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## Prophetic Imagination: Confronting The New Jim Crow & Income Inequality in America

Cornel West

*Union Theological Seminary*, [mcole@uts.columbia.edu](mailto:mcole@uts.columbia.edu)

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## **Erratum**

A new version adhering to APA guidelines replaced the original version on 12/01/2015.

**Prophetic Imagination:  
Confronting The New Jim Crow & Income Inequality in America  
Cornel West, Union Theological Seminary**

*On October 11, 2014, Cornel West delivered the keynote address to nearly 600 students at the regional Leadership & Social Justice Conference, hosted at Saint Mary's College of California. The conference occurred two days before West was arrested in Ferguson, Missouri, during a demonstration to protest the killing of young Black men by White police officers, as in the case of 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson. Speaking of the students, West said, "I would like to see these precious young people commit themselves to lives of integrity, honesty and decency, where they are vigilant against all forms of evil—White supremacists, male supremacists, anti-Jewish, anti-Arab, anti-Muslim and homophobia. Live lives never losing sight of the humanity of other people. Be true to the Lasallian ideal that says each one of us is made in the image and likeness of God. We need to love that image in each and every one of us human beings, wherever and whoever we are." Offered here is a transcript of West address rich with the intertextuality of current events, blues and soul music, Greek philosophy, theology, and politics.*

I want to thank you. I'm so pleased to be with the youth who decided to spend some time with me today. I'm here to learn and listen but I hope I say something that unsettles you, something that unnerves you, and maybe even for a moment un-houses you. I am in no rush today. I don't have to be on a plane until 5:40 tomorrow morning on my way to Ferguson, Missouri where we're going to have a mass demonstration, and folks were kind enough to ask me to say a few words.

There will be a mass demonstration on Sunday night, and on Monday morning we're going to let the world know that there's many of us who are old school who have a deep love and care for the young Black poor people, the children. We're going to jail on Monday. We're going to try to fill the jails, the way they filled the jails in Birmingham. We're going to keep love and justice at the center of it. We're going to fight back the hand of revenge, but we want the world to know, and we want the young folks to know, you're not in it by yourself.

They may send you to decrepit schools and try to murder your soul, but you're not in it by yourself. They may have you deal with massive unemployment and act as if you are disposable and superfluous but you're not in it by yourself. They may convince you that you have less beauty and less morality and less character, but you come from a tradition that says you can look that vicious legacy of White supremacy in the face and still learn how to love, learn how to love yourself. Justice is what love looks like in public. Connect that love to bearing witness and put pressure on the powerful elites. Apply this pressure not out of hatred, but out of trying to make them accountable, answerable and responsible, to act in such a way that the least of these weak and the vulnerable ought to be center stage of what they do. That's the tradition -- Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Dubois, Ida B. Wells, and Ella Baker. And Malcolm X (we've got a revolutionary Islamic brother in the mix) and Brother Martin Luther King Jr. See, I come from a tradition of a people who not only talk about justice, but also talk about militant tenderness

and subversive sweetness and radical gentleness. I come from a tradition that also sings about justice.

**Justice-Seeking & Soul Music**

Do you know what it's like to be terrorized, traumatized, and stigmatized for 400 years, with every authority telling you that you're less than human? Then you listen to Sylvester Stone of Sly and The Family Stone, a genius from Vallejo, California, say, "Stand, you've been sitting much too long. There's a permanent crease in your right and wrong. Stand, there's a cross for you to bear, things to go through if you're going anywhere. Stand, there's a midget standing tall, and the giant beside him about to fall" (Stone, 1969). Tenderness is the sweetness of David Ruffin from Whynot, Mississippi, singing with the Temptations; follow his voice, and you will feel an honesty and compassion there.

There is also a night side to this music, because it deals with scars and bruises and trying to transform and transfigure them into sweetness, because soul music is sharing of the soothing sweetness, against the backdrop of a dark catastrophe. That's what I try to tell young folk when I go into the studio. They say, "Yes, here comes Brother West, old school," that's right, and I'm bringing with me those voices of justice -- Malcom X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ida B. Wells -- but also the tenderness of the Delphonics, the Jones Girls, Gladys Knight, Aretha Franklin, Mary Lou Williams, and Thelonius Monk. That's a tradition full of prophetic fire as it responds to the four queries that the great W.E.B. Dubois raised at the age of 83 years old.

