philosopher, The Teacher and, even, The Preacher. But when it's all said and done, he would rather be referred to simply as - "a cracked vessel named West."

For more than three decades now, Dr. Cornel West's work has found refuge in the hearts of millions who've exposed themselves to his many writings on Race, Culture, Media, Democracy, Empire, Religion, Morality, Philosophy, and Music.

In these years, he's been largely regarded one of America's foremost public minds on contemporary issues, for challenging readers and thinkers alike to engage the world with a passion for justice and a thirst for fairness.

He's written and edited more than 20 books; but not until now did he decide to "reflect on my own life, on the dark precincts of my own soul." His latest book, [*Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud, A Memoir*](#), is a brave attempt in that direction.

I recently had the honor of engaging Dr. West in a wide-ranging dialogue on some of the personal, professional, and prophetic issues raised in his memoir:

Brother West, how have you been, Sir?

I've been on the run, but it's a blessing to talk to you.

You've written and edited many books, but never came close enough to an autobiographical chronicle. How did *Brother West* come to be?

Well, my dear Brother Tavis Smiley asked me to think about writing about my life. I never really had the time to just sit back and reflect on my own life, on the dark precincts of my own soul. And so, I said, *that's a wonderful idea*. And writing about your life is just life-transforming, because you have to examine some things that you haven't looked at for too long.

And did you ever feel some resentment at having to air out so much of your personal story - which contains almost as many narratives of failure as it does victory?

You feel kind of naked - existentially naked, Brother. Definitely. But if you figure you can help somebody, touch somebody's life, help them deal with some of the *funk* in their life (we all got funk in our life), and help people cultivate the capacity to love and to think more critically and have hope, then I figure it can be of use to somebody - because the fundamental aim is to help somebody.

What does it mean to *live and love out loud*? And what are the consequences involved as opposed to, say, doing it away from the scrutinizing attention of the dominant public?

I think, anytime you do anything out loud - whether live or love - you're subject to being misunderstood and misconstrued, and so, you want to be able to speak your truth in a humble manner, and stand in your truth - which means willing to pay a cost and make a sacrifice, and, at the same time, open up enough to learn from others. The book, in a certain sense, is about the power of love and education.

From family, church, coaches, to athletic teachers, all the love that I've [received] just makes me saturated in love. And, at the same time, [using] education in such a way that it can touch souls, unsettle minds, and awaken hearts. That's really what it's all about.

You posed a question: "[I]s it possible to love oppressed people and not be a fanatic for fairness?"

Anytime you love folk - especially poor folk, especially Black people - you cannot but be a fanatic for fairness; you cannot but be somebody who is just obsessed with fairness.

To put it another way: If you really love folk, you despise the fact that they've been treated unfairly. You can't help yourself: You got to say something, you got to write something.

In the book, you write: "... [B]y giving one's heart and soul to uplift others through one's art, one's vocation, voice and vision are fulfilled." The first connection I made with that was Tolstoy, who wrote in *Family Happiness*: "... [I]n life there is only one certain happiness - living for others." How has that shaped your life ministry?

Well, I learned that in Shiloh Baptist Church [Sacramento, CA]. And Tolstoy had that same insight. The greatest joy that you [can] have in life is the joy of loving others and serving others - beginning with your mama, your kids, your friends, your spouses, and whomever. And to be able to allow that joy to be connected to your larger vocation in life - reading, writing and so forth - and still be able to love and serve others - there's nothing like it.

And that's why my life is so blessed. And that's why, you know, that last chapter is all about gratitude.

Yes. I love that chapter.

Put it this way: The aristocrat of the attitude is gratitude. There's nothing like it. If you have enough gratitude in your soul, it doesn't leave much room for your ego to operate. It's hard to be egoistic when you're praising somebody else.

Three seminal texts you've written are *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, *Race Matters*, and *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*. Tying all three together, how is Philosophy connected to the ways in which our society considers Race and carries out its political will - for good or bad?

Well, I think Philosophy - Phi-lo-so-phy - itself ought to lead one into a promotion of love and justice. And when you talk about Race, you're talking about the ways in which Black people have tried to fight for fairness and justice in the face of White Supremacy.

