

ARTS & ATTITUDE

PHOTO BY JEFFERY ROTSTEIN



Sacramento native
Cornel West.

The Rage Within

For African-American Scholar Cornel West, Anger Can Be A Good Thing

By Matthew Budman



It's become palpable enough to taste. Gunfire rings out in the night; local TV news programs lead with what bleeds. Polls proclaim that a majority of Californians feel something must be done about the "immigrant problem." Politicians, unwilling to embrace progressive economic policies, decry affirmative action and welfare programs and promise to build more prisons. Like rats deserting a sinking ship, we crawl over the top of each other in order to survive.

Call it fear. Call it hate. Call it rage.

"Rage," says Cornel West, "is not just a black thing—it's a human thing. When you listen to Rush Limbaugh, you get a lot of white male rage, articulated with a conservative feeling. White male rage doesn't have to be conservative. Part of progressives' challenge is trying to steal the thunder from Rush and convince white brothers that one of the reasons they're catching hell is because of the corporate elites and the bank elites, who are certainly much more responsible for their declining wages than are black men and women or gays and lesbians.

"If the best we can come up with are deeply conservative, even reactionary channels, then we're all in deep trouble, very deep trouble."

West has devoted his life to extricating America from that deep trouble, and in doing so has become perhaps the country's most visible black scholar. When the Sacramento native announced recently that he would be leaving Princeton for Harvard next fall, The New York Times found the news worthy of a detailed article and a photo.

His collection of essays, *Race Matters*, published last spring, has sold nearly 100,000 copies, and a new col-

"If people don't want to talk about white supremacy then they're living in a different world," West says. "There's a certain honesty in calling something what it is."

(continued on next page)

lection, *Keeping Faith*, is in its second printing. A self-described "freedom fighter who engages in the fight for intellectual, political, social and existential freedom," West, 40, maintains an astonishing range of interests and expertise.

His writing shifts smoothly through Marxism, rap music, black-Jewish relations, art criticism, literary criticism, institutional racism, Christianity, European history, post-modern philosophy and economics. And all of it fits into his struggle to win social justice for America's oppressed and to create "more public spheres in which serious critical exchange can take place."

His overloaded schedule—each year, in addition to visiting parents Clifton and Irene in Sacramento a half-dozen times, West travels the lecture circuit coast to coast—leaves him short of time and attention: His *Keeping Faith* publicist can't get him to answer her calls and faxes; his Princeton University colleagues joke about West being unable to identify them; students sign up for West's office hours literally months in advance, and know when they finally see the professor he probably won't recall their names.

But nobody ever displays the slightest resentment. Even just a few minutes alone with West are an exhilarating experience, and he usually is spoken of in tones of reverence, as a rare pillar of moral and intellectual strength.

West's Princeton office (he directs the Afro-American Studies Program) is a small, almost claustrophobic room lined floor-to-ceiling with books on everything from Hegel and Dewey to James Brown and Arrested Development, with a framed black-and-white photo of Malcolm X propped in a corner and a yellowed Sacramento Bee clipping about West and his father taped to the door.

Instantly recognizable, with unabashed Afro, navy three-piece suit, enormous gold class rings, and wide gap between his front teeth, West peers over a desk buried under at least a foot of papers, books, audio cassettes and videotapes. He listens intently and compliments the questioner before answering gently, deliberately, his voice sometimes falling to nearly a whisper as he leans forward over the desk, his eyes riveting. He ignores the ringing phone, even when the voice on his answering machine identifies itself as an aide of U.S. Sen. Bill Bradley.

Politics has been much on West's mind lately, particularly the bitter New York City mayoral race. Republican Rudy Giuliani's victory over David Dinkins, "a decent man in a desperate situation," capped a rotten last few years for black mayors. "Dinkins was a disappointment," West says, "but Giuliani is a potential disaster. I mean, Dinkins did a decent job. He was not able to generate the kind of symbols that can set people on fire, and no mayor can do everything by him- or herself."

One might argue that, given the state of American cities, it might be

best for African-Americans to be out of mayoral offices for a while. West disagrees.

"You lose either way," he says. "Giuliani—God bless him, because he's now mayor of New York, and that's a very fragile situation when you have the levels of despair that, after the election, may ensue in the black and brown communities, and among some working poor. The permanent government—the big-business community—is going to be putting pressure on Giuliani to move in deeply conