

Gender and the Thought of Cornel West

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Cornel West's writings are being cited on a number of fronts, and it is not uncommon to hear his name mentioned in academic circles having to do with religion, Black Studies, philosophy, cultural studies, and a number of other pursuits. Most strikingly, perhaps, West is often taken to be one of the chief exponents of the "new pragmatism," and along with Richard Rorty, he is frequently touted as one of the chief theoreticians of the contemporary version of this long-established American philosophical tradition.¹

West's work is striking for its general liberatory theme, its range, and the development of a number of lines of other sorts of theory that intersect, in his work, with pragmatism—Marxism, criticism of the arts, sexuality and gender studies issues, and so forth. Although there is no question that his work strikes a generally feminist-friendly tone (he has, for example, co-authored a work with Sylvia Ann Hewlett), parts of West's work exhibit a number of the androcentric tendencies that contemporary feminist critics have often associated with other, more rigorously analytic work.²

In a recent work critical of West's initial heavy reliance on Marxism as a liberatory strategy, and subsequent turn from it, the political scientist Mark David Wood argues that West's most recent, less overtly theoretical work represents a failure to follow through on the promise of his original project. But one theme has remained comparatively consistent throughout West's work: he relies on a number of overarching categories to concoct a large scheme, one that provides, if not Answers, at least a path toward such Answers. In this paper I will argue that the feminist reader can still discern a great deal of androcentrism in West's work, although the net results for feminism may indeed be beneficial. I shall begin with an examination of his early work.

I

In a way, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, West's first full-length book, is his most interesting work, since it represents an initial attempt at a fundamental synthesis of a number of philosophical points.³ In this early work, one of West's concerns is to articulate the origins of racism in the very beginnings of modernity itself, and he undertakes a lengthy, complex, and highly articulate review of the arts, literature, the rise of science, and of Enlightenment thought in general in the development of a modernist worldview. More important, he tries to schematize race and its various conceptualizations as one of the foci upon which modernity grounded itself. In order to achieve this, West displays no hesitation in running together a number of somewhat disparate themes, and in striving to provide them all with a template befitting them. For example, he writes:

The emergence of the idea of white supremacy as an object of modern discourse seems inevitable in that, besides the practical need to justify nonwhite domination (especially in the early nineteenth century), the only available theoretical alternative for the unhampered search for truth and knowledge in the modern West consisted of detailed observation, measurement, comparison and ordering of the natural and human kingdom by autonomous subjects in the light of the aesthetic and cultural ideals of classical antiquity.⁴

In other words, part of West's thesis here is that the originating discourse of modernity in Europe and the Americas required the creation of a concept of race that worked to the detriment of many, but to the special degradation of peoples of African ancestry. In a wide-ranging synthesis, West furthers the notion that a number of strands of intellectual endeavor, from Linnaeus to Ingres to James Fenimore Cooper, worked to further the construction of race that fitted best into the rise of the bourgeoisie and the growth of industrial strength in Europe.

In his earliest works, then, West exhibits a number of tendencies that feminist theorists have consistently demarcated as androcentric: a sort of stylistic aggression involved in establishing a "complete account," a desire to tie a number of diverse phenomena and conceptual patterns together under one rubric, and a tendency toward the development of an architectonic intellectual overview.⁵ Tracing this type of development in West's thought is made more difficult than it would be in the work of many theorists, however, because of both his range and his desire to consistently forward a progressive political overview.

One line of theory, however, admirably served West's purposes, at least in this comparatively early stage of his development. His early works rely heavily on Marxism, and in some cases on a sort of Marxist/pragmatist line. While attempting to push for an overview that provides us with a strong account of the origins of racism in modernity, West also indicates a desire to establish the basis for a move away from the type of theorizing that resulted in the racist constructions. As he himself writes, "The emergence of the idea of white supremacy as an object of

modern discourse seems contingent, in that there was no iron necessity at work. . . . [but] This inquiry accents the fact that the everyday life of black people is shaped not simply by the exploitative (oligopolistic) capitalist system of production, but also by cultural attitudes. . . .”⁶

