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To speak as a human, a modern and as an American : blues rhetoric in Cornel West's prophetic pragmatism

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TO SPEAK AS A HUMAN, A MODERN AND AS AN AMERICAN:
BLUES RHETORIC IN
CORNEL WEST'S PROPHETIC PRAGMATISM

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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by
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Cornel West's description of the human condition and works of art produced in three particular ways. First, there is being human which is a universal condition that speaks to all people and their struggles in the face of death and fallibility. Second, there is the condition of being modern, which speaks to people in a particular age in which power must be challenged with intelligence. Third, there is the idea of being American, which is to confront historical legacies of injustice through political action and agency. West's rhetoric speaks to these existential crises and draws its resources from jazz, blues, tragicomic and prophetic pragmatism to create a community of affiliation and rich discourse that's beneficial and productive for all.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

My own work and life have always unfolded under the dark shadows of death, dread and despair in search of love, dialogue and democracy. I am first and foremost a blues man in the world of ideas-a jazz man in the life of the mind-committed to keeping alive the flickering candles of intellectual humility, personal compassion and social hope while living in our barbaric century. My work is a feeble attempt to understand and respond to the guttural cry that erupts from the depths of the soul of each of us. The existential quest for meaning and the political struggle for freedom sit at the center of my thought (West 1999, xv).

In the summer of 2011 Cornel West and Tavis Smiley toured 18 cities in 11 states on a poverty tour. The purpose of the tour was to highlight the expanding numbers of the poor in America and call attention to inequality and suffering by people of all races, creeds and ethnicities. Compelled to carry on the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in identifying with the impoverished, marginalized and forgotten, West and Smiley chose King's sobering yet forthright words to summarize their calling and purpose: "I choose to identify with the underprivileged, I choose to identify with the poor, I choose to give my life for those who have been left out of the sunlight of opportunity" (Harding 2008, 58). Throughout the tour, Smiley and West spoke with the poor, Americans formally of the middle class, unemployed veterans, and the homeless, and they witnessed the struggles of native Americans on reservations and occupants of a tent city-Michigan Camp Take Notice under an overpass outside of Ann Arbor. The pervasiveness of poverty was evident in lack of education, joblessness, food shortage, and public housing. The courage to confront the struggles and suffering of the marginalized, the boldness to speak truthfully about America's troubled past and dubious future and the proclamation of a daring hope that inspires confidence in the human spirit to transcend its present is what has drawn me to Cornel West. Through his interviews, speeches and books I have

encountered the candidness and compassion of West as he has attempted to highlight the plight of the poor as well as speak to the institutional injustices within this capitalistic society. In these I have also witnessed the work of this cultural critic and political activist follow in the tradition of Martin Luther King Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer and Dorothy Day, each courageously battling against the catastrophic conditions of humanity, defiant power structures and the troubled past of America. I wrote this thesis to examine three particular areas that encompass the work of West and underscore the persistent struggles that continually plague this nation. West defines these as three fundamental questions that motivate his writings: What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be modern? What does it mean to be American? He has defined the struggles that human share in these. West calls for critical intelligence to endure human struggles, understand institutional power structures and provoke human agency to promote democratic ideals. This is the basis for my rhetorical and textual analysis.

I understand rhetoric to be discourse that responds to an exigent which produces a community of affiliation moving towards accomplishing certain ends. Lloyd Bitzer defines rhetoric as:

A mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action. The rhetor alters reality by bringing into existence a discourse of such a character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes mediator of change (Lucaites, Condit & Caudill 1999, 219).

I argue that West provides tools for rhetoricians to utilize the particulars of a situation to shine light on a universal problem. It is ethical in the sense that it addresses the underlined meaning of discord and attempts to generate agreement and collective agency. As I see it, to be human, modern and American are rhetorical situations. They are

expressions of the human condition that involve ameliorating suffering, advocating critical intelligence and establishing creative democracy. Bitzer contends rhetorical situations are:

As a natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance; this invited utterance participates naturally in the situation, is in many instances necessary to the completion of situational activity, and by means of its participation with situation obtains its meaning and its rhetorical character (Lucaites, Condit & Caudill 1999, 219).

West's writings describe the essence of these in order to foster a rhetorical discourse. The rhetoric that he calls for acknowledges the situation and "changes reality through the mediation of thought and action." In other words, West calls for discourse that doesn't focus on one particular situation at the expense of our universal responsibility. I argue, the greater need is to look at the human condition and its situation, considering the exigencies and constraints to ultimately bring about an appropriate response. In a rhetorical situation there are exigencies and constraints that are called into question. In this thesis I examine West's work and draw attention to the exigencies and constraints that are embedded within the human condition. Each calls for a particular response, an ethic that can be extracted from the literature of Anton Chekhov, blues and jazz sensibilities as well as notions of tragicomic. Utilizing these resources creates a discourse that's both honest and effective in establishing a creative democracy that promotes equality and justice for all. I divide this thesis into two major sections. First I will examine Cornel West's approach to the world through prophetic pragmatism, the writings of Anton Chekhov, the Christian existential philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard and tragicomic sensibilities. Second, I will examine three ways that we can look at a rhetorical situation approaching an exigency. First, there is being human, which speaks

to all people and our struggles, wrestling with the absurdities of life yet maintaining hope. Second, there is the condition of being modern, which speaks to a people exercising human agency, through courageously questioning and challenging power structures and institutions. Third, there is the idea of being American, which is to question democratic practices and incorporate through political practice and agency the voices of all citizens to draw attention to the moral responsibility that a government has towards its people. These are different ways of pulling out distinct aspects of a situation to ultimately address the human condition and foster a creative democracy through human agency and political action. Bringing attention to the suffering of humans and the persistent inequities in society has been the passion of West. Throughout his life and work he has attempted to answer for the prevailing presence of evil, the contradictions and dissonance humans face. As one of the nations foremost public intellectuals he has extracted ideals from philosophy, music, religion and literature to communicate practical solutions to seemingly intractable problems. In the following sections we will look at the earlier years of West and how they were instrumental in establishing his philosophy and shaping his view of the world.

Public Intellectual

As a cultural critic and social philosopher, Cornel West's love and service for humanity had its inception in family, community and church, not in the academy or politics. These institutions "provided existential and ethical equipment with which to confront the crises, terrors and horrors of life" (West 1999, 3). As an early teen, West read Soren Kierkegaard and identified with his perpetual wrestling with "suffering, sadness and sorrow" (West 1999, 20). Describing his "intellectual vocation" in an

interview with George Yancy, West likens his experience with Kierkegaard's philosophy as "a kind of vertigo, a dizziness, a sense of being staggered by the darkness that one sees in the human condition, the human predicament" (West 1999, 20). This encounter would later situate his understanding of philosophy in relation to the human crisis. "It gave me a profoundly Kierkegaardian sensibility that required then that philosophizing be linked to existentially concrete situations, wrestling with decision, commitment, actualized possibility and realized potential" (West 1999, 20). This appreciation of Kierkegaard coupled with the message learned within West's Christian faith of suffering and death were the underpinnings for his calling to boldly speak about the social ills of society, the mal-distribution of wealth, an anemic democracy and the perpetual struggles acquainted with being human, modern and American.

In the prophetic tradition Cornel West bears witness to the truth. He hearkens to the tradition of Old Testament seers such as Isaiah and Jeremiah called to proclaim truth, and be courageous to speak to an obstinate and rebellious nation. Isaiah fearlessly chastises Judah for its defiance to the word of the Lord and dereliction of the poor and needy:

When you lift up your hands in prayer, I will not look. Though you offer many prayers, I will not listen, for your hands are covered with the blood of innocent victims. Wash yourselves and be clean! Get your sins out of my sight. Give up your evil ways. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows (Isaiah 1:16-17 New Living Translation).

For West, there is a kinship with the prophetic utterances of Isaiah. He identifies with the compassion and heartache Isaiah felt for the children of Israel. West also notes the similarities in the attention given to those who are victims of evil. Speaking to the bond that he maintains with primarily the Old Testament prophets West declares: "The mark of

the prophet is to speak the truth in love with courage-come what may” (West 1989, 233). This critique of America to cultivate a creative democracy where all citizens are able to participate in its promise is central to the bold conversation that should be held. It is an integral component to democracy.

West is described as a “radical democrat, humanist, race-transcending prophet, spiritual gadfly, social and cultural critic, advocate on the side of the ‘least of these,’ making sense of life’s absurdities, being a voice for the suffering, and calling into the question the inequities of a ‘messy’ democracy” (Yancy 2001, 1-2). He is “motivated by a concern to create a genuine alternative to an unnecessary and unacceptable fate; inspired by the possibility that class, race, and gender hierarchy will not have the last word on how far democracy will go in our time” (Wood 2000, 2). Suffering is universal; it’s the “funk of life” that at one time everyone encounters, integral to the American narrative (Yancy 2001, 346). Learning how to live with the blues is what West seeks, recognizing how individuals suffer and survive with courage and resiliency. Identifying with humanity of different backgrounds while acknowledging the institutional disparities present is what West is adamant about; however, his body of work emphasizes the African American struggle. Liberation theologian James Cone characterizes this passion and commitment:

West’s solidarity with the Black poor undoubtedly influenced him to place the problem of suffering at the center of his philosophy. He is not interested in a theoretical or logical solution to the problem of evil. He does not even ask the age old theodicy question; If God is all good and all-powerful, why is there suffering in the world? West’s concern is concrete and existential. The evil he is talking about is both social and existential, both aspects feeding off one another. (Yancy 2001, 112)

His brand of philosophy is meant to be a critic of the culture, a tool to encounter the

darkness within American democracy and ultimately a way to foster hope instead of optimism and courage instead of cowardliness (Yancy 2001, 348). West asserts, understanding how to contend and conquer the struggles and absurdities acquainted with being human, how to cope with power structures encountered in a modern society, and how to actualize the democratic experience for everyone should be at the heart of our rhetorical discourse.

The problem, however, is that our current state of rhetoric is permeated with flowery notions of a romantic existence, unwilling to acknowledge the death, dread and despair that is daily met by ordinary people. Discourse that is rooted in harmony and congruity at its core is a denial of the “funk of life” (Yancy 2001, 346). West argues:

Romanticism thoroughly saturated the discourse of modern thinkers. Can you totalize? Can you make things whole? Can you create harmony? And if you can't you're disappointed. Disappointment is always at the center. Failure is always at the center...See, I don't begin in romanticism...No, you see, the blues, my kind of blues begins with catastrophe...This is where Chekov begins, this is where jazz starts. You think Charlie Parker is upset cause he can't sustain a harmony? He doesn't care about the harmony he's trying to completely ride on the dissonance, ride on the blue notes (Taylor, 2013).

In order to adeptly address the situations of being human, modern, and American, there must be a willingness to begin with discord and realize the possibility of failure and the presence of evil in the world. Rhetoric constructed in denial of the incongruities in life also is inclined to overlook the culpability of American democracy in contributing to the pervasive darkness. It neglects the haunting past of slavery, Jim Crow, and other forms of discrimination, dismissing the importance of empowering and valuing every citizen. This shortsighted view of democracy in America perpetuates a distorted perspective and thus fails to address the present crisis. West describes America this way,

[America is a] very fragile democratic experiment predicated on the

dispossession of the lands of indigenous people, and the enslavement of African peoples, and the subjugation of women, and the marginalization of gays and lesbians. It has great potential, but this notion that somehow we had it all, or ever will have it all, has got to go you have to push it to the side (Taylor, 2013).

Rhetoric must contend with the inconsistencies of democracy, encouraging it to resist allegiance to dogmas and conventions while exhorting it to improvise and become more inclusive.

West's critique of American culture resonates with that of earlier African American intellectuals and artists. In his essay *The Creative Process*, for instance, James Baldwin is critical of the hubris and duplicitous existence in the American narrative. "The artist cannot and must not take anything for granted, but must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides" (Morrison 1998, 80). This disregard for the truth does not produce ethical rhetoric; instead it contextualizes life in a romantic discourse that is vacuous and of little benefit. Baldwin's contention with the abusive treatment of American citizens by institutional powers points to a failure in democracy and the continual need to speak the truth. He writes in *The Fire Next Time*:

But in order to deal with the untapped and dormant force of the previously subjugated, in order to survive as a human, moving, moral weight in the world, America and all western nations will be forced to reexamine themselves and release themselves from many things that are now taken to be sacred, and to discard nearly all the assumptions that have been used to justify their lives and their anguish and their crimes so long (West 2004, 82).