**W.E.B Dubois & the Four Queries**

The United States government had already tried to convict W.E.B. Dubois and send him to jail for life for working with the Peace Information Center to ban nuclear weapons. He was viewed as an extension of, a foreign agent of, the Soviet Union.

He'd just married Sister Shirley Graham Dubois on Valentine's Day 1951, and two weeks later he was in court. He asked himself how to pass on the best of his passion and ideas to the younger generation. His answer, "I'm going to write three novels." In the first novel, the *Ordeal of Mansart: The Black Flame* (1957), Dubois introduces four questions. I know that they are the same questions that these precious students here have been wrestling with all day.

First query: What does integrity do in the face oppression? He didn't say cupidity, he didn't say venality, didn't say vapidly, he said integrity. Second query: What does honesty do in the face of deception? What does it mean to attempt to be a person of integrity and a person who is honest? Remember that last line in James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) -- "I want to be an honest man and a good writer" (p. 9). Just aspiring to integrity and honesty will make you counter-cultural, especially in a market driven society obsessed with the eleventh commandment, "Thou shall not get caught." This is especially difficult in a highly commodified society that bombards each and every one of us, but especially our priceless young people, with weapons of "mass distraction." For Dubois, integrity and honesty were critical.

And the third query: What does decency do in the face of insult? How you going to deal with attacks, assaults, insults? Can you hold on to your decency? Something's got to sustain you inside, and you've got to fall back on tradition. You've got to fall back on memories. You've got to fall back on unbelievable courage to be willing to make that move from your momma's womb to tomb and say, "I'm holding on to integrity. I'm holding on to honesty. I'm holding on to decency."

The last query: What does virtue do in the face of brute force? This is very important, because in America we like to talk about race relations. I talk about vicious legacies of White supremacy. I don't believe in deodorized discourses. I don't believe in sanitized discourses. I don't believe in sterilized discourses.

What does integrity do in the face of oppression? What does honesty do in the face of deception? What does decency do in the face of insult? What does virtue do in the face of brute force? It gets educated.

### **Paideia**

Human beings are made in the image and likeness of God. All of us have the same status in the eyes of a mighty God, and Christian faith is about radical love that requires us to be in the world but not of the world, to be transformed as we work alongside others to find their voices, as we become maladjusted to injustice. My own brother learned that in his Lasallian education. He got educated. Some say indoctrinated. No, it was a genuine education, *paideia*, the difference between education and schooling. It's what I like about the Lasallian tradition. It doesn't believe in market models that suggest that you come in, get a skill, network, think highly of

yourself and gain access to a job so you can live in some vanilla suburb. That's not what I'm talking about. We're talking about *paideia*, going back to Plato's *Republic* (2000): How do we engage in that turning of the soul from the superficial fleeting things to substantial enduring things? From instant gratification and fleeting pleasures to enduring joys and wrestling with the things that matter?

Life, death, joy, justice, trust, fidelity, these are things that matter, the things they will talk about when you are in your coffin. It won't be a story about how much money you made. It won't be a story about how big your mansion was. It won't be a story about how many material toys you accumulated. They will want to say something about the things that matter, with your body in that coffin before the worms get you. Oh, that's education at its deep level and that's precisely what Dubois was talking about. Do we have the courage to at least aspire to integrity, honesty, decency, virtue? Of course, we fall on our faces. A great lapsed Protestant Samuel Becket (1983) used to say, "Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (p. 7). Try again, fail again, fail better. We all fall short, no doubt. The Anglican W.H. Auden used to remind us in his poem, do we have the courage to learn how to love our "crooked neighbors with our crooked hearts" (1940)? That's the raw stuff. Any serious talk about justice, like Reinhold Niebuhr's justice, soon degenerates into something less than justice. Justice is rescued by something deeper than justice, namely love.