These early attempts by West to provide an account of the exploitation of persons of African ancestry in the Americas and to simultaneously promulgate a theoretical stance that is liberatory are remarkably similar, in their structure, to most philosophical theorizing, especially in the areas of political and social philosophy, of the earlier part of this century. West attempts to give an account of the origins of the phenomenon at hand, but must also distance himself, in his role as Black theorist, from at least some of the thinking in question. As the feminist theorist Bat-Ami Bar On has argued in a provocative essay titled “Marginality and Epistemic Privilege,”

The attribution of agency to a marginality that is not at the same time a centrality problematizes the attribution of epistemic privilege to the socially marginalized subjects. . . . Epistemic privilege then becomes a function of the distance from the center.⁷

Although West’s overview requires him to take such a stand, there is an inherent tension in its development. These tensions are heightened by the necessity of constructing the sort of magisterial overview that androcentric theorizing so frequently entails. The situation is made all the more paradoxical since it is, of course, the voice of modernity—the voice under criticism by West here—that has yielded, historically, both the racism in question and the “view from nowhere” attitudes that have been the object of contemporary feminist criticism.

In a sense, the very task to which West has put himself as a philosopher calls out for a view that is in some sense guilty of the type of overriding self-importance of which the pragmatist tradition will later be critical. It is no doubt because West senses this that, after his early work, he begins a turn in another direction. It is as if a theorist cannot have it both ways—to the extent that theory becomes sensitive to a multiplicity of voices and concerns, it frequently loses the pretensions to centrality and explanation that it originally had. West himself seems to be aware of this when, in his next major work, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, he turns to theorizing of another sort. Yet the tensions raised by West in his early work also spring from (as has been indicated here) his subjectively felt necessity of adopting a liberatory stance. Later work may be less androcentric in its construction, but simultaneously less liberatory. That this is the case is marked not only by, for example, commentary on West’s work, such as that undertaken by Wood, but by a close observation of West’s work with his *Prophesy!* goals kept in mind.

II

Beginning with *The American Evasion*, West takes a turn in his work that is at once more holistic, more overtly friendly to feminist concerns, and less distanced and detached.⁸ Such a view has, of course, the virtues of its defects and the defects

of its virtues—it is at this point that a critic such as Wood, for example, maintains that West begins to lose the cutting edge of his work and that he starts to capitulate to a view that will ultimately become little more than standard liberal fare.

In any case, the preliminary stance of *American Evasion* is precisely one that we can see as less androcentric than the more standard philosophical overview that West was inclined to give in *Prophesy!* and other earlier works. For one thing, West is drawn to pragmatism specifically because it is, as he maintains, an “evasion” of philosophy. By this he means that pragmatism is a new way of thinking: it refuses to get bogged down in the sorts of technical questions with respect to matters metaphysical and epistemological that are the hallmark of the Western tradition. Somewhat idiosyncratically, but with much intellectual style, West sees the tradition that encompasses the well-known names of Peirce, James, and Dewey, among others, as having its origins in the work of Emerson, whom he wants to label one who philosophizes, but without in any sense being a technical philosopher. West’s reliance on the force of Emerson’s thought—the adjective “Emersonian,” meant in a complimentary sense, recurs throughout the work—pushes *Evasion* down a remarkable and original path.

What West wants is a worldview that embodies the best of that which is American—forceful, cutting, and concerned with the lived ordinariness of daily life—without losing the possibility of being “prophetic,” that is, speaking in some sense to transcendental concerns. As West himself says, “Emerson is the preeminent proponent of the dignity and worth of human personality.”⁹ Thus West creates an important overview of pragmatism that focuses less on the technical differences between pragmatism and other views (differences that are highlighted, for example, in Bertrand Russell’s approach to the topic) than on the vision and spirit that drive the construction of pragmatism in the first place.