And so, for me, Philosophy - *the love of wisdom* - embraces any attempt to transform the world from an unjust system to a just one.

And coming from a *Blues People* - philosophy goes to school with both poetry and music, because the music itself is also a quest for wisdom, the music itself is also a form of resisting injustice, the music itself is a way of affirming our humanity and enabling us to straighten our backs and step forward and mobilize.

On the topic of music, you've released three Hip-Hop/Spoken Word albums (*Sketches of My Culture*, *Street Knowledge*, and *Never Forget: A Journey of Revelations*). What is curious, though, is that you're actually a pioneer in the field of Hip-Hop studies. As far back as 1982, when many scholars your age and status were convinced Hip-Hop wasn't an art-form, you were arguing for legitimacy and support from the older generation, making the connections between this emerging phenomenon and other great works of Afro-American

art that had come before, and gave birth to, it. What did you see so far back as 1982 that some of your peers lacked the insight and foresight to see?

Well, that's a good question. I mean, part of it is just loving young folk, loving young Black brothers and sisters, and always [being] concerned about how they're expressing themselves, always trying to learn from them, getting into their world, and trying to see what they're thinking, how they're feeling, and how they're going about redefining reality.

As much as I love Curtis Mayfield, Al Green, and Aretha Franklin, that's my generation. And the Hip-Hop generation built on [that tradition]; but it is very different from Curtis, Smokey [Robinson], Stevie [Wonder], and the others.

So, in that sense, it was just a matter of the love spilling over. That's what [I was trying to tell Larry Summers](#). [He's saying], *You won't have nothing to do with Hip-Hop!* [And I'm saying], *Oh, no. You won't stand in the way of my love for young brothers and sisters, because Harvard is subordinate to my love for [them] any day of the year.*

I'm not *anti-Harvard*, but I just don't let anything stand in the way of my love for the folk. And so, [in 1982], when I was American correspondent for *Le Monde diplomatique*, I really wanted the world to know that another wave of Black artistic genius and Black artistic talent was taking a new form. And Hip-Hop was that new form.

And I wanted the young folk to know that they are part of a tradition and continuum, because Black folk have been speaking, and teaching, and preaching, and engaging in linguistic virtuosity on street corners for a long time. They [Hip-Hop pioneers] weren't the first ones, but they were finding their voices in a new way - with the sampling, the technology, and so forth.

And so, I wrote those early essays; but, of course, by the time a genius like Michael Eric Dyson hit it, he took it to a whole new level. And now, thank God we've got Tricia Rose and the other folk who've created a whole Hip-Hop studies; and they're far deeper and far more sophisticated than I am.

Last year, [I interviewed you](#) around this time, and, on the question of political audacity and statesmanship, referring to then-candidate Obama, you said, "He's met it enough for me to support him, but he hasn't met it enough for me not to criticize him." In the last one year, what has changed and hasn't changed vis-à-vis your assessment of the new Obama presidency and administration - thus far?

On the one hand, I still love the Brother - I support him when he's right. I want to make sure he's protected from some of these right-wing folk or *sick* White brothers and sisters who're almost trying to kill him. And that's very important.

On the other hand, I'm profoundly disappointed. When I look at his economic team, I see he's been seduced by Wall Street - bringing in [Larry] Summers and Timothy [Geithner]. These folk are the same deregulators that got us in trouble, and [he] thinks, somehow, they've changed their mind? But, for them, poor folk have always been an afterthought. They've never been concerned about working people.

[With] the bailout, they gave \$750 billion to Wall Street, but not a penny to poor people? As though that's how you bring recovery. He [President Obama] just has the wrong priority.

I was very disappointed when he brought them in; same is true in foreign policy. You look at Susan Rice and [Richard] Holbrooke - these are the same recycled neo-Clintonites that were running things in the '90s. And I'm looking for a *Change*.

You know, I see him reassuring the establishment, instead of trying to put pressure on it in a way that would make working people and poor people more central.

And, you know, with the last 8 years, we had probably the most vicious form of neo-liberalism emerge.

Absolutely.

Just a free-market fundamentalist sensibility -

Unregulated, unfettered; supported by Summers and Geithner. Geithner is running the New York Federal Reserve; Summers is deregulating derivatives before he leaves the Clinton White House. So, it just amazes me how quickly my dear Brother Obama was seduced and mesmerized by these folk.