The fundamental mission of any institution of higher learning is a quest for truth, (small t), knowledge (small k), and then a shaping of character. There's a certain amount of intellectual dishonesty in someone who is interested in only certain truths or a selective reading of the truth. For example, "Oh I see, when it comes to people of color, all of a sudden you don't think it is a serious inquiry into truth?" That's precisely what *paideia* is in the deep sense. We have to be open to question truth, which can take us into very unpredictable and surprising places. It takes courage to ask, "How did I become so adjusted to injustice, to partial truth, to outright lies?"

### **Paideia & the New Jim Crow**

So let's move to *paideia* education and relate it to these magnificent struggles that are escalating in vicious form: the new Jim Crow, the prison industrial complex, income equality, and wealth and equality, too. Let's start with Socrates. Turn to Plato's *Apology* (2008) where Socrates says, "the unexamined life, is not worth living" (p. 29). The Greek actually emphasizes human life. We know our English word human derives from *humando* which means burying, humility, die to the earth, and tied to this fundamental question of what it means to be human.

That's the most terrifying question we will ever raise as mortals made in the image and the likeness of God, not a question about what kind of job you have, not a question about your career. It's not a question about how much money you have, or the question even of about your educational attainment. The

essential terrifying question: What kind of human being are you going to be? There are ugly forms of institutionalized injustice, but we can break free and choose to be certain kinds of persons with integrity, honesty, decency and virtue. Under what conditions can you make such choices? For me, this prophetic imagination, the prophetic empathy, and prophetic will, and prophetic courage all go hand in hand and you have to begin with tradition. Here, it's about the Lasallian tradition.

No one can do it alone. One of the most vicious lies ever told in the history of American civilization is that we can be self-made. Radical freedom usually ties you to some cause bigger than yourself to get outside of your egocentric predicament, to push back the hedonism, to push back the narcissism so that you become connected, coalescing with others who are lured by a grand vision.

We've seen in the history of this nation some of the best examples: Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Dubois, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcom X, Ida B. Wells, Ella Fitzgerald, Stokley Carmichael. Diane Nash, Ericka Huggins, Alice Walker, we can go on and on and on and we haven't gotten to the musicians yet who set the highest standards, the highest standard. There is no intellectual analogist to John Coltrane or Billie Holiday ... Why? Because they had a depth of courage as well as a depth of talent and genius that allowed them to transfigure their suffering and be free and it's impossible to talk about movements of freedom unless you have already internally freed yourself in such a way that your very words and your witness is a foretaste of the freedom that you talking about with others. That's precisely what Gandhi had in mind when he said, "You've got to be the change you're talking about," or the old folks used to put it "We'd rather see sermons than hear sermons." Oh, that's where young folk are today. That's what we're going to talk about in Ferguson. They want to see sermons.

What to see something? See the creative appropriation of a tradition of rich stories of a Palestinian Jew that emerges out of a legacy of Jerusalem that builds on the notion that to be human is to spread love. Jesus said, extend loving kindness to the widow, the fatherless, the motherless, the weak, and the vulnerable. He said love the stranger, 36 times, evoked Hebrew Scripture's love of neighbor, Leviticus 19:18. That Palestinian Jew was building on that rich prophetic Judaic tradition that says, "Yes, be human in the face of all that comes at us."

Not only must we have courage to love our neighbor, of course Jesus also said to love our enemy. You don't try that on your own, you need a whole lot of grace for that. Pray for me, I'm working at it. Loving our enemy is necessary, it's crucial, it's imperative, because we don't want to deny anyone's potential. Everybody can grow and mature. That's precisely why when we talk about forms of death like the new Jim Crow, we talk about the social catastrophe of poor people. What is the truth about poverty? Twenty percent of children in America live in poverty (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014)? Three times as many precious Black, Brown, Red children live in poverty than their white

peers (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014). In the richest nation in the history of the world, that's an ethical abomination, a form of death, of psychic death, of spiritual death.

Let's bring it back to Saint Mary's College, and you students.

### Learning How To Die

Are you willing to learn how to die, in order to learn how to live? Are you willing to die so that you can be an exemplary figure who has a foretaste of freedom and knowledge of who you are in your struggle for freedom, vis-à-vis the new Jim Crow, wealth, income, and economy inequality? For the last 40 years, I've welcomed students on the first day; I say, "You've come here to die." They say, "I thought I came here for a B+." I've been blessed to teach in prison for 37 years. I just finish a class with 150 brothers. We read Plato. We read Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. We read Toni Morrison. I told the Brothers, "You've come here to learn how to die." When you examine certain assumptions and presuppositions, and when you begin to give some of them up, it is a form of death. There is no rebirth without death. There is no development and maturation without death, and if you're not willing to critically examine who you are and allow something inside of you to die, then you're not ever going to be freedom fighter.