It might be tempting to say at this point that the shift in West’s thought—now signaled, as Wood and others have remarked, by a much less aggrandizing overview—reveals a markedly less masculinist stance. It is the case that the overview of *Evasion* is indeed less androcentric; of this, there can be no doubt. But West’s own personal style begins to shine through more clearly here, and it exhibits an amalgamation of a remarkable number of traits. While adhering to his official line that prophetic pragmatism is the spirit of philosophy as it touches our daily and individual lives, West’s writing still aggressively pursues punchy conclusions and pithy summations, many times at the expense of a more nuanced and fully developed view. While now examining the trees instead of the forest, so to speak, he still quickly shoves individual trees under a number of ready-to-hand rubrics. Stylistic aggression is still at work, albeit in a new guise.

West is at his most original in this work when he attempts to tell us what is pragmatic about a number of thinkers who would not ordinarily be so labeled. In these sections (his section on Sidney Hook is a good example), West is disarmingly creative in his use of philosophical terminology while still decidedly dynamic, in the male style, in his categorizations. An example of West’s thinking here, pertinent not only because it exhibits his conceptualization patterns but also shows his rhetorical strategies, tells us what he thinks is important about the turn in Hook’s thought:

Hook claims that the pragmatic approach neither vulgarizes nor spiritualizes tragedy. It is more serious and heroic than the other approaches because its method of critical intelligence provides a guide for human beings who can both create tragic history and benefit from this creation.¹⁰

Here West ties in a change in Hook's thinking to the focal point of *Evasion*, the notion of the Emersonian spirit. But although the realities of instantiated pragmatic doctrine—in Emerson, Hook, Dewey, or anyone else—may indeed be more friendly for women and persons of color, the articulation of such doctrine still bears many of the hallmarks of visionary and questing masculinist thought. As West matures as a thinker, he engages with co-authors, including at least one woman, but his writing still exhibits an intriguing mix of particularist and universalizing tendencies.

III

West's more recent work is perhaps the most interesting from the standpoint both of tracing the trajectory of his intellectual development and analyzing its intersection with a greater sensitivity toward feminist issues. Interestingly enough, it is precisely his most recent work that has led Wood, among others, to become more critical of his line of development, since this work is much less radical in its political views and more comfortable with a sort of progressive American democratism.¹¹

West has a number of co-authored works at this point, many of which attempt to deal with contemporary issues of American life in a somewhat less than theoretical vein. It is perhaps his work with Sylvia Hewlett that has attracted the most commentary, and it is worth noting the general tendency of his thought here, particularly insofar as it contrasts with his previous work.

In the book written with Hewlett, West takes a generally progressive political line, without espousing the more radical views that he had held at an earlier point. More important, perhaps, the point of the work is to address everyday realities—such as those faced by all parents in American society—in lay terms. Thus the book more or less eschews the sorts of theoretical constructs that West felt free to employ in earlier work.¹² West and Hewlett note, for example, that:

Whatever their political orientation, our leaders seem to have little understanding of how much the decks are stacked against parents in our materialistic, individualistic age. . . . This brings us to the heart of the matter: If the center of this nation is to hold, we have to learn to give new and self-conscious value to the art and practice of parenting. It can no longer be left to invisible female labor or the tender mercies of the market. . . . At a fundamental level of analysis, the parent-child bond is the strongest and most primeval of all human attachments. When it weakens and frays, devastating consequences ripple through our nation, because this elemental bond is the ultimate source of connectedness in society.¹³

This work, with its overt reference to the importance of parenting/mothering, its reference to “invisible female labor,” and general citation of the notion of mothering as a sort of labor is by far and away West’s most overtly feminist-friendly work, but of course a gynocentric approach—or even one open to gynocentricity—is much more than an acknowledgment of women’s lives. As we have said here on more than one occasion, one of the chief indices of androcentrism in theory is a focus on airtight theoretical construction. In his later work, West has, for the most part, left such construction behind, and the openness of his thinking is as much a hallmark of his change as any overt mention of problems that might be deemed to have a feminist orientation.