The abandonment of evil practices and acknowledgment to address salient issues are what is needed to facilitate a radical democracy that is inclusive of everyone.

For West, any rhetoric capable of speaking to the expansive struggles of our age must take account of all three of these rhetorical situations. He calls for rhetoric that addresses the human struggle, modern reasoning and American responsibility.

This requires using Chekhovian sensibilities, existentialist thought and prophetic pragmatism to accomplish the goal of creative democracy. West views this as an imperative in the growth of citizens and a nation.

The Call For A Rhetoric Of Prophetic Pragmatism

Although Cornel West draws inspiration from the likes of the American pragmatic tradition, the literary works of Chekhov, and the philosophy of Kierkegaard, he ultimately wants both art and philosophy to be put into practice as a rhetoric, meaning here “the art of public advocacy that functions in a timely relationship to shared problematic situations of moral conflict, cognitive uncertainty, and practical urgency” (Crick 2010, 14). It is for this reason that Cornel West would desire us to be more like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. than John Dewey, drawing from philosophy, the wisdom that can be used to speak truth to power and virtue to vice. For instance, throughout his sermons and speeches, King effectively deployed this tool as a method to draw attention to unjust laws and discriminatory practices America embraced that sustained segregation and racism during the Civil Rights period. Pragmatically King would exegete a biblical text and then broaden the particular meaning intended for that specific audience to apply to a universal situation with the hope of bringing an understanding of justice, freedom and love. In the sermon, *Remaining Awake Through A Great Revolution*, King likens America’s apathy for the poor to the rich ruler who disregarded the needs of the beggar Lazarus and ultimately went to hell because of his willful disregard for the poor. The rich man was condemned to a place of torment because he had the means to eliminate poverty and didn’t. King parallels the judgment of America to that of the rich ruler.

And this can happen to America, the richest nation in the world—and nothing's wrong with that—this is America's opportunity to help bridge the gulf between the haves and the have-nots. The question is whether America will do it. There is nothing new about poverty. What is new is that we now have the techniques and the resources to get rid of poverty. The real question is whether we have the will (Carson 1998, 205).

He concludes this sermon with a reference to Matthew 25:31-46, when Jesus gives the parable of The Sheep and the Goats. In this story those who have neglected the undesirables in life will be given eternal punishment. King praises the greatness of America in science and industry, space exploration and land development; however regarding the moral issues of consequence, he declares America has been negligent and derelict in its responsibilities to their citizens and founding documents.

It seems that I can hear the God of history saying, "That was not enough! But I was hungry, and ye fed me not. I was naked, and ye clothed me not. I was devoid of a decent sanitary house to live in, and ye provided no shelter for me. And consequently, you cannot enter the kingdom of greatness. If ye do it unto the least of these, my brethren, ye do it unto me. That's the question facing America today (Carson 1998, 219).

Speaking pragmatically, King used the meaning ascribed in biblical text and integrated ideas and thoughts in the affairs of life to judge America of its immoral ways and guide it toward meaningful and transformative action. He would, through the scriptures, shine a light on the motives of America, thereby causing them to examine meaning of certain actions. King demonstrated what West believes should be the role of pragmatism in the national discourse. It should examine the efficacy of truth in its relation to the life-world in society, as well as answer the questions of what it means to be human, modern and American in the context of pressing problems and struggles. West calls for a philosophically and historically informed rhetoric to address the depth and scope of the problems we face in the modern world. All rhetorical situations are not about this or that

passing issue; they are all bound up into larger exigencies. Unfortunately, we continue to miss the forest for the trees. West's body of work exhibits an abiding dismay with politicians, news media personalities, and others who attempt to provide a simple answer to complex issues. He dismisses dogma and ideology that refuse to wrestle with the intricacies of being human, modern, and American and instead answers with either a callous and indifferent solution or philosophical creed. West's disapproval is not with a specific political party or individual leader but with a supposed democratic system that is aligned against the disenfranchised. He questions the moral compass and the "grand paradox of American democracy" (West 1999, xix). His dismay is with a government that does not consider universal suffering but continues to deal with smaller issues that are a byproduct of a pervasive larger condition. Rhetoric that doesn't value the poor, neglects the hungry, disregards the imprisoned and has no empathy for the disenfranchised is abdicating its ethical responsibility. West's primary concern with the modern so-called pragmatists is that they had become so absorbed in principles and methods giving little to no attention to universal suffering. His frustration with political parties, economic institutions and other establishments of power is that their discourse has focused on superficial, abstract issues instead of the existential crises of what it means to be human, modern, and American. They lack the language to address central issues pertaining to human existence. This frustration is not simply a partisan affair. West goes so far as to criticize the policies of President Barack Obama, the first African-American president for whom West campaigned in 2008. In speaking with Juan Gonzalez of *Democracy Now*, West criticized the policies of President Obama arguing their ineffectiveness to address the needs of the poor:

The Obama administration seems to have very little concern about poor people and their social misery. Look at the policies vis-à-vis Wall Street downplaying Main Street. Look at the policies of black farmers, a settlement already in place, but they don't want to execute it, because they don't want to be associated with black folk too explicitly. Look at the policies of dilapidated housing. We can go right across the board. Look at the policies of the new Jim Crow system, the prison industrial complex. So, we're talking not just about individual presidents. We're talking about a system that is tilted against poor people, against working people, disproportionately black and brown and red (Gonzales, 2013).

West decries any political institution that seems to overlook the existential crisis of those who are shuddering under daily oppression and abuse. His criticism is centered in the commitment to the deep democratic tradition of America as evident in the writings of Melville, Hawthorne, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison, each calling forth the "painful truths about our all too-human complicity with evil and evasion of dark realities, which no country or social experiment can ignore without danger" (West 1999, xix). Telling the truth requires posing the appropriate questions that grapple with the role of evil in the world. West argues that whether democrat or republican there is a failure in understanding the problems encountered in human existence. This critique of America, to cultivate a creative democracy where all citizens are able to participate in its promise, is central to the conversation that he believes should be held. Understanding how to contend and conquer the struggles and absurdities acquainted with being human, how to cope with power structures encountered in a modern society and how to actualize the democratic experience for all should be at the heart of discourse. Anything other than this is a refusal to acknowledge the presence of evil in the world and the limitations and inhibitions of humanity in a tragicomic society.

Because of the pervasive presence of evil West contends as a nation we are blind to our existential crisis, absorbed with the particular, the minutiae, when the situation demands rhetoric that's capable of speaking to darkness, dread and despair. He calls for an appropriate response, an ethical rhetoric that forces us to acknowledge our existential rhetorical situation. The ethics of rhetoric calls for a recognition of the particular circumstances shared in the present moment. It is contingent upon an understanding of the rhetorical situation and the demands that give rise to the particular event. Thomas Farrell makes clear the criteria for rhetoric to be most useful and persuasive:

An ethic of rhetoric must attend to the moral of the story: such issues as what public character is implied by the course we have taken, what forms of social learning are yet available to us, what legacy of experience we wish our story to yield to future generations, which episodes in our unfinished and unbounded narrative of collective action are irretrievable or lost, which need to be ended altogether, which prolonged, which begun anew, and which audiences, so far neglected, need to have their own stores articulated (Farrell 1993, 274).

Situations call for ethical rhetoric, which in turn produces a rhetorical culture that requires judgment towards a desired action. For Farrell, knowing what to say, appreciating the universal implication and its effect on the audience as well as determining the right response is predicated upon the principles and values shrouded within the rhetorical situation. An understanding of the circumstances requires that the rhetor must educate the audience and "invent public thought" (Farrell 1993, 16). It encourages unity around a particular situation, a shared vision or something that is believed. It deals in the area of appearances, seeking to change the way we look at things, suggesting that these appearances be viewed from a different perspective. As Farrell notes, "For rhetoric along among the arts, approaches appearances through the interpretive lens of interested common opinions (endoxa); reconsidered as signs,

probabilities, and examples, appearances become the material of public argument” (Farrell 1993, 32). West argues that the language in rhetoric should give an account for the historical evils and societal institutions that are present within America. In an interview with *The Root* West speaks to the ethics of rhetoric and the abiding principles that must accompany any response to universal suffering:

There are principles that are always larger than any individual and president. Principles of justice and fairness, especially for the poor and working people is a larger principle no matter what color. That’s what the larger freedom movement was all about, from Frederick Douglass to Fannie Lou Hamer to Martin King; justice, fairness and respect. Those values are greater than anyone of us (Corley, 2013).

It should be effused with love, willing to hate injustices so vehemently that it courageously endures persecution and exclusion. The one in pursuit of truth will pose “critical questions to people with power” (West 1999, 294). That is to say, “manifest fearless speech-*parrhesia*-that unsettles, unnerves, and unhouses people from their uncritical sleepwalking” (West 2004, 16). West recalls Socrates words in Plato’s *Apology*, “plain speech [*parrhesia*] is the cause of my unpopularity” (Hamilton & Cairns 2009, 10). Socrates biting criticism and disapproval of some methods of the Sophist garnered his unpopularity. To this West declares, “We desperately need the deep democratic energy of this Socratic questioning in these times of rampant sophistry on the part of our political elites and their media pundits” (West 2004, 16). Democracy is inextricably woven to a citizenry that is empowered and courageous to challenge existing practices that undermine equality, that betray the meaning within the founding documents, and that avoid the truth. In order to prevent an inept democracy, there is a need for rhetoric that begins with the particular situation and relates it to the universal circumstance of “death, dread and despair” (West 1999, xv). West calls for rhetoric that

creates transcendence from the immediate crisis and looks at the broader existential crisis of meaning. Through establishing identification, rhetoric brings about new principles that focus less on the abstract and more on the universality of suffering, the source of the absurd. What West calls for, therefore, is that kind of rhetoric that Thomas Farrell calls “great rhetoric.” In his words, “great rhetoric finds an imaginative way to individuate breadth of vision within the recognizable particularities of appearance” (Farrell 1993, 267). In these common places of unity, rhetoric responds with creating general attitudes that cause individuals to recognize each other’s existence and act in the best interest of the group.

The remainder of this thesis will be looking at Cornel West’s view of the world, identifying the role pragmatism, the literature of Anton Chekhov and tragicomic have in providing resources that a contemporary prophetic rhetoric might draw from as it attempts to respond to particular situations in a way that illuminates universal struggles, conditions, and hopes. First, it will show how Cornel West draws from the American pragmatic tradition to gain a philosophical understanding of the relationship between language and power. Second, it will show how West gains ethical, moral, and aesthetic inspiration from his reading of Anton Chekhov and Soren Kierkegaard. Lastly, it will explore how West conceptualizes our overall condition in the context of being human, modern, and American. He will then conclude by showing how contemporary rhetors can draw from all of these resources to speak in a prophetic character that does justice to the struggles and hopes of all of us.

Being Pragmatic

We begin a study of West's contribution to rhetoric with an analysis of pragmatism because it is with pragmatism that West first formulates an explicit theory of language, ethics, knowledge, and politics. In *The American Evasion of Philosophy* West argues that pragmatism should be practical and usable to wrestle with evil and suffering, infusing hope and courage, instead of a method to acquire empirical information, engage in analytical discourse, distancing itself from everyday people. American pragmatism is a movement within philosophy that breaks with absolute truths, methods and maxims, signifying the ever-changing nature of societies, structure, and processes. It is the evidence and basis for comprehending conflicts within a community as their principles, traditions and circumstances change:

Pragmatism is antiformalist: it represents a principle of endless assault on every tendency to erect contingent knowledge into a formal system. To the extent that philosophy is an effort to erect what we know about how we know into a formal system, pragmatism cannot help acting the role of termite—undermining foundations, collapsing distinctions, deflating abstractions, suggesting that the real work of the world is being done somewhere other than in philosophy departments (Menand 1997, xxxi).

In the tradition of the termite, pragmatism weakens the foundation of truths and questions their relevance to practical life world experiences instead of embracing that, which is intangible and inexplicable.

The American Evasion of Philosophy seeks to direct pragmatism towards the struggles acquainted with being human, the absurdities of modern existence and the suffering of humanity in an inequitable democracy. It turns us away from the conventional mode of philosophy that is involved with empirical evidence, values and ideals that are incapable of addressing situations dealing with death, dread and despair.

West notes the dialectical exchange in the tradition of American pragmatism:

American pragmatism emerges with profound insights and myopic blindness, enabling strengths and debilitating weakness, all resulting from distinctive features of American civilization: its revolutionary beginning combined with a slave-based economy; its elastic liberal rule of law combined with an entrenched business-dominated status quo; its hybrid culture in combination with a collective self-definition as homogeneously Anglo-American; its obsession with mobility, contingency, and pecuniary liquidity combined with a deep moralistic impulse; and its impatience with theories and philosophies alongside ingenious technological innovation, political strategies of compromise, and personal devices for comfort and convenience (West 1989, 5).