You might say certain words, you may act as if you are on the love train but deep down you haven't engaged in that soul interrogation, that soul scrutiny that goes hand in hand with deep education. When you graduate from Saint Mary's, I hope you will look at each other and say, "Oh, we all learned how to die pretty well, didn't we?" Well, did you undergo that transformation? Did you undergo that *metanoia*? Did you undergo that kind of intellectual conversion? You came in with your set of dogma, you let some of them go, didn't you? Especially that dogma of white supremacy, but also the male supremacy, the anti-Jewish, anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, and the imperial identity thinking that somehow an American baby has more value than a baby in Yemen, has more value than a baby in Ethiopia, has more value than a baby in Guatemala, yes, that's got to die. Oh, you've got to let it go. James Brown (1969) song title suggests, "Give it up or turn it loose." You've got to let it go, to be what? To be able to straighten your back up and Brother Martin used to say that anytime when folks straighten their backs up, they're going somewhere because folks can't ride your back, unless it's bent.

### The United States of America

America has grown rich and grown wealthy but has America grown up? That's the question and that's the role of educational institutions at their best. It doesn't mean that educational institutions are not wrestling with their denial of death, injustice, and oppression. Absolutely, we at Union Theological Seminary wrestle with it. At Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, the white supremacist tradition still operates and I'm sure the legacy of white supremacy still operates at Saint Mary's. There ain't no doubt about that, but that doesn't mean

you don't fight against it. You've got to confront it, got to hit it head on, got to be able to think critically and act passionately.

You've got to be able to speak candidly as Socrates in the *Apology* (2008), when he suggests that the cause of his unpopularity is *parrhesia* – candid speech, plain speech, frank speech, unintimidated speech. It's a speech that is not afraid to say something against the grain but to say it in such a way that's not name calling and finger pointing but is an attempt to make people accountable as human beings and try to accept the best of who they are but be honest about the worst and expect the same thing about one's self.

You see, we're not talking about white supremacy. I'm not talking about something outside. I'm talking about the white supremacy inside me of me, too. I'm a Black man in America. You look in the souls of Black people and you still see white supremacy operating, thinking that they're less beautiful, less intelligent, and less moral because it's impossible to live in this civilization that's so deeply shot through with the legacy of white supremacy, both conscious and unconscious.

After the election of President Barak Obama, some people exclaim, "Finally we've gone beyond your racism. Get off the crack pipe!" Yes, it's a breakthrough that we have a Black president, absolutely so, particularly if it means that we've got large numbers of vanilla brothers and sisters of great pricelessness, who are less racist than their parents and grandparents. That's a beautiful thing.

At the same time, however, I don't give out moral prizes for white brothers and sisters on the vanilla side of town who are less racist than grandma and granddaddy but still carry some deeply xenophobic proclivities. I'm not talking about all white brothers – there have always been progressive white brothers and sisters. Oh, you have John Brown, Anne Braden, and Myles Horton, but they've got a whole lot of cousins. It makes Thanksgiving dinner very difficult, but you've still got to love them. They've got the image of God in them, but they've got moral blindness and willful ignorance. Oftentimes their fears and anxieties have been shaped by deeply white supremacist perceptions, so when they see a Michael Brown, he's already a criminal, somebody to control and contain.

The great entertainer Josephine Baker left America, didn't she? She said, "The very idea of America makes me shake, shake and tremble and gives me nightmares" (quoted by Zinn & Arnove, 2004, p. 27). We need to incorporate her voice when we're talking about America. There are a lot of wonderful things about America, but she'd been dealing with American terrorism. Folks outside the United States have no monopoly on terrorism, not at all; ask some indigenous peoples about that. So many Americans talk about feeling unsafe and unprotected, suffering from random violence and hatred for who they are. Listen, you be Black in America for 400 years. Unsafe, unprotected, recipients of public random violence, hated for who they are. Maybe we can learn something from our people who have been on intimate terms with forms of

death, the social death of slavery, the civic death of Jim Crow, the psychic death of the hate toward yourself, the death of being told you have the wrong hips and lips and noses and hair extensions, skin pigmentation. Then the spiritual death of just feeling as if you can't make it, you cave in.