In still another work, co-authored with Roberto Unger, West takes a similar line.¹⁴ For example, in a scheme to redistribute savings so as to abrogate the kinds of problematic areas that Social Security has gotten itself into, West and Unger write about a law which “would require everyone to save in special pension funds a certain percentage of their incomes, defined on a progressive scale according to income levels.”¹⁵ While this idea may be attractive as well as progressive, this is clearly not the same West who was originally enamored of Marxism and who wanted to give a Complete Accounts view of a number of problems. The new West, as Wood has remarked, seems comfortable with a within-the-system overview and seems not to want to espouse the radical ideas—or even the all-encompassing explanations—that he once held.

IV

The reliance on object-relations theory in some forms of contemporary feminism has troubled some, but it has proven to be a useful and forceful tool in the demarcation of a number of areas of androcentrism within theoretical projects.¹⁶ One of the reasons that the use of the theory has become entrenched is that it helps to explain how the dynamic of the growth of male personality intersects with emergent theory in most disciplines. Thus plain, old “punch ‘em out” aggression often gets channeled into theoretical aggression—my theory is bigger than yours, my theory is better than yours, my theory explains more, and so forth.

West’s theoretical ventures require more elaboration than most, both because of the ground they cover and because West, from the outset, was striving to achieve a view that would advance the voices of many often left out of standard competing views and explanations—that is, persons of color, specifically Black Americans. So from the outset, the thought of Cornel West needed to be, by his own lights, theoretically progressive but deep and rich enough in explanation to cover the plight of those who had been here for three or four hundred years and whose situation had remained comparatively unexamined.

Much of West’s work, then, although retaining a great deal of appeal from the standpoints both of explanation and of ease of style, is problematic for the feminist because, from that sort of orientation, it has a worst-of-both-worlds quality. Cornel West’s earlier work, as we have seen, is as androcentric as any other standard sort of theorizing and relies heavily on Marxist and other views to achieve a tight

kind of theoretical explanatory structure that will do the work that West needs to get done. His later work to a great extent eschews such a structure and indeed seems a great deal less politically radical—but it is at this point that the theoretical power of his work begins to fade. In the efforts co-authored with Unger and with Hewlett, West tells us a great deal about American society, but we fail to come away with the sensation that he has told us anything that we do not already know. Thus although “devastating consequences” can be expected from the fraying of the parent/child bond, West’s prescription here is essentially what could be expected from a European socialist—or an American who admires European socialism—and is, in general, no more than that.¹⁷

Returning for a moment to the origins of the notion that androcentric theorizing itself borrows from the more ordinary aggression often present in male personality development, Keller’s original take on this concept also relied on its historical antecedents, such as those found in Plato. In an essay in *Reflections on Gender and Science*, Keller notes that, for Plato, knowledge has absolutely nothing to do with women or even a male orientation toward women:

Plato’s model for spiritual begetting is the love of man for man; knowledge is a product of a divine union of kindred essences. It is a man’s feeling of love for boys, not for women, that provides the first impetus for the philosopher’s journey. . . .¹⁸

Although this material in itself is only analogically related to much of contemporary theory, there is no question that it is this type of dynamic that drives a great deal of conceptualizing, even when the thinkers in question are unaware of the force of it. This is the same point being made by Carol Gilligan in *In a Different Voice*; the voices, literal and metaphorical, of women have seldom been heard in research areas because questions involving research have been framed, from the outset, in such a way that they are male-driven and male-dominated questions.¹⁹ The “justice” voice in Gilligan’s work is a voice concerned with rules and regulations. It is also a theoretical voice. Where theory dominates, the sort of thinking implicit in the justice voice tends to predominate.

Androcentrism, then, insofar as it manifests itself in the work of many twentieth-century philosophers, is a sort of aggressive style of thought in which a number of phenomena are subsumed under one rubric, frequently with an aim at providing the One Explanation. As we have seen, West’s thought manifests these tendencies in its earlier phases—and less so in its later phases—although, ironically (and as one would expect, since most commentators will also be driven by similar concerns), it is his earlier work that many find structurally more appealing. Some of the origins of the androcentric style, at least as far as philosophy is concerned, are to be found in the psychodynamics of personality development and in at least some of the origins of philosophical theorizing, especially since Platonic thought clearly manifests all of these strains.