This contrast between freedom and slavery, corporate domination and free enterprise, praxis and theory highlight the dissonant tendencies with American pragmatism. West draws attention to these incongruities and offers a prophetic pragmatist view that acknowledges the presence of evil, the tragicomic in life and institutional and historical inequities. *The American Evasion of Philosophy* differentiates pragmatism from the European tradition to the America counterpart. West writes that American pragmatism is distinct from other traditions because it appeals to the “longing for norms and values that can make a difference, a yearning for principled resistance and struggle that can change our desperate plight” (West 1989, 4). Whereas philosophers in Europe were occupied with pragmatism as a means of obtaining theories of knowledge, certain values, and methods, American pragmatic philosophers are concerned with methods to acquire knowledge to act upon, to examine the effect of the attained knowledge, and to bring social critique upon the nation’s democratic system.

The American Evasion of Philosophy is a genealogy that follows many figures within the American pragmatic tradition. Three figures stand out with respect to how we understand the relationship between pragmatism and rhetoric: Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Dewey, and W.E.B. Du Bois. West begins with Emerson because he was the

foremost 19th century American thinker who broke with European traditions and articulated a vision of an empowered citizenry grounded in knowledge with morals and practicality. West argues for beginning with the lineage with Emerson because of his “rhetorical strategies that principally aimed at explaining America to itself” (West 1989, 10). In the essay, *The American Scholar*, Emerson emphasizes the necessity to break free from its European influence “when the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids” and instead establish an American culture (Porte & Morris 2001, 56). “Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close (Porte & Morris 2001, 56). The millions, that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvest” (Porte & Morris 2001, 56). This declaration of independence from the influence of Europe has at its core the empowered citizen, working within a democratic system that allows for freedom and flexibility.

Three aspects of Emerson's work stand out for West: power, provocation, and personality. His notion of power is the capacity that enables one to act in concert with others. It is a collective energy that coordinates action through the tool of communication. When a nation's citizens are empowered there is harmony and the capacity to act which ultimately fosters a creative democracy. A weakened nation however is the result of individuals that have been separated, marginalized, or divided into various groups, communities, factions that consequently are bereft of power because of their inability to communicate. West describes Emerson's understanding of the necessity of rhetoric to empower a nation by producing an image or ideology to coalesce around thereby creating a unified action:

For Emerson, the powers of the nation are inseparable from the powers of rhetoric to construct ‘the nation’ as a distinct object of discourse. Emerson exalts the powers of new rhetoric—the eloquent and creative weaving of myth, symbol, and narrative in order—to promote the powers of the new nation. He envisages culture as the domain wherein rhetorical powers principally deployed by intellectuals constitute ‘the nation’ as a worth discursive concern and consolidate ‘the nation’ as a geographical and political entity (West 1989, 13).

Rhetoric proves useful to make clear the capacity that a nation has and the necessity to wield it in a way that enables the individual to unify under a shared vision and something that is believed upon by everyone because of understanding. Effective rhetoric that generates power ultimately guides individuals in generating independence from institutions, traditions, and foundations that are no longer useful. Provocation encourages a desire to act in a certain way that would not have otherwise occurred to me, it focuses on the desire to act outside of the normal. It is a prodding to question conventional pieties resulting in the desire and necessity to act heroically and spontaneously. West argues that the essence of Emerson’s body of work is “activity, flux, movement, and energy. The aim of Emersonian provocation is to subjectify and humanize unique individuals” (West 1989, 25). According to West, “provocation and stimulation constituted a rhetorical strategy” that empowered the citizen in the midst of a turbulent and unstable culture” (West 1989, 26). Personality is the capacity to realize the highest potential of my moral self. That is to say, it allows me to place a premium on morals and ascribe value to the individual. “Emerson is the preeminent proponent of the dignity and worth of human personality. This means neither that all persons are created equal nor that every person can be as great as every other” (West 1989, 28). While West argues that this notion captures Emerson’s discourse and writings, he also recognizes that the fact overlooks indomitable forces aligned against African Americans. “The major significance of race in Emerson’s reflections on human personality has to do with its

relation to notions of circumstance, fate, limits—and, ultimately, history” (West 1989, 31). Although West points to Emerson’s theodicy of power, provocation, and personality as essential components in establishing a creative democracy, his reticence in fully recognizing the darkness of America history necessitated a structural change in the way American pragmatism is appropriated. For West, it was John Dewey that maintained an awareness of social structures and historical troubles that prevented ordinary people from participating in the fruits of democracy.

One of the attractions of the philosophy of John Dewey, then, was its ability to recognize historical injustice and societal evils, particularly as they were bound up with economic and political power. During the industrial revolution America experienced exponential growth in its population and economy. The farming industry in various areas of the country was largely eclipsed by the manufacturing industry. This contributed to wealth disparity and widespread suffering. “The social misery upon which Dewey opened his eyes in the late nineteenth century was principally that of economic deprivation, cultural dislocation, and personal disorientation” (West 1989, 80). He believed that pragmatism was as good as its ability to provoke action as well provide results towards a productive democracy. Coming from the tradition of the African American church where wrestling with suffering and sorrow were inextricably woven in the hymns and sermons, West was able to identify with the proclivity of Dewey towards the downtrodden. He portrays Dewey as “the greatest of the American pragmatist” because his type of pragmatism is a “mode of historical consciousness that highlights the conditioned and circumstantial character of human existence in terms of changing societies, cultures, and communities” (West 1989, 69-70). Dewey’s historical

consciousness shapes his brand of pragmatism. He has a keen awareness of institutions and hierarchal structures and their bearing on individuals as well as a democracy. For Dewey, we are heavily guided by history but also have the opportunity to orchestrate it, providing the proper resources are available. He makes judgment about the present with a historical, economical and political history in mind. Dewey values philosophy as a “mode of cultural critical action that focuses on the ways and means by which human beings have, do and can overcome obstacles, dispose of predicaments, and settle problematic situations” (West 1989, 86).

Philosophy, for Dewey, is therefore seen as an existential means of eradicating the barriers constructed through society as opposed to simply acquiring knowledge or applying methods. It functions as a method to observe the larger patterns and behavior of individual through the context of history and the appropriation of knowledge that is rooted in certain principles or mores that ultimately orchestrate actions. Knowledge is only as good as it is beneficial to individual experiences. “For Dewey, philosophy is a mode not of knowledge but of wisdom. And wisdom is conviction about values, a choice to do something, a preference for this rather than that form of living. Wisdom involves discriminating judgments and a desired future” (West 1989, 86). This future that Dewey points to is the result of “effects, fruits and consequences” instead of “self-evident truths and epistemic foundations” (West 1989, 90). The accumulation of knowledge is important when it has practicality in everyday life. This results in critical intelligence that leads to the liberation of thoughts, ideas, and judgments to articulate new paths. Dewey’s pragmatism advocates critical intelligence that “defers to no authority other than the enrichment of human experience and the alleviation of the human plight” (West 1989,

99). This fundamental objective is to cultivate a creative democracy that values all citizens, loosens the allegiance to dogmas or institutions, and develops a better life for everyone. This form of governing encourages the engagement of all people, welcoming differing perspectives, and articulating a discourse that is open and not prescribed. The vision of democracy that West takes from Dewey is expressed in its highest ideal in Dewey 1939 speech, “Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us.” In it he argues that democracy is receptive to social, political, and cultural criticism, guided toward human intervention and involvement and historically conscious with a keen awareness of the ability to construct a better and more productive future:

Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature. Belief in the Common Man is a familiar article in the democratic creed. That belief is without basis and significance save as it means faith in the potentialities of human nature as that nature is exhibited in every human being irrespective of race, color, sex, birth and family, of material or cultural wealth (Talissee & Aikin 2011, 150).

West embraces Dewey’s notion of creative democracy because it contends that a maturing and prosperous government must have differing voices from all communities; it is a faith in the critical intelligence of individuals to determine what will lead toward a productive society. As Dewey writes, “Democracy is a way of personal life controlled not merely by faith in human nature in general but by faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished” (Talissee & Aikin 2011, 150). Although Dewey advocated pragmatism that called for social, economic and cultural changes in America West argued that his advocacy was somewhat timid and called for more robust and resolute actions. Characterizing Dewey’s role in reshaping of pragmatism, West contends, “Dewey adopts a gradualist view of social change and remains a reformer rather than a revolutionary...He shuns confrontational

politics and agitational social struggle. The major means by which creative democracy is furthered is education and discussion” (West 1989, 102). West sees dialogue and discourse as essential components to democracy.

The reluctance of Emerson and Dewey to incorporate tragic sensibilities in their philosophy revealed the need for further changes in American pragmatism. *The American Evasion of Philosophy* marks a significant difference in the traditions of Emerson, Peirce, James, and Dewey in their inclusion of the forces of evil that were present in the struggles of those who were marginalized, particularly African Americans. Their slow moving assimilation into democracy was largely because of institutional forces such as slavery, Jim Crow, and white supremacy. These oppressive factors were largely ignored in the evolution of American Pragmatism. Therefore, West points to the philosophy of W.E.B. Du Bois as a significant contribution in broadening the understanding and magnitude of suffering while also strategically delineating the forces of obstruction. His body of work recognizes the African American struggle and the legacy of racism in preventing economic, cultural and social freedoms. West writes, “Du Bois’ basic concern is the specific predicament of Afro-Americans as victims of white capitalist exploitation at the workplace and of white capitalist and workers in the political system and cultural mores of the country” (West 1989, 145). His seminal text, *The Souls of Black Folk*, recognized the structures aligned against African Americans while also addressing a critical question that according to West, is relatively insignificant in the American political discourse, “How does it feel to be a problem” (Du Bois 1995, 43)? This probing query situates the history of African Americans in the context of slavery and oppression. Du Bois’ writing challenges America’s “rhetoric of freedom and democracy”

as it is “threatened by the oppression of black Americans” (West 1989, 132). Unlike the other pragmatist, Du Bois’ perspective of America wasn’t shrouded in romantic grandeur of a country filled with optimism and promise. His view instead was stained with the reality of slavery and the feeling of “double-consciousness”, that is to say, being in America but not able to participate in the democratic promises afforded its citizens (West 1989, 142). *The Souls of Black Folk* speaks to this contradiction:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois 1995, 45).

This dual citizenship, being an American and a problem, is what preoccupied Du Bois. He seeks to disclose the story of this peculiar identity and examines how African Americans can use their abilities to rise up against institutional forces. America is indebted to its problem people according to Du Bois, for they have provided this country with “its only indigenous music, the material foundations of its empire, and ethical critiques to remind America of its own moral limits” (West 1989, 143). The music encompasses an American narrative that is resilient and determined. West contends that slave labor was the foundation for American economic rule and the inequities suffered by American slaves and other injustices would always be the blemish on a professed American democracy. Du Bois’ commentary on the historical, cultural and social impediments to the upward mobility of African Americans addresses the perpetual failure of democracy. Although most of the aforementioned pragmatists were not reticent about racism during their time, neither considered the magnitude of its role in subjugating African Americans and excluding them from participating in a capitalist society but

Du Bois. His tradition rejects rhetoric that has situated America within a benign historical context. Instead he argues that racism and class struggle must be accounted for as African Americans attempt to acquire the promises intimated within the founding documents. Du Bois' view of pragmatism is necessary because it considers the entire American narrative:

It gives international perspective on the impetus and impediments to individuality and radical democracy, a perspective that highlights the plight of the wretched of the earth, namely, the majority of humanity who own no property or wealth, participate in no democratic arrangements, and whose individualities are crushed by hard labor and harsh living conditions (West 1989, 147-8).

West maintains that American democracy flourishes and prospers when all citizens are valued and acknowledged. He sees Du Bois' work as representative of this notion, for "The defeat of any effective movements for radical democracy is inseparable from the lack of even formal democracy for most black Americans" (West 1989, 146). The effective governance of America requires inclusiveness, and discourse from the wealthiest to the marginalized. At its core political participation should incorporate differing points of view so that the maximum potential for the democracy can be achieved. Du Bois' pragmatism contends that unless America recognizes the significance of black voices that have been silenced, its democracy is fragile and non productive. West argues that "creative powers resided among the wretched of the earth even in their subjugation, and the fragile structures of democracy in the world depend, in large part, on how these powers are ultimately exercised" (West 1989, 148). This preoccupation with the "wretched of the earth" is what aligns West with Du Bois. The attention that West gives to the role of the tragic in everyday life and the absurdities of the human condition underscore the need for principles that are adaptable and usable.