## Death & Love

Look, we've got to remind folks that you can't have a freedom movement for folk who don't speak their mind freely and are willing to pay the consequences. Every figure in *Black Prophetic Fire* (West & Buschendorf, 2014) from Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Dubois to Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X and Ida B. Wells and Ella Baker would say over and over again, "Death, where is thy sting; grave, where is thy victory (1 Corinthians 15:55)?"

If you're really willing to serve justice, give your life. Already you have been given the gift of life, the least you can do is give your life back. To be able to speak freely is a privilege, if you even have to give your life. The status quo knows that there is a whole battalion of folk who are unwilling to pay the ultimate cost. The powers that be know that. But, it doesn't have to be that way. That's what happened in the 1960s when you got a whole wave of artists, activists, intellectuals who said in the face of America's white supremacist order, "We are willing to love, laugh, sing, and die for freedom. What you going to do now?" And what happened? They started shaking in their boots, elites shaking in their boots in every society. When you get people of integrity, honesty, decency, and virtue, willing to live and die for something bigger than them, change happens. That's what we need.

I am not saying that martyrdom is normative for everybody, don't get me wrong. But somebody's got to be willing to love enough to die. And I'm not just talking about physical death. I'm talking about other forms of death as well, that critical scrutiny like what happens when you fall in love. Your old isolated self dies and a new self emerges entangled with another. The centrality of love is not an abstraction, it's a steadfast commitment to the well-being of others, and it is precisely what needs to be talked about and embodied today.

Love is as old as can be but in a market-driven culture it's usually reduced to just manipulation, manipulation, manipulation. And this is precisely where I think by focusing on the new Jim Crow, you have to come to terms with legacy of white supremacy because what Black people have taught America and the world is in the face of being such a hated people, here comes John Coltrane, Martin Luther King, Jr., Marvin Gaye, and Stevie Wonder.

In the face of such unbelievable, unjust conditions, teach America something about justice. We in America brag about our constitution, but for 80 some years it was a pro-slavery document, in practice. We're going to teach you something about democracy. We're going to teach you something about justice. We can build on your words. We're on the ground. Yes,

keep track of us. Emmett Tills' mother, my God. Where did she get the spiritual strength to look at her baby in an open coffin in Roberts Temple Church of God and Christ on the Westside of Chicago in 1955? She looked at the cameras and said, "I don't have a minute to hate. I will pursue justice for the rest of my life" (as cited in Mikulich, 2014). Where did she get the strength? She didn't do that by herself. Something went into her, her grandparents and her ministers and her teacher shaped her soul in such a way that she could still be in quest, not for revenge but for justice. I salute each and every one of you for dealing with the rawness of life as you proceed to becoming not just activists in the narrow sense, but human beings who love and care especially for the weak and vulnerable. Oh, we need that now for the whole world's got the blues, and we will not survive if that world doesn't learn something from a "blues people."

### Concluding On A Blues Note

I started on a blues note and I want to end on a blues note now. I think it is impossible to be a human being, and it's certainly impossible to be Christian without having the blues sensibility. Do we have the Socratic courage to learn how to die and critically examine who we are in relation to the catastrophe of injustice so we can leave the world better than we found it? Can you catch your own prophetic fire, act on your courage? It is for every human being. For each of you, there is something inside, a voice that won't let you hold your peace, something in the world that you want to be better. Access what the great William James (2011) called the "something more." Find that something more that lures us out of our earthbound clay feet existence and into truthful acts of courage.

Do we have what it takes to reach out based on our R-O-O-T-S and proceed with R-O-U-T-E-S to be international, to be global even as we are rooted in the best of our traditions? I think we do. That's the blues sensibility. That's where the love of truth, love of neighbor, love of enemy, love of community but also acknowledging the ways in which we all fall short.

Thank you all so very much.

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