Perhaps one final take on androcentrism in theory can come from a somewhat unusual source, contemporary aesthetics. Because the intersection of feminism and

aesthetics was somewhat slow to develop in comparison to other areas of philosophical endeavor, a great deal of the work in this area is recent. Several commentators have worked on Kant and Kantian notions of the sublime, the noble, and so forth in an effort to develop a feminist take on standard aesthetic theory.²⁰ It is intriguing to note that a great deal of Kantian commentary on these concepts strikes a chord that is relevant to theory as a whole, and not merely aesthetics. Christine Battersby writes, with respect to Kant:

In a Kantian society it is the task of the males—particularly husbands—to discipline the anarchic forces implicit in female nature. . . . In the Kantian universe it is the individual person who legislates moral and aesthetic values through his own will and through the play of his faculties.²¹

Holdovers from the Kantian universe affect all kinds of theorizing, and the style of “discipline” adds to the theorist’s conception that something must be Explained and Subsumed. In works such as *Prophesy!* and *American Evasion*, West has succeeded in the discipline and legislation at which the Kantian view aims. As we have seen, these are also the works that Wood, for one, sees as being his best and most worthy contributions.

V

I have been arguing that the work of Cornel West presents more of a challenge to the philosophical feminist than might be the case with much contemporary theory because it is clear from the outset that West’s work is at least superficially feminist-friendly. Many feminists have made the contention, repeated by those who have attempted to find woman-oriented strands of thought in various thinkers, that male philosophers can (and indeed should) be feminists and that the gender of a thinker may not be of particular importance to an appraisal of that thinker’s work.

Nevertheless, West’s body of written work, while hostile to the sorts of implicit claims frequently made by Eurocentric male theorists, does in fact have an androcentric orientation, and it has been my contention throughout this paper that that orientation is fairly readily discernible, especially in his earliest work. Pragmatism as a whole, as has been argued by those feminists who have taken the time to examine it closely, is often deemed more susceptible to feminist use and less rigidly androcentric than much other contemporary theory. The special issue of *Hypatia* on feminism and pragmatism included several pieces that attempted to be precise about what it is that the two lines of theory have to offer each other; many of the authors seemed to think that a reliance on everyday empiricism and a refusal to countenance *a priori* theorizing were among two of the foci that apply to both feminist and pragmatist theory.²² So presumably it would stand to reason—should a philosopher be inclined to think along these lines—that pragmatist philosophers who identify with persons of color issues might be all the more ready to develop patterns of thought that are either overtly feminist or at least not pronouncedly androcentric.

As we have seen, however, West in general wants explanation—indeed, insofar as he is attempting to develop a philosophy, however pragmatist, that intersects with Black American issues or African diaspora issues, his theorizing virtually demands it, since he needs to be able to address the question of how Eurocentric American racism developed. It is explanation, perhaps more than any other theoretical construct that might be tied to epistemological or metaphysical concerns, that seems to provide the seeding for androcentrism, since explanation, if it is to abide by Occam's Razor, demands tight, ontologically slender constructions that do the most amount of work, so to speak, in the smallest possible space. This quest for Complete Accountism, which historically speaking is traceable to Plato and indeed occurs throughout the entire Western tradition, is androcentric in both its origins and practice. It relies on notions of intellectual quest and mastery which themselves are driven by masculinist personality constructs and highly male intellectual processes. As has been argued here, the work by West most frequently cited, and most often praised, such as *Prophesy Deliverance!* and *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, is as androcentric as any other work that might be cited and, despite its attempt to lay the groundwork for a Black American pragmatist philosophy (or indeed because of it), is recognizably masculinist in its desire for an Explanation of the origins of European racism and the failures of many or most American nineteenth-century thinkers to address such racism.

West is at his most feminist-friendly and least masculinist in his more recent co-authored work, but there seems to be a consensus that this is not West at his best or most inspiring. Perhaps this is part of the problem. Perhaps what we take as inspirational in philosophy is work that seems to aim at some overarching concepts, in general points the way toward them, and does so in such a manner that it takes us away from our daily cares and provides us with a glimpse of something else.