In summary, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* calls for pragmatism that recognizes evil in all parts of the nation, is critical of social, cultural, and historical practices, and is willing to empower human beings with judgment towards a creative democracy. West argues for pragmatism that is prophetic in its essence and rhetorical in its character. It functions in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets who spoke against evil and pronounced judgment upon a corrupt society. “I have dubbed it ‘prophetic’ in that it harkens back to the Jewish and Christian tradition of prophets who brought urgent and compassionate critique to bear on the evils of their day” (West 1989, 233). The sorrow and empathy that West demonstrates in his work is evident and directed towards those who are marginalized. His tone is likened to the Prophet Jeremiah in describing his anguish for the children of Israel in a desolate and forlorn place:

My grief is beyond healing; my heart is broken. Listen to the weeping of my people; it can be heard all across the land...I hurt with the hurt of my people. I mourn and am overcome with grief. Is there no medicine in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why is there no healing for the wounds of my people (Jeremiah 8:18-19, 21-22 New Living Translation)?

Appointed to speak as God’s spokesman, Jeremiah’s words communicated the heart of God. His concern for the children of Israel was an example of divine compassion for the oppressed. Within the Jewish tradition Amos, Isaiah, Micah and others were seen as the oracles of God to speak prophetically against injustices, to summon other nations towards goodness and to warn of impending judgment. West describes this prescient calling:

Prophetic witness consists of human acts of justice and kindness that attend to the unjust sources of human hurt and misery. Prophetic witness calls attention to the causes of unjustified suffering and unnecessary social misery. It highlights personal and institutional evil, including especially the evil of being indifferent to personal and institutional evil (West 2004, 17).

The clarion call of the Old Testament prophets was not solely to the nation of Israel but

to other neighboring countries and future inhabitants of the world. Isaiah's proclamation is to "people of the world, you who live on the earth" (Isaiah 18:3 New Living Translation). Jeremiah was appointed as a prophet to the nations. This commitment to the prophetic is emblematic of West's fidelity to the tradition of Martin Luther King Jr., and other fearless and courageous warriors who pronounced truth and condemned injustice. Pragmatism must support this prophetic project allowing it to speak for the suffering and experience the daily encounters with the absurdities of being human in a modern democratic system. It should point to the need for critical judgment of theory and practices largely proven ineffective in addressing poverty, disparities and other areas in the human condition. It should account for the dark history of America, slavery, Jim Crow, desegregation and the continual disparity that gives wealthy access to the means and assets within a capitalistic economy:

Prophetic pragmatism is a form of tragic thought in that it confronts candidly individual and collective experiences of evil in individuals and institutions—with little expectation of riddling the world of all evil. Yet it is a kind of romanticism in that it holds many experiences of evil to be neither inevitable nor necessary but rather the results of human agency, i.e., choices and actions (West 1989, 228).

By acknowledging the human struggle, prophetic pragmatism respects the role of tragedy throughout history and how it alters the present. It recognizes the traditions, beliefs and practices that determine the outcome in the lives of everyday citizens. West argues that rhetoric, which speaks to the situations of being human, modern and American, must not simply advocate for practices, traditions and strategies that have at best modest benefit in empowering individuals. Instead it should speak to the intellectual resources available within the philosophy of prophetic pragmatism. It should address universal issues that appear within particular circumstances.

Being A Chekhovian Christian

In addition to drawing on the work of the American pragmatists, Cornel West also directs us to “intellectual sources and existential resources that feed our courage to be, courage to love and courage to fight for democracy” (West 1989, xv). These perspectives and attitudes are pertinent to understanding the human struggle, for they give us the courage to live in hope and the strength to love one’s enemies. Specifically, West points to the literature of Anton Chekov, and the Christian existential philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard to explicate each of these viewpoints. Chekov’s writings illustrate compassion and concern for the suffering. His dramas and short stories encompass the lives of ordinary people that have become immersed in sorrow and despair. Their perpetual struggles underscore the notion that suffering is universal, and that all must meet and contend with suffering at some point in their lives. As West writes:

I find the incomparable works of Anton Chekhov-the best singular body of a modern artist-to be the wisest and deepest interpretations of what human beings confront in their daily struggles. His magisterial depiction of the cold Cosmos, indifferent Nature, crushing Fate and the cruel histories that circumscribe desperate, bored, confused, and anxiety-ridden yet love-hungry people, who try to endure against all odds, rings true for me (West 1999, xv-xvi).

But this recognition of the human struggle must be balanced with the Christian hope that he finds in Kierkegaard. After reading Kierkegaard as a teenager, he began to make meaning of the existential crises acquainted with the community of which he was part. Kierkegaard provided West with what he calls “non market values” of hope and courage, which helped him struggle for justice and recognize the significance of these qualities in the survival of those making it through the “absurdities of life” (West 1989, xvi).

In this section of the thesis I will therefore show how the works of Chekov and Kierkegaard are also important rhetorical resources to draw upon. With respect to

Chekov, I will first give an overview of his life, providing insight into his love for the Russian people and how this compassion became the centerpiece of his writings. Second, I will examine the short story by Chekov: *Peasants*. This story sheds light on the misery inflicted by institutions on its citizens and the suffering that is experienced and endured in isolation and in a community. Third, I will analyze Chekov's play *Three Sisters*, revealing the perpetual struggle the family has with loneliness, despair and disillusionment. With respect to Kierkegaard, I will give a brief overview of his teaching as it relates to the enlightenment West experienced in his understanding of evil and the internal conflict of faith and doubt that subsequently provided the framework for his philosophy. Understanding these perspectives through the writings of Chekov, the philosophy of Kierkegaard and the Christian tradition will equip the rhetor with resources that will yield a more effective discourse and understanding of what it means to be human, modern and American.

In Anton Chekov West finds a writer who best summarizes the human condition. His attention to the misery and suffering that individuals encounter daily is one of the reasons West has likened his corpus to the lyrics of a blues artist. In tune with the marginalized, Chekov exudes compassionate and love. Furthermore, his attention to the Russian peasants, oppressed and marginalized often produced contention within the upper echelon of society. His portrayal of neglect by the Russian government of its citizens as seen in "Peasants" incurred disdain from many including Tolstoy, who characterized the story as "a sin before the people" (Loehlin 2010, 26). Chekov's life and writing demonstrate wisdom. His friend and fellow writer Maxim Gorky characterized Chekov this way:

In front of that dreary, gray crowd of helpless people there passed a great, wise, and observant man; he looked at all these dreary inhabitants of his country, and with a sad smile, with a tone of gentle but deep reproach, with anguish in his face and in his heart, in a beautiful and sincere voice, he said to them: ‘You live badly, my friends. It is shameful to live like that (Moss, 2013).

Through short stories he portrays the struggles and strivings, perpetual despair and indomitable hope of individuals. His plays reveal the reality of a life lived without meaning. “His work is suffused with a consciousness of human suffering and stupidity, the sorry messes we make of our lives and the loft indifference of the nature that surrounds us” (Loehlin 2010, vii). In this context, Chekov shows how pathetic and abysmal the lives of his characters are. His intent is to point out this reality in hope of a better life. “Chekov himself said in 1902 that when people realized how badly they live, they would create another and better life for themselves...And so long as this different life does not exist, I shall go on saying to people again and again, please understand that your life is bad and dreary” (Moss, 2013). There is recognition of class conflicts, abuse, poverty, lack of education and social parody, ultimately highlighting the absurdities of life. He uses elements of comedy and tragedy in his work to paint a full portrait of life. His characters are often entrapped in the midst of a situation of their own making or have become a victim of the inherent injustices of society. Their painful struggles are internalized thus preventing them from advancing beyond personal fears. Chekov emphasizes human struggle and the complexities of human nature. “His plays embody an attempt to awaken an audience to the possibilities of change and improvement. It is not existential angst at the fixed nature of the world that is being expressed by Chekhov, but his sense of humanity’s comic and pathetic failure to make the most of the world” (Borny 2010, 27). Often there is a struggle between the individual and a group, or a struggle

between a person and social forces beyond their control. In either case Chekov infuses comic and tragic sensibilities in these situations to highlight the absurdities in life and the courage and hope to escape the suffering. West argues that these elements of tragedy and comedy correlate to aspects of jazz and blues. “Like the best blues and jazz artists, he enacts melancholic yet melioristic indictments of misery without concealing the wounds inflicted or promising permanent victory” (West 1999, xvi). Despite societal injustices, poverty, inner conflicts or outward dissension with others, Chekov’s characters are hopeful and courageous.

In the short story, “Peasants,” Chekov gives attention to a prevailing sense of hope in the midst of despair and desolation. Nikolai, a Moscow waiter has become ill and has to return with his wife Olga and daughter Sasha to the village of his youth. It is an impoverished village and his family is less than delighted in welcoming his return. The family has suffered immense hardships, poverty has pervaded the land, and it has affected their perspective on life. Nikolai’s mother is a violent curmudgeon; his brother and father are alcoholics. Describing a day that could aptly contextualize the place and its people, Chekov writes:

And how lovely life would have been in this world, in all likelihood, if it were not for poverty, horrible, hopeless poverty, from which one can find not refuge! One had only to look round at the village to remember vividly all that had happened the day before, and the illusion of happiness which seemed to surround them vanished instantly (Chekhov 2000, 252).

The town was deprived of its productive citizens as they were sent off to Moscow to become waiters, cooks, and domestic help. The older, less educated and refuse of society were left to only reminiscence on how life was. Their sleep was haunted with images of death and despair:

The lamp died down. And the dusk, and the two little windows sharply defined by the moonlight, and the stillness and the creak of the cradle, reminded them for some reason that life was over, that nothing one could do would bring it back...You doze off, you forget yourself, and suddenly someone touches your shoulder or breathes on your cheek—and sleep is gone; your body feels cramped, and thoughts of death keep creeping into your mind. You turn on the other side: death is forgotten, but old dreary, sickening thoughts of poverty, of food, of how dear flour is getting, stray through the mind, and a little later again you remember that life is over and you cannot bring it back (Chekhov 2000, 273).

The perpetual longing for the past, the idleness of mind, wrestling with the darkness, are inherent qualities within the writing of Chekov that reveal his awareness of the human condition and the need to ameliorate it. Attending church was an outlet to escape the horrors of life within the impoverished village. Although their religion did little to assuage their feelings of hopelessness, which underscores the notion that Chekov had regarding dogmas and institutions as the sole source of truth or method of freedom. At the end of “Peasants,” Nikolai dies and his wife and daughter leave the village.

Olga reflects on the town that she had become fond of, particularly because of the care given to Nikolai during his illness:

She was sorry to part from the village and the peasants...In the course of the summer and the winter there had been hours and days when it seemed as though these people lived worse than the beasts, and to live with them was terrible; they were coarse, dishonest, filthy, and drunken; they did not live in harmony...Yes, to live with them was terrible; but yet, they were human beings, they suffered and wept like human beings, and there was nothing in their lives for which one could not find excuse. Hard labour that made the whole body ached at night, the cruel winters, the scanty harvests, the overcrowding; and they had no help and none to whom they could look for help (Chekhov 2000, 290).

In “Peasants” Chekov incorporates the culpability institutions had in subjecting its citizens to poverty. The Zemstvos or taxperson was responsible for the ills of the people. Their pleas for help had fallen on deaf ears, ignored by society. Their poverty and suffering was not solely of their own making. They had become citizens entangled in the dread and misery of life. Chekov’s love for those agonizing with the absurdities of life is

evident in this story. West identifies with the “blues sensibilities” and the “balance sense of life” that permeates Chekov’s work:

Actually Chekov is the great poet of the comic of incongruity, but it is very high comedy. He talks about failure and inadequacy of intelligence in the most sophisticated and intelligent way. Chekov for me is the great writer of compassion. He understands the essence of the best of Russian orthodoxy: absolute condemnation of no one, forgiveness for all, compassion to all (West 1999, 556).