It's just an amazing thing.

And what happens is, you get embraced by the establishment folk - like the [Nobel Peace Prize] Award today - God bless the Brother - for something that you know, deep down, you don't really deserve. You know what I mean?

Yes.

It's like, *wait a minute - they're really overdoing this thing!* [He should have confessed], "I'm not really in the same ballpark as Martin and Mandela." Also, it's not as though they don't really *expect* something from [him].

So, I do want to celebrate with the Brother, because, a lot of times, these *prizes* are really more for your parents than for you, because they're the ones who loved you [into greatness]. But what happens is that, now, okay, you're gonna have a Peace Prize? You're gonna be a War president with a Peace Prize?

How are you going to work that out?

You have unemployment escalating - while you're getting a Peace Prize? Peace is tied to justice. So, he's going to feel some pressure, and that might be a wonderful thing, because I do want to put *loving pressure* on the Brother - in the name of poor and working people.

And what must we do - poor and working people - to retain a sense of dignity while holding on to the sacrifices of those who came before us?

Yes, yes. Well, one thing is: We've got to tell folk the truth. Part of the problem is that, as you know, in the first year [of his presidency], it's been hard to engage in principled

criticism of the Obama administration in the Black community, because he's got a lot of play-hating from the right-wing, and we've got to fight that - ad hominem attacks. Some of it is racist - outright. But there have to be critiques from the other side concerned about poor people, or people will get all confused.

What are your thoughts on the recent [caught-on-tape death](#) of the young Brother, Derrion Albert, especially in light of the violent tendencies that framed part of your childhood? And do you share any worries that, unlike your loving parents, some adults in our communities are increasingly giving voice to draconian, militarized measures to reform misbehaving youth of color?

Well, it's a good question - in terms of response. We know that that kind of gangster activity has been out of control for a long time in the Black community. We have the same [problem] in Philadelphia, parts of New York, LA, and so forth. It's also true that this becomes some sort of wake-up call for some people who haven't been following for a good while.

And I don't think we should [adopt] any kind of draconian measures. I want to make it very clear: We have to give a priority to young people, which means [we ask ourselves], "Are we going to spend \$4 billion-a-day in Afghanistan, but have no money for education?" [Young people] know that's low priority. Also, there's a need for gun control - which is so fundamental - because these guns are *too* available.

And we know there's got to be a way to cut off the drugs from reaching them. But, most importantly, there's got to be an alternative for the young folk; which means, we say, "you all are a major priority, so we're going to give you the safest streets, the best schools, all kinds of athletic activities, and studios so you can go in and make your own records."

After you do that, there's always going to be some gangsters - because gangsters come in all colors - but there'll be so fewer young people who opt for gangster activity.

But, as you know, some of our parents, unlike yours, don't really understand that the best way to reform misguided minds is not to beat their brains out, but to push them in a spiritual direction with education.

Yes, yes. I do believe that education ought to be supplemented by some kind of spiritual dimension. I speak as a Christian, but I don't believe in imposing my own [views]. I think that the Muslims can do it. You can go to the Synagogues to do it. You can go to the Buddhist Temple and do it. You can be secular but have your own spirituality - in terms of love, compassion, the arts, music, and so forth. But there has to be a spiritual dimension in addition to the kind of mainstream education.

But the problem is you don't want just the spiritual without the deeper education, either. They go hand-in-hand.

Deadly prostate cancer couldn't stop you. What *can* stop you?

Oh shoot, Brother. I can get stung by a mosquito; as soon as Malaria sets in, I'll be a dead Negro. But the important thing is that death would never rob me of the joy and

love that I've tried to provide to people.

And when all is said and done, Dr. West, what legacy would you like to see left behind for your kids, for your family, for the next generation?

Just a simple thing, Brother: A cracked vessel named West who tried to love folk and serve folk and smile because he was part of a great tradition rooted in the West family, Shiloh Baptist Church, the Black Freedom Movement; and tried to be a Bluesman in the life of the mind and a Jazz mind in the world of ideas.

It's been a great honor having you, Brother West.

Love you much. Stay strong.

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