Oddly enough, this seems to be the general direction of Plato's thought, and it is, of course, the direction of a great deal of philosophy ever since. Philosophical endeavors seem to fall on a continuum of more and less androcentric, more and less explanatory, more and less cohering, and so forth. The very concerns that keep a thinker such as Bertrand Russell from accepting pragmatism as a valuable philosophical enterprise are themselves the sorts of concerns which we now address: notions of truth, continuity, and acuity of theorizing.²³

The work of Cornel West is among the most exciting, original, and philosophically literate of work done by American thinkers within the past twenty years. It has been a source of fructification and illumination for many philosophers, especially women and persons of color, who have been under the impression, however misguidedly, that American philosophy would simply choose never to address any of the many questions that West does in fact address. But West's thought, like so much current work that is subject to frequent citation in debates over gender and feminism, is itself androcentric in much of its conceptualizing and in its philosophical origins.²⁴ Perhaps still another thinker will emerge to pursue pragmatist lines in ways that open up new spaces for gynocentricity and, ultimately, for women as a whole.

Notes

1. At this point, there is a growing body of secondary commentary on his work. See, for example, Mark David Wood, *Cornel West and the Politics of Prophetic Pragmatism* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000).
2. Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West, *The War Against Parents: What We Can Do for America's Beleaguered Moms and Dads* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), hereinafter cited as *The War Against Parents*.
3. Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: an Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982).
4. Cornel West, "Race and Modernity," originally printed in *Prophesy Deliverance!* and reprinted in *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 55–86; this citation, 84, hereinafter cited as "Race and Modernity."
5. "Stylistic aggression," and the concomitant influence of object-relations theory in the development of an account of androcentrism, is due largely to the work of Evelyn Fox Keller. See Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).
6. West, "Race and Modernity," 85–86.
7. Bat-Ami Bar On, "Marginality and Epistemic Privilege," in *Feminist Epistemologies*, Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 88–89.
8. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), hereinafter cited as *American Evasion*.
9. West, *American Evasion*, 28.
10. West, *American Evasion*, 122.
11. Mark David Wood, *Cornel West and the Politics of Prophetic Pragmatism*, cited in full at note 1, above; the most precise statement of Wood's position on this issue—as well as the most succinct—is in the Introduction of his book, 1–18.
12. Hewlett and West, *The War Against Parents*, cited in full at note 2, above. Portions of this work are also excerpted in *The Cornel West Reader*, cited in full at note 4, above, and it is citations from this volume that will be used in subsequent references.
13. Hewlett and West, "Parents and Survival," originally printed in *The War Against Parents* and reprinted in *The Cornel West Reader*, cited in full at note 4, above, 333–43; this citation, 333, 337–38.
14. Roberto Mangabeira Unger and Cornel West, *The Future of American Progressivism: an Initiative for Political and Economic Reform* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), hereinafter cited as *The Future of American Progressivism*. Portions of this work are excerpted in *The Cornel West Reader*, cited in full at note 4, above.
15. Unger and West, "American Progressivism Reoriented," originally printed in *The Future of American Progressivism*, cited in full at note 14, above, and reprinted in *The Cornel West Reader*, cited in full at note 4, above, 316–32; this citation, 320.
16. Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science*, cited in full at note 5, above.
17. Hewlett and West, "Parents and Survival," cited in full at note 13, above.
18. Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science*, cited in full at note 5, above, 24–25.
19. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

20. An excellent collection of essays in this area is Peggy Zeglin Brand and Carolyn Korsmeyer, eds., *Feminism and Tradition in Aesthetics* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), hereinafter cited as *Feminism and Tradition*.
21. Christine Battersby, "Stages on Kant's Way: Aesthetics, Morality and the Gendered Sublime," in Brand and Korsmeyer, eds., *Feminism and Tradition*, cited in full at note 20, above, 88–114; this citation, 94.
22. This issue, edited by Charlene Haddock Seigfried, is Vol. 8, No. 3, 1993.
23. See, for example, Bertrand Russell, *Philosophical Essays* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966). The essay "Pragmatism" is found at pages 79–111 in this volume.
24. Many Continental thinkers whose work is frequently cited are, of course, open to the same or similar objections.