Chekov’s play “Three Sisters” demonstrates the dissonant tones of life, displaying loneliness, disillusion, and rejection. Life is meaningless. The absence of love, family, and opportunity, contribute to the existential crisis Olga, Vershinin and Masha encounter. In the beginning of the play, each sister communicates her desire to return to Russia, nostalgic for the time when life was familiar and meaningful. “History becomes the only reassurance for these characters that they ‘matter’ and that they will be ‘remembered’. They must ‘suffer’ in order to create a future life of happiness for their descendants” (Wallace 2011, 73). From longing to start life over again to attempting to understand the ugliness of life, each scene underscores the discord amongst each other that result from frustrations and depressions within. Ultimately the sisters long to find meaning in their suffering. In the final scene, when they are huddled together, Irna summarizes the sentiments of their lives: “There will come a day when everyone will know why we had to suffer like this, what it was all for, there won’t be any more mystery, but until then, we have to live...have to work, just work” (Columbus 2005, 225-226)! In spite of the absurdities in their life, there is hope. Chekov’s work situates his characters in the midst of despair, but they remain resilient, ready to fight against the darkness and press toward another day. Olga communicates these expressions as she attempts to squeeze hope from anguish:

That music is so happy, so bright, it makes me want to live! Oh God! Time just passes, we'll fade away, be forgotten, our faces, our voices, who we were, all forgotten. But our suffering will become the happiness of those who come after us, happiness and peace will cover the whole world, and they will bless and thank those of us living now. Our lives aren't over, my sweet sisters. We're going to go on living! That music is so happy, so joyful, and I feel as if we will know why we've lived, why we've suffered...If only we knew, if only we could know (*Columbus* 2005, 226)!

As a “Chekhovian Christian” West extracts from the work of Chekov a compassion and love for ordinary people who are attempting to make sense of the tragedies within their life (West 1999, xv). He argues along with Chekov that ideologies often will fall short in attempting to assuage the misery of individuals. Both except the reality of death and try to highlight its presence and how to best wrestle with it. “I find inspiration in his refusal to escape from the pain and misery of life by indulging in dogmas, doctrines or dreams as well as abstract systems, philosophic theodicies or political utopias” (West 1999, xvi). This underscores West’s need for prophetic pragmatism, to speak to the evils of society while also shining a light on the philosophical methods of pragmatism that need to be changed in order to allow those who are suffering to have a voice in the public discourse. The Westian formulation of what it means to be a Chekhovian Christian is summarized by an intense love and compassion for the marginalized; that is to say, it involves loving people as Jesus would and a perpetual internal wrestling with the forces of doubt and faith attempting to stymie this love. Unlike Chekov, however, West embraces the Judeo-Christian faith and maintains that his love is situated within that faith in the “skeptical Christian tradition of Montaigne, Pascal and Kierkegaard—figures in touch with (and often tortured by) an inescapable demon of doubt inscribed within their humble faith” (West 1999, xvi).

In Kierkegaard, then, West finds a common thread in contending with the paradoxes of the Christian faith lived through human experience. As a youth he wrestled with understanding the suffering, death and despair in the lives of African Americans. Hearing sermons about the trials of Job, the crucifixion, the Israelite captivity and other mournful events, West attempted to grapple with the presence of darkness in the everyday lives of ordinary people. Kierkegaard provided for him a sense of stability and clarity. It shed light on the tragicomic existence within his community as well as a broader view of how those who are entangled within the absurdities of life survive. Instead of pursuing “academic philosophy” West became interested in the Kierkegaardian tradition that was interested in “the concrete, the particular, the existential, the suffering beings and the loving beings that we are and can be” (West 1999, 20). This brand of philosophy also forced him to confront the question, “How do you really struggle against the suffering in a loving way, to leave a legacy in which people would be able to accent their own loving possibility in the midst of so much evil” (West 1999, 20)? This fundamental question clearly points toward the tradition of Martin Luther King Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and others in the Civil Rights Movement who forged ahead with courage and love to stand against the evils of white supremacy and institutional structures of racism. West takes from Kierkegaard the conviction and boldness to move forward despite anxiety and doubt. In other words, West’s rhetoric is generated from what Kierkegaard calls, “the leap of faith” (Wartenberg 2011, 79). This philosophical notion concludes that belief in the existence of God is irrational and absurd to the rational standards of the world. To embrace and adhere to God and Christian principles one has to suspend rational common sense, for there is nothing logical or

reasonable regarding the principles of faith. In other words “Kierkegaard analogizes the situation to standing on the edge of a precipice over which you must leap to get to the other side. The two realms of the ordinary and of faith are so different from each other that there can be no gradual transition from one to the other” (Wartenberg 2011, 85). Because this leap is antithetical to the cultural norms and societal values, anxiety and doubt are inextricably woven into whether there should be a jump into the seemingly unknown or not. Kierkegaard says this decision is made in “fear and trembling” (Wartenberg 2011, 86). That is to say, the anxiety that accompanies the decision is to be expected because of the trepidation acquainted with the unknown. Courage is required to take the “leap of faith” because “one will have to leave the world of ordinary human experience to base one’s life on a principle for which one has none of the usual evidence we rely on in making decisions” (Wartenberg 2011, 86). This conflict between values and acceptance, principles and popularity are what West argues for when he speaks of the need for prophetic pragmatism. There is commonality with Kierkegaard’s tradition and West understands that his wrestling with good and evil, faith and doubt are to be expected. He acknowledges the futility of attempting to make sense of a Christian faith that stands outside of the margins of society:

Like Kierkegaard, whose reflections on Christian faith were so profound yet often so frustrating, I do not think it possible to put forward rational defenses of one’s faith that verify its veracity or even persuade one’s critics. Yet it is possible to convey to others the sense of deep emptiness and pervasive meaningless one feels if one is not critically aligned with an enabling tradition. One risks not logical inconsistency but actual insanity; the issue is not reason or irrationality but life or death. Of course, the fundamental philosophical question remains whether the Christian gospel is ultimately true (West 1989, 233).

Viewed from the perspective of a Chekhovian Christian through a Kierkegaardian lens,

West looks at the existential crisis of those grappling with despair, dread, and death with a measure of hope. This hope is rooted in the Christian tradition that provides him with examples of inevitable suffering and ultimate victory, in the lives of biblical characters such as Joseph, Job, the children of Israel and Jesus. On the existential level the Christian tradition gives West a point of identification with the cross of Christ and His suffering and a hope that is acquainted with the Christian faith. As a Chekhovian Christian West demonstrates love for those least likely to receive it, particularly the marginalized. Describing this tradition and the influence that it has on his work, West says, “This tradition enables me feebly to love my way through the absurdity of life and the darkness of history” (West 1989, xvi). His Christian faith gives him the hope that social reform is possible. He chooses to love despite of an array of institutional challenges facing those who have been ensnarled in the legacy of suffering.

I have examined Cornel West’s approach to the world through prophetic pragmatism, the writings of Anton Chekhov and the Christian existential philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard. Finally I conclude this section by analyzing the meaning of tragicomic. West argues that the tragicomic are inextricably woven to the universal human condition. An intense love for truth and justice can lead into circumstances that are fraught with difficulties or that require one to laugh at the absurdities and contradictions in life. This is where tragicomic sensibilities become apparent in the human condition.

Tragicomic

Tragedy entails human suffering, moving toward an inexorable fate; a struggle that has been provoked through societal forces and practices, with often inevitable consequences. According to West, tragic refers “to the freedom that humans have to explore the possibility of even greater freedom, but against constraints, usually constraints of which they are unaware” (West 1999, 557). It looks at the appearances and considers what should I feel about this situation. People caught within the tragic often are attempting to make sense of the absurdities and incongruous elements that contradict with life. Tragedy within the context of being human involves individuals and society:

Tragic highlights the irreducible predicament of unique individuals who undergo dread, despair, disillusionment, disease, and death and the institutional forms of oppression that dehumanize people. Tragic thought is not confined solely to the plight of the individual; it also applies to social experiences of resistance, revolution, and societal reconstruction (West 1989, 228).

During increasingly difficult situations tragedy generates conflict and places before individuals and communities choices. In these situations rhetoric is essential for pointing out the universality of suffering and the combined responsibility that all share in making life better. Although life is fraught with difficulties, the comic, on the other hand, considers what should I do about this situation, deliberating what the appropriate response is. “The comic is a way of acknowledging those limitations and the incongruity between those high aspirations and where one actually ends up” (West 1999, 557). Individuals caught within a comic situation recognize the conflict, the choices, and the possible conclusion. Often there is uncertainty about the future, but we still move forward. Human sensibilities are entangled with complexities, contradictions, and conflicts. Despite the reward, there is a quality within humanity to exhibit courage and

tenacity. West points to this in the literature of Anton Chekov. In his plays and short stories the lofty dreams and aspirations of his character often fall short of their expectations. This comic essence exhibits the incongruity and frustration with life. According to West the human condition is tragicomic, maintaining elements of both tragedy and comedy, because it entails suffering in the hope of a better existence.

The tragicomic is 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. This tragicomic hope is expressed in America most profoundly in the wrenchingly honest yet compassionate voices of the black freedom struggle; most poignantly in the painful eloquence of the blues; and most exuberantly in the improvisational virtuosity of jazz (West 2004, 16).

In the tragicomic you are caught moving against the grain, towards a seemingly unavoidable fate, with the capacities to make choices that could bring a favorable ending. In these situations, weariness of the human condition is the energy that propels you towards the unknown. Tragicomic sensibilities are concerned with the struggle against evil and the belief in a better future.

Two inherent qualities of tragicomic are courage and hope. Struggling against the current of a long history of racism, evil and disparity calls for endurance and fortitude to believe in the possibility of freedom and justice. Courage is required in the face of impossible choices while hope is necessary to peer beyond the past with its denials and intransigence towards the fulfillment of democratic promises. West argues that courage is predicated upon a commitment to the truth, which then enables one to suffer and sacrifice until the truth is proclaimed. “Political courage is based on a profound commitment. Commitment is fundamentally about focusing on the suffering and trying to understand where it comes from, its causes, and its effects. At the same time, it is about trying to prepare oneself to sacrifice and to serve in such a way that one attempts to

overcome the suffering” (West 1999, 409). West points to this enduring qualities of courage, commitment and sacrifice, inherent within people who have been marginalized and had to contend with the perpetual situations of social injustices, institutional inequalities, and a history of racial supremacy in America. While these are universal traits applicable to those grappling with the vicissitudes of life, West’s primary attention is given to the African American struggle. The protracted existence of evil and enslavement exhibited throughout history were evident in structural and institutional places of power, thus preventing any upward mobility or progress within the American democratic system. The constant state of wrestling is subsumed within an existential crisis that looks for meaning in “death, dread and despair” (West 1999, xv). It can lead to what West addresses in his seminal text, *Race Matter’s*, as “nihilism” (West 1994, 23). This state of being is a major threat to the upward mobility of those who are beset with perennial problems that undermine human survival. West defines nihilism this way:

Nihilism is the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness...the major enemy of black survival in America has been and is neither oppression nor exploitation but rather the nihilistic threat—that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning. For as long as hope remains and meaning is preserved, the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive (West 1994, 23).

These qualities maintain tragicomic sensibilities, which are clearly evident in answering the question of what it means to be human in America. This existence allows one to live with an abiding tension, a constant striving between suffering and survival, a faceoff with death but determination to do something with the life that is ahead. “To be human, at the most profound level, is to encounter honestly the inescapable circumstances that constrain us, yet muster the courage to struggle compassionately for our own unique individualities and for more democratic and free societies” (West 1999, xvi). This

commitment to service and courage is evident in the lives of those who struggled against injustice. Mamie Till is an example of courageous individuals that stood against the darkness acquainted with being a human in America for truth. West cites Till's willingness to keep open her son's casket after he was brutally killed, "one of the most courageous moments in American history" (West 2008, 19). She was determined for the world to witness the horrors of racial injustices and violence. Although gripped with sorrow, Till refuses to be bitter and instead uses this pivotal moment as an opportunity to demonstrate courage and love for truth. Gripped with sorrow she says, "I don't have a minute to hate. I'm going to pursue justice for the rest of my life" (West 2008, 20). West characterizes her actions as emblematic of "spiritual maturity, moral wisdom, care and love" (West 2008, 20). Her stance against the evils of the day paved the way for later non-violent demonstrations of the Civil Rights Movement. West argues that the hope displayed by Till was threatening to the status quo:

This kind of tragicomic hope is dangerous—and potentially subversive—because it can never be extinguished. Like laughter, dance, and music, it is a form of elemental freedom that cannot be eliminated or snuffed out by any elite power. Instead, it is inexorably resilient and inescapably seductive—even contagious" (Democracy 2004, 217).

The human condition is to daily abide within the context of the tragicomic, without losing hope, yet understanding that the struggle is a perpetual one as long as evil is present. It is a realization that being human is a universal situation; we are all entangled in the absurdities of life; we all face death and despair.

After looking at Cornel West's approach to the world through the lens of Anton Chekhov, pragmatism and tragicomic, we find tools that a rhetorician can use to bring additional clarity in understanding the human condition. These are necessary in

promoting an ethical response to human suffering and the constraints and limitations that are universally shared. West calls for a rhetoric that is subsumed in the compassion and understanding of Chekhov. It must speak to the depth of human misery and the hope for a better existence. With this Westian formulation in mind I now want to look at his notion of what it means to be human, modern and American as three distinct rhetorical situations.

CHAPTER TWO

To Speak As A Human, A Modern And As An American

My own work and life have always unfolded under the dark shadows of death, dread and despair in search of love, dialogue and democracy. I am first and foremost a blues man in the world of ideas—a jazz man in the life of the mind—committed to keeping alive the flickering candles of intellectual humility, personal compassion and social hope while living in our barbaric century. Three related and fundamental questions motivate my writings: What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be modern? What does it mean to be American? My perennial wrestling with these overwhelming queries is rooted in my terrifying experience and constant awareness of the radical contingency and fragility of life (West 1999, xv).

West looks at the human condition, and the works of art human beings produce, in three ways. First there is being human which is a universal condition that speaks to all people in which concerns our struggle in the face of death and fallibility in which speak of our comic and tragic sensibilities. Second there is the condition of being modern, which speaks to people in a particular age in which power must be challenged with intelligence. Third, there is the idea of being American, which is to confront historical legacies of injustice through political action and agency. The sensibilities of each are understood by artists and writers that contextualize the zeitgeist in song and story. Writers such as Herman Melville, Toni Morrison, Anton Chekhov, Samuel Beckett and

Lorraine Hansberry are “all great dramatic poets of death, courage and compassion” (West 1999, xvii). Their work reveals the complexities of our age and search for answers to the pressing problems that have become a product of social evils. West argues, “Profound music leads us—beyond language to the dark roots of our scream and the celestial heights of our silence” (West 1999, xvii). John Coltrane, Louis Armstrong, Sarah Vaughn and Curtis Mayfield, represent the blues, jazz and soul tradition that defines the spirit of resilience and hope, struggle and faith against institutions and complex power structures. In this section I will examine these three different rhetorical situations that serve as the foundation for the work of West. I will demonstrate the use of literature, blues and jazz music to address the constraints within each condition and express the nature of the rhetorical situation. In these, distinct exigencies will be drawn out, thus calling for a specific rhetoric that’s ethical and promotes human agency and political action. I will look at Martin Luther King, Jr.’s *Eulogy for the Martyred Children* as an example of a rhetorical response that speaks to the human condition. *A Time To Break Silence* King’s speech in response to America’s participation in the Vietnam will be analyzed as a rhetorical response to a modern situation. Finally, Senator Obama’s speech on race given during the 2008 Presidential Campaign will be looked as an example of a rhetorical response to an American problem. Although I am drawing from American works of art, I argue that these artifacts as works of human beings reflect the human condition not just in America but everywhere.

Being Human

To be human is to suffer, shudder and struggle courageously in the face of inevitable death. To be human, at the most profound level, is to encounter honestly the inescapable circumstances that constrain us, yet muster the courage to struggle compassionately for our own unique individualities and for more democratic and free societies (West 1999, xvi).

Cornel West's body of work attempts to answer the question of what it means to be human in America. He wrestles with the perplexities in life that contribute to an environment of despair, dread and death. He also examines the indomitable strength that is resident in individuals as they show resilience in the daily difficulties. To be human is rooted in the tragic and comic. It is a perpetual struggle against the absurdities of life, a conscious effort to hope against the prevailing tides of evil. Being human requires fortitude and stamina that are irrepressible, molded and tried in the crucible of suffering. It is birthed in the midst of a callous and often indifferent society. To be human means to engage in a daily struggle whether it is economical, physical, psychological, or social wise. It is an acknowledgement of a seemingly indomitable forces aligned against you with an even greater determination to defeat it. This is a universal condition of struggle and death. "To be human is to call for help. We saw birth itself as a catastrophe: you're thrown in space and time to die. The flesh fails. Then the question becomes simple—how you gonna cope? Life is shot through with contradictions and incongruities" (West 2009, 101). Moving through the darkness in faith, hope and love requires conviction, commitment, and courage. These values are predicated upon a willingness to "suffer, shudder and struggle...in the face of inevitable death" (West 1999, xvi). It is a perpetual wrestling with choices that can ultimately lead to life or death. When we look at something as a human we look at something existentially, that is to say, this is what we

all are, this is what we all face. It is a universal condition. While our individual pains are particular and unique to a specific situation there is also a broader understanding that is to be gained from the bond of suffering. The death, dread and despair, that are interwoven in humanity is what encompasses Chekhov's work and what West sees as the dissonance in life. This state of being that refuses to die under the withering pressures of life is evident in blues music. West identifies this genre as apt to describe the human condition, because it speaks to the daily absurdities experienced by those who are on the margins of society. Its language of a hopeful cry is embedded within the tunes of John Coltrane's "Alabama," Sarah Vaughan's "Send In The Clowns," Louis Armstrong's "West End Blues" and Duke Ellington's "Mood Indigo." "Music...is the grand archaeology into and transfiguration of our guttural cry...Profound music leads us—beyond language—to the dark roots of our scream and the celestial heights of our silence" (West 1999, xvii). The language of those who suffer through "the absurdity of life and the darkness of history" is the blues (West 1999, xvi). That is to say, blues unveils the depth of sorrow and anguish for those in contention with the presence of evil yet willing to continue fighting for another day. Blues music evokes a response to tragicomic situations that is resilient and fearless. To be human in America is to have blues sensibilities. Despair and death, hope and struggle, are intertwined with the lyrical content. "The blues is the elegant coping with catastrophe that yields a grace and dignity so that the spirit of resistance is never completely snuffed out" (West 2008, 219). It is the voice of those on the outside of power structures. A blues metaphor links the possible with the somewhat unexpected. It is an expression of the dissonance within life. The tensions that develop from the difficulties of life are given voice to through the lyrical

content of blues. It is the voice of the oppressed and marginalized. Ralph Ellison identifies blues as an apt summary of an incongruous life:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near comic lyricism. As a form the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically (Werner 1998, 69).

People who are acquainted with the blues are aware of the uncertainties of life and yet muster the courage to look beyond the pitifulness of the present situation. Langston Hughes underscores the irony in the blues. "Sad as the blues may be, there's almost always something humorous about them—even if it's the kind of humor that laughs to keep from crying" (Werner 1998, 68). It forces confrontation with realities that are incongruent and unfair.

Within this context West gives rhetors the language needed to orient themselves toward the frame of mind of being human in America. He contends that discourse that doesn't recognize the inexorable situation that restricts those who have been marginalized is ineffective and disingenuous. Rhetoric that's credible and efficacious must account for the prevailing factors that contribute to a life of despair as well as the indomitable courage and hope exhibited by those who have become a participant in the fight for survival. As a rhetorician you can approach any struggle in a way that doesn't solely focus a particular thing or a particular person. Instead this human condition allows the rhetor to speak to the universal qualities that are shared in suffering. Rhetorically the admonition is to stop looking at the particulars at the expense of the universal. Let's stop coddling our own needs and have the courage to transcend this pain and sorrow.

An example of the power of rhetoric to transcend a human tragedy is found in the eulogy given by Martin Luther King, Jr., to the parents of the children who were killed in the 16th Street Baptist Church. In the *Eulogy for the Martyred Children*, King situated the deceased in the context of a play. As lead characters, their role is significant because their blood cried out from the ground. The sacrifice of these blameless children rhetorically assigned blame to a nation of cowards, murderers and hypocrites. King's eulogy considered the public opinion, stereotypes and images promoted by the media. Before creating a community of affiliation, it was imperative to address the occurrences that brought them to that place. Tragedy looks at an appearance and considers, how shall I feel about this? How do I ascribe usefulness to it? King admonished that God hadn't diminished in power and He would give meaning to this event. "God still has a way of wringing good out of evil" (Washington 1992, 116). Speaking from a biblical narrative he reminded the mourners of the role children have in the kingdom of God to be leaders. If allowed, their death could bring reconciliation and hope to an otherwise desolate situation. Death is described as a powerful agent with redemptive qualities to illuminate the darkness, create peace and harmony. Ultimately, the irony of death is that it could do what life in many ways failed to do. Death would be the light to illuminate the moral conscience of a nation. King encouraged the audience to transcend the tragedy. In his comic discourse the crowd was asked to make a deliberative judgment regarding the actions of the bombers and derive a conclusion unlike what was expected:

We must not become bitter, nor must we harbor the desire to retaliate with violence. No, we must lose faith in our white brothers. Somehow we must believe that the most misguided among them can learn to respect the dignity and the worth of all human personality (Washington 1992, 117).

Rhetorically King utilized comedic language as he sought to guide his audience into a more contemplative manner of viewing the tragedy. He admonished against retribution and encouraged a reconciliatory response. By acknowledging the evildoers, King assigned blame, but argued that their actions were not representative of the larger community. Even in the most horrific event hope could be found. The eulogy transitioned from a discourse on the tragic and comic elements of this event to a reassuring word to the grieving family members. It was also an admonition to view their experience from the biblical perspective:

I hope you can find some consolation from Christianity's affirmation that death is not the end. Death is not a period that ends the great sentence of life, but a comma that punctuates it to more lofty significance. Death is not a blind alley that leads the human race into a state of nothingness, but an open door which leads man into life eternal (Washington 1992, 117).

King rhetorically tried to change the appearance of death from an untimely, unwanted enemy to an occurrence that transitions from an earthly life to a heavenly reward.

Interwoven in this encouragement was the need to bring meaning to their suffering and an offering of hope from God. In this rhetorical discourse we see what it means to be human, to suffer and struggle, yet transcend it. King transcended the tragedy and offered them a different perspective of life and death. This Christian perspective that he impressed would give them comfort and meaning. They would also transport them “from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope.” Weaver summarizes what the words of this eulogy intended to do:

Rhetoric moves the soul with a movement which cannot finally be justified logically. It can only be valued analogically with reference to some supreme image. Therefore when the rhetorician encounters some soul ‘sinking beneath the double load of forgetfulness and vice’ he seeks to re-animate it by holding up to its sight the order of presumptive goods (Weaver 1953, 23).

The rhetoric of Martin Luther King was ultimately designed to direct the hopes and actions of the civil rights community. His words would encourage a more meaningful way of life centered in love and forgiveness.

Being Modern

To be modern is to have the courage to use one's critical intelligence to question and challenge the prevailing authorities, powers and hierarchies of the world...to be modern is to live dangerously and courageously in the face of relentless self-criticism and inescapable fallibilism; it is to give up the all-too-human quest for certainty and indubitability owing to the historicity of our claims" (West 1999, xvii).

West argues for an honest judgment of the dark side of American history and the effects of its practices. It must be critiqued and accounted for. His work centers on the absurdity of human suffering in the midst of a modern society. This requires courage to confront institutional establishments regarding its abdication of democratic principles and moral pieties:

My obsession with modernity and evil with forms of unjustified suffering and unnecessary social misery in modern times, propels me to put a premium on the analytical understandings of the causes of this social misery and the cultural sources for resistance to this suffering. My initial starting point is courage in the face of death, of social death, civic death, psychic death, and physical death (Yancy 2001, 348).

West calls for discourse that challenges prevailing dogmas and traditions. In understanding what it means to be modern we arrive at questions of ethics. That is to say, it means addressing the responsibility of a government to its citizenry; understanding the relationship a complex power structure to individuals within a society. Furthermore, determining how communities wrestle with hierarchal establishments embodied with institutions of modernity and utilizes them for the good. When a nation is derelict in the "ethics of democracy" (Menand 1997, 182) there is need for dialogue that "may result in

a dizziness, vertigo or shudder that unhinges us from our moorings or yanks us from our anchors” (West 1999, xviii). This discourse discloses the existential crises of meaning in the persistent struggle of marginalized humans. It is an invitation to live “with a sense of the dialogical—the free encounter of mind, soul and body that relates to others in order to be unsettled, unnerved, and unhoused” (West 1999, xvii). This state of being calls into question that which has historically constrained human progress. It utilizes what John Dewey calls “critical intelligence” to criticize, exploit and act against the power dynamics with a complex world. The first important point here is that critical intelligence is available to all peoples; it is neither the birthright of the highbrow nor the property of the professional” (West 1989, 97). As West sees it, “the aims of critical intelligence are to overcome obstacles, resolve problems, and project realizable possibilities in pressing predicaments” (West 1989, 97). This type of judgment is used to analyze, diagnose and understand the challenges faced in a complex society for the purpose of human agency and political change.

Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech on the Vietnam War is a rhetorical response to a modern situation. *A Time To Break Silence* was given on April 4, 1967 at a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned About Vietnam, held at Riverside Church in New York City. King condemned the greed and hubris of America’s capitalistic society that had neglected its responsibility to the poor at home and instead channeled resources towards an international conflict. He judged the actions as morally wrong. ‘America is the ‘greatest purveyor of violence in the world today’—King declares, ‘Its soul has become almost ‘totally poisoned.’ He calls for a reorientation of values that prioritizes people:

I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin,

we must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered (Washington 1992, 148).

As King saw it, capitalism had caused an unfair distribution of wealth, power and resources therefore the institutions that had promulgated this inequity must be demolished and made anew:

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring (Washington 1992, 148).

To be modern is to use critical intelligence to diagnose the failures within structures of power for the purpose of mobilizing action through human agency. Not only are criticisms levied against institutions but also solutions are given to improve upon an unfair and unjust system. King concludes the speech by giving his audience and America something to do, charging them to act with courage and conviction:

We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent coannihilation. We must move past indecision to action. Now let us begin. Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter, but beautiful, struggle for a new world. This the calling of the sons of God, and our brothers wait eagerly for our response. Shall we say the odds are too great? Shall we tell them the struggle is too hard? Will our message be that the forces of American life militate against their arrival as full men, and we send our deepest commitment to their cause, whatever the cost? The choice is ours, and though we might prefer it otherwise, we must choose in this crucial moment of human history (Washington 1992, 151).

The Vietnam speech was a rhetorical response to a modern situation. King's language was crafted to critique and challenge America. It also served the purpose of diagnosing the present condition and mapping out a strategy to move beyond the horrors of Vietnam.

Through the rhetorical use of symbols and metaphors King changed the prevailing narrative from an American liberation to an American tragedy. His critical judgment was an example of what West calls for in the language of those who “live dangerously and courageously in the face of relentless self-criticism and inescapable fallibilism” (West 1999, xvii). It was an occasion for King to pronounce judgment upon institutions of power that influenced the culture of America and drew attention to the ideals and democratic principles that had been neglected.

To be modern is to live in a world where critical intelligence is exercised and valued. It is to have an understanding of the nature of the world as a capitalist society with various dynamics and extensions of power that ultimately control the lives of the citizenry. These seats of power are within financial institutions, political parties, industries and other bastions of influence. West calls for a rhetoric that “explores the intellectual sources and existential resources” to provoke human agency that leads towards a fair and just democratic process. This critical discourse begins with understanding America’s troubled past and the possibilities of a promising future for all citizens. It is West’s understanding of what it means to be American.

Being American

To be American is to raise perennially the frightening democratic question: What does the public interest have to do with the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our society? To be American is to be part of a dialogical and democratic operation that grapples with the challenge of being human in an open-ended and experimental manner (West 1999, xix).

The idea of being American necessitates an examination of America’s historical legacy of injustice and the freedom to “be part of a dialogical and democratic operation that grapples with the challenge of being human in an open-ended and experimental

manner” (West 1999, xviii). It is a clear understanding of our American democracies. Despite the flaws of America, greatness has been achieved. It has flourished within the context of particular strivings: slavery in contrast with freedom, powerful in contrast with powerless, imperialism in contrast with the democracy. The notion of being American, at its best, is a functional and burgeoning democracy. At best it allows for dissent and discussion, voices and not merely echoes; it encourages participation by the demos. At worst, it is an institution of the powerful and elite controlling the everyday people and the underclass. In these dialectical communities cultures have arisen, traditions have been established and beliefs have been constructed. For democracies to take place there must be, “a restlessness, energy and boldness that galvanizes people to organize and mobilize themselves in a way that makes new opportunities and possibilities credible and worth the effort” (West 1999, xviii). This sort of organization encourages critical judgment while facilitating a creative democracy. West sees these qualities as essential to alleviating human stress and despair. Because of the many parts that ultimately function as a whole, the instability, different voices with disparate meanings he likens the development and growth of a democracy to jazz music. “Like jazz, democracy is fundamentally about self-criticism, self-correction, self-examination. It allows for society to engage in critical, reflective, experimental, improvisational modes of being” (Gordon, 2013). In this section I will examine the growth of a democracy revealed in the literature of Ralph Emerson and James Baldwin. Next I will examine a speech given by Senator Obama during the 2008 presidential campaign on race that addressed an American problem. Finally I will look at the qualities of jazz that portray the particulars of a democracy.

To be American is to be historically minded. It maintains an awareness of America's troubled past but is anchored in the possibility of better horizons. It is "to give ethical significance to the future by viewing the present as terrain capable of transcending any past and thereby arriving at a new identity and community" (West 1999, xix). This belief in America's potential to redress its wrongs and become a republic that adheres to its principles is the hope expressed in West's body of work. He harkens to the tradition of Ralph Emerson, Herman Melville, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Luther King Jr. in their democratic pursuit for individuality, justice and freedom. Each brought attention to the particular evils of his day, while also addressing the universal suffering encountered by the marginalized and the failure of America to actualize its promises. Summing up their zeal and conviction, West describes their place in the pantheon of democratic trailblazers:

That democratic fervor is found in the beacon calls for imaginative self-creation in Ralph Waldo Emerson, in the dark warnings of imminent self-destruction in Herman Melville, in the impassioned odes to democratic possibility in Walt Whitman. It is found most urgently and poignantly in the prophetic and powerful voices of the long black freedom struggle—from the democratic eloquence of Frederick Douglass to the soaring civic sermons of Martin Luther King Jr., in the wrenching artistic honesty of James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, and in the expressive force and improvisatory genius of the blues/jazz tradition, all forged in the night side of America and defying the demeaning strictures of white supremacy (West 2004, 22).

In *Democracy Matters* West looks at the democratic sensibilities of Ralph Emerson and James Baldwin as examples of literary titans who were social critics that spoke to the American condition in their time and attempted to empower individuals towards achieving a fair and just democratic society.

Considered by West as the “godfather of the deep democratic tradition,” Ralph Emerson clearly communicated through his works the value of the independent citizen and the value of a democratic society (West 2004, 68). His social criticism disturbed conventional discourse and agitated institutions of power. Emerson called for an empowered citizenry that was neither compliant nor complacent but willing to be a non-conformist. In Emerson’s essay *Self-Reliance* he advocates for citizens that are contributors to society and loathes imitators. “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind...A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition as if everything were titular and ephemeral but he. I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions” (Porte & Morris 2001, 120). He derides the citizen who has become compliant to the will of society and disbanded his convictions. “Speak your latent conviction and it shall be the universal sense; A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light, which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his” (Porte & Morris 2001, 120). A prosperous and effective democracy comprises a citizenry that consist of “Man Thinking” as Emerson writes in *The American Scholar*. This cognitive action he purports to be the most arduous as intimated in the essay *Intellect*. West draws attention to Emerson’s concerns of ordinary people in the formulation of a democracy:

The literature of the poor, the feelings of the child, the philosophy of the street, the meaning of household life, are the topics of the time. It is a great stride. It is a sign—is it not? Of new vigor when the extremities are made active, when currents of warm life run into the hands and the feet. I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provencal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low (Porte & Morris 2001, 56).

Emerson expressed contempt with America’s occupation with material goods. These he

argued would rob individuals of their creativity and ingenuity.

Men such as they are, very naturally seek money or power; and power because it is as good as money...And why not? For they aspire to the highest, and this, in their sleep-walking, they dream is highest. Wake them, and they shall quit the false good and leap to the true... This revolution is to be wrought by the gradual domestication of the idea of Culture (Porte & Morris 2001, 56).

The attention to shallow items such as these temporal and ephemeral substances would ostensibly deprive America citizens of their individuality, vision and purpose. Emerson expressed the need to have empowered and enlightened citizens so that they would be independent critics of the culture. This was necessary to facilitate a functional democracy. West saw the work of Emerson as a means to correct institutions, citizens and the culture to become more productive. “Emerson took that rhetorical mission seriously, writing prose songs that were meant to unsettle the public, to jolt us out of our sleepwalking and inspire us to stay the democratic course” (West 2004, 74). Emerson advocated for citizens “to be an active player in public discourse” (West 2004, 74). He saw this as an essential component of democratic process. West likened this to being “thrown into life’s contingency and fragility with the heavy baggage of history and tradition, baggage like the American legacies of race and empire” (West 2004, 74). It is to this dark history of America’s inhumane evil of slavery and white supremacy that James Baldwin prophetically speaks. His work as a proclaimer of truth would challenge the prevailing dogmas of America and its institutional practices of segregation and racial injustice.

James Baldwin’s work confronted the troubled past of America and slavery. He argued that this nation’s democracy would rest upon the willingness to acknowledge its wrongdoings and its effort to incorporate African Americans into the republic.

“We know, the case of the person, that whoever cannot tell himself the truth about his past is trapped in it, is immobilized in the prison of his undiscovered self. This is also true of nations” (West 2004, 80). Baldwin’s appeal for integrity and honesty from America was essential to its freedom. He argued that it was in their best interest and that of the democracy to acknowledge its troubled past of white supremacy and institutional subjugation. West underscores the attention that Baldwin gave to achieving “democratic individuality” (West 2004, 80). He creates this dissonance through casting judgment on the actions of America. As a writer that underscores the tragic and blues sensibilities of African Americans Baldwin emphasizes human suffering, despair and frustration. He identifies the fate of blacks inextricably linked to the hubris and malicious actions to white establishment. He courageously confronts their complacency and self-delusion in refusing to face up to their wrong doings:

A vast amount of the energy that goes into what we call the Negro problem is produced by the white man’s profound desire not to be judged by those who are not white, not to be seen as he is, and at the same time a vast amount of the white anguish is rooted in the white man’s equally profound need to be seen as he is, to be released from tyranny of his mirror (Morrison 1998, 341).

The work of Baldwin and Emerson encourages individualism and democracy that is undergirded with truth and justice. Their social critique of America provoked others to think independent of the prevailing norms of the culture and courageously confront national malaise. Their literature spoke to the American condition, drawing attention to the inequities of the past in hope of a more democratic and equitable future.

A rhetorician approaching an American situation highlights the shared struggles and expresses the goals and ideals that bring us together as a nation. Senator Barack Obama’s speech on race is an example of a rhetorical situation calling for a language that acknowledges the shared history and anticipates a more promising future.

On March 18, 2008, presidential candidate Barack Obama delivered a speech in response to remarks that were made by his former Pastor Jeremiah Wright. In one of his sermons Senator Obama began his speech as a historical journey, reflecting on the ideals that are the foundation to our American democracy. Citing the Declaration of Independence Obama appealed to the unity that Americans have in their founding documents and citizenship. Speaking about this unity allowed him to emphasize the bond shared by all Americans as well the goals of democracy. It was also a historical reminder of the failures of democracy as evident in slavery:

We the people, in order to form a more perfect union.’ Two hundred and twenty one years ago, in a hall that still stands across the street, a group of men gathered and, with these simple words, launched America’s improbable experiment in democracy. The document they produced was eventually signed but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation’s original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least twenty more years, and to leave any final resolution to future generations (Obama, 2013).

This rhetorical response articulated the ideals and injustices of America. It took into account the historical journey of race in the nation and provided a lens through which we could see the tragedies and triumphs along the way. Obama’s speech acknowledged the injustices and struggles encountered by African Americans and its effect on the nation. Racism was not just an intractable problem to be addressed by a particular group. It wasn’t a black problem or a white problem, but an American problem:

And yet words on a parchment would not be enough to deliver slaves from bondage, or provide men and women of every color and creed their full rights and obligations as citizens of the United States. What would be needed were Americans in successive generations who were willing to do their part—through protest and struggle, on their streets and in the courts, through a civil war and civil disobedience and always at great risk—to narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time (Obama, 2013).

Speaking to an American problem Obama admitted that the sins of the past would only

be remitted when citizens from different creeds, races and ethnicities acknowledge their individual responsibilities to forge ahead towards unity:

I chose to run for the presidency at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together—unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction—towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren. This belief comes from my unyielding faith in the decency and generosity of the American people (Obama, 2013).

Obama's speech echoed the ideals and sentiments that are embedded within jazz. The union that he called for would require different voices and distinct sounds, flexibility and improvisation; a willingness to accept dissonance to achieve harmony. For achieving the ideals of democracy is an evolving process, a messy undertaking that blends disparate histories, creates the clashing of ideas and clanging of notes engage in a similar process in method and delivery. Describing the bond between democracy and jazz West asserts:

What links democracy and jazz? Energy. Joy. Both require the combination of individual performers and the whole group. Neither is about fetishized 'success' or winning. Both unleash sensibilities, which are radically against the grain. They are processes that encompass all contexts and are not limited to the closed, controlled systems elites prefer (Gordon, 2013).

Jazz appropriately describes democracy. It is the result of riffs and improvisation, innovation and nuance. The band is comprised of instruments with different sounds, different texture and composition. The band's compositions are of different races, creeds, ethnicity and ideology, that doesn't preclude them from contributing to the musical artistry. The diversity adds a distinct dimension. It is the responsibility of the leader to blend the sounds, but also know when to allow for innovation and independence. In jazz every artist must create his own niche and distinguish his sound. Improvisation is an essential component to the artistry and creativity in jazz:

Improvisation, both collective and solo, builds a relationship between the members of the ensemble, helping them to “talk” to one another. It allows musicians to be creative and share their personalities. By experimenting and developing individual styles of improvisation, musicians are able to challenge and redefine conventional standards of virtuosity (Jazz an American Story, 2013).

The idea of being American is resisting dogmas, fundamental traditional, and practices for flexibility, impromptu and the extemporaneous. It rejects the notion of abiding to a principle if there is not a practical implication in making life better. In this regard democracy, at its best forges through dense debates, recalcitrant politicians and obstinate institutions to welcome all voices to the conversation. “Like jazz, democracy is fundamentally about self-criticism, self-correction, self-examination. It allows for society to engage in critical reflective, experimental, improvisational modes of being” (Gordon, 2013). Jazz and democracy are both expressions of dialectics. In jazz there is a striving between the individual and collective, each attempting to create a melodious sound while not sacrificing the uniqueness of the other. Within an ensemble there is a tension that results from strident chords and more placid ones. In finding their way through the music each artist must chart his unique course without creating dissonance with the notes on the page:

Jazz loves to think about itself, play changes on ideas as well as sounds. Sometimes the theme that’s being varied hasn’t even been played. Jazz gets you thinking along one line, then switches directions, breaks apart expectations you didn’t even know you had. It digs deep down inside your mind and shows you where the electric paths carrying thought and sensation back and forth between your consciousness and the world have begun to turn to bone (Werner 1998, 135).

Democracy revels in the back and forth. The dialectical expression occurs in the strivings between people of disparate backgrounds and ideologies, between tradition and pragmatism, between the voices and echoes.

Describing what binds these states of being West conveys:

Both also encompass the "blue notes." Dissonance. Defiance. They pull the cover off sentimental claims for harmony and liberty, get beneath superficial glitter and glitz to wrestle with history and its struggles; reality and its misery; forms of death that American mainstream culture evades and avoids (Gordon 2013).

Within a culture there are those that speak with a prophetic voice uncovers the hypocrisy and mendacity acquainted with a failed or floundering democracy. In the spirit of the jazz artist, they seek to peer beyond the veil of culture to explore the various components of society and how each contributes to inequities, injustices and disparities. They delve into the messiness of democracy in the hope that truth would be revealed.

Prophetic Rhetoric

Prophetic rhetoric calls for judgment upon appearances of evil and injustice. It condemns any abandonment of the truth and forges a path out of the wilderness of deception and hubris. It awakens the apathetic and provokes the indolent. It forges new territory to acquire and foster a vision that can be achieved. According to West, the prophetic has spiritual connotation, harkening to Judeo Christian tradition. Primarily in the Old Testament prophets such as Jeremiah, Amos and Isaiah were the seers and mouthpiece of God to speak the truth often to a wayward nation, arresting their attention and reminding them of the consequences of disobedience to the laws of God. Speaking to Israel, God warns them of the perils of forgetting about the poor and disregarding justice:

You trample the poor stealing their grain through taxes and unfair rend.
Therefore, though you build beautiful stone houses, you will never live in them....You oppress good people by taking bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts (Amos 5:11-12 New Living Translation).

Amos furthermore reminds the people what God disregards and requires, "Away with the

noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream” (Amos 5:25 New International Version)! These prophets were also instrumental in reminding the children of Israel of the covenant He made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, assuring them of His love and provision. The Lord appeared to us in the past, saying, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness. I will build you up again, and you, Virgin Israel, will be rebuilt” (Jeremiah 31:3-4 New International Version). The voice of God through the prophets was not solely for his people but also for the purveyors of evil in the land. The word of the Lord to the enemies of the poor, marginalized, widows and orphans was straightforward and condemnatory. He would destroy the evildoer. “O beautiful Babylon, sit now in darkness and silence... Calamity will fall upon you, and you won’t be able to buy your way out. A catastrophe will strike you suddenly, one for which you are not prepared” (Isaiah 47:1,11 New Living Translation). Although the prophetic voice was instrumental in the Old Testament, it also has been used outside of the Judeo-Christian context. West points to the work of Ralph Emerson, James Baldwin, and W.E.B. Du Bois as examples of individuals that brought prophetic critique to their society, speaking against the moral transgressions of a nation.

Rhetoric used in the prophetic sense is a tool to generate action, bring judgment and give guidance. It draws attention to a universal situation for the intent of a particular response to a specific occurrence. Great rhetoric leads toward a community of affiliation that leads to the possibility of collective action and a shared bonding. It is a means of perfecting collective vision for future actions. Rhetoric that is prophetic focuses on questions of evil and reward. It calls for judgment on the societal ills as well as identifies

those who are culpable. West sees the role of prophesy as having little to do with determining the future, but instead identifying evil practices and creating a vision for the future:

The prophetic...refers to my own attempt to be true to the blue notes in American history (its own forms of evil and death and its wrestling with tragicomic darkness). It has to do with identifying, analyzing, and condemning forms of evil and forging vision, hope, and courage for selves and communities to overcome them (Yancy 2001, 351).

In this tradition of prophetic rhetoric I want to draw from the work of Emerson, Baldwin and Du Bois to demonstrate what West identifies as great rhetoric. West calls for a philosophically and historically informed rhetoric equal to the scope of the problems we face in the modern world. All rhetorical situations are not about this or that passing issue; they are all bound up into larger exigencies. West calls for an appropriate response, an ethical rhetoric that forces us to acknowledge our pervasive existential rhetorical situation. The ethics of rhetoric calls for a recognition of the particular circumstances shared in the present moment. It is contingent upon an understanding of the rhetorical situation and the demands that give rise to the particular event. West gives rhetors the language needed to orient themselves toward the frame of mind of being human in America. He contends that discourse that doesn't recognize the inexorable situation that restricts those who have been marginalized is ineffective and disingenuous. Rhetoric that is credible and efficacious must account for the prevailing factors that contribute to a life of despair as well as the indomitable courage and hope exhibited by those who have become a participant in the fight for survival.

Emersonian rhetoric draws attention to power, provocation and personality. His notion of power is the capacity that enables one to act in concert with others. It is a

collective energy that coordinates action through the tool of communication. When a nation's citizens are empowered there is harmony and the capacity to act which ultimately fosters a creative democracy. Provocation encourages a desire to act in a certain way, it focuses on my desire to act outside of the norms of what I am used to doing. It is a prodding to question conventional pieties resulting in the desire and necessity to act in a certain way. Personality is the capacity to realize the highest potential of my moral self. That is to say, it allows me to place a premium on morals and ascribe value to the individual. His social criticism disturbed conventional discourse and agitating institutions of power. Emerson called for an empowered citizenry that was neither compliant nor complacent but willing to be a non-conformist, advocating for citizens "to be an active player in public discourse" (West 2004, 74). He saw this as vital to the democratic process. For West these concepts are pivotal in establishing rhetoric that leads towards a creative democracy.

James Baldwin prophetically calls for America to acknowledge the truth of its troubled past. His rhetoric as a social critic points to the mendacity and hubris present in a nation in denial. West contends that discourse true to democratic principles must own up to the truth.

Baldwin spoke the deep truth that democratic individuality demands that white Americans give up their deliberate ignorance and willful blindness about the weight of white supremacy in America. Only then can a genuine democratic community emerge in America-an emergence predicated on listening to the Socratic questioning of black people and the mutual embrace of blacks and whites (West 2004, 81-82).

Rhetoric that doesn't acknowledge the constraining power of institutional practices that hindered its citizens from participating in the promises of democracy is disingenuous and ineffective. West calls for rhetoric that is honest and forthright.

He argues that it must account for the pervasive presence of evil, “the absurdity of life and the darkness of history” (West 1999, xvi). Rhetoric must also remain hopeful and courageous in the fight towards justice and equality.

Du Bois’ writing challenges America’s “rhetoric of freedom and democracy” as it is “threatened by the oppression of black Americans” (West 1989, 142). Du Bois’ commentary on the historical, cultural and social impediments to the upward mobility of African Americans addresses the perpetual failure of democracy. His tradition rejects rhetoric that has situated America within a benign historical context. Instead he argues that racism and class struggle must be accounted for as African Americans attempt to acquire the promises intimated within the founding documents. Therefore, West points to the philosophy of W.E.B. Du Bois as a significant contribution in broadening the understanding and magnitude of suffering while also strategically delineating the forces of obstruction. His body of work recognizes the African American struggle and the legacy of racism in preventing economic, cultural and social freedoms. Rhetoric that addresses the human condition must have tragicomic sensibilities. That is to say, there must be a tragic realization of the perpetual struggle due to unforeseen situations and the inability of humans to ever fully overcome institutional impediments. West argues that discourse should have at its center an appreciation for people caught within the tragic who are often attempting to make sense of the absurdities and incongruous elements that contradict with life.

The resources that Emerson, Baldwin and Du Bois provide help construct the foundation to prophetic rhetoric. As social critics, their analytical acumen of the national condition proves useful in identifying the perpetual causes of societal troubles.

These rhetorical tools disclose the existential crises faced by humanity while also pointing to means and methods that empower ordinary people to overcome these challenges. In order to have a democracy that is beneficial to each citizen certain principles must be in order. West argues for a populous that exercises critical judgment, that is aware of institutional impediments and that is infused with hope. These can be derived from rhetoric historically conscious, courageous to highlight the evils within society and hopeful to point to better horizons. When this occurs democracy will function at an optimal measure benefiting not just an elite few but all.

CONCLUSION

The corpus of Cornel West chronicles the idea of being human, modern and American. He considers the human condition and its way of being expressed in three ways. First, there is being human which looks at the universality of suffering and the wrestling with “death, dread despair” in the everyday existence of life (West 1999, xv). Second, there is the condition of being modern, which involves imploring critical intelligence to challenge prevailing dogmas and institutions that wield power over its citizenry. Third, there is the idea of being American, which is to confront the contradictions to democracy in questioning historical legacies of injustice. His work focuses on “the specific and contemporaneous ways in which we grapple with concrete and universal issues of life and death, oppression and resistance, joy and sorrow” (West 1999, xvi). West looks at the capacity and agency of humans within these situation to exhibit courage in the midst of despair, to continue living in hopeful expectancy of something better and to endure prolonged suffering while remaining a believer in the inevitability of justice. He explores the “intellectual sources and existential resources

that feed our courage to be, courage to love and courage to fight for democracy” (West 1999, xvi). In this thesis I argue what West sees as human, modern and American are rhetorical situations that call for a particular response. Bitzer defines a rhetorical situation as a “natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance.” Rhetoric speaks to the expansive struggles within these situations. In response to appearances, rhetoric asks not only where we go from here but also how we got here in the first place. Thus, although rhetoric rouses interest within the audience about a peculiar situation, it does so with the intent of arriving at a universal principle. It “attends to the particular situation as it relates to a more universal social context always in the process of transition” (Crick 2010, 21). It is in this way that particular controversies or shocking events are often the vehicle by which we start to think about our past, our shared moral values, and our place in the world. Not only is it imperative that rhetoric has an understanding of the particular situation that humans contend with but also it should be prophetic, pointing out societal evils while also creating new horizons. Rhetoric should be oriented in the blues frame of mind, wrestling with the human struggle; it should be maintain the improvisation and flexibility of jazz and it should courageously maintain an awareness of history. When these resources are appropriated “democracy can be a way of being in the world, not just a mode of governance,” where its citizens are empowered and given agency (West 1999, xx). Rhetoric draws from the resources of jazz, blues and prophetic pragmatism to give meaning to universal suffering while helping to create a discourse that gives individuals an opportunity to reap the benefits of freedom and justice for all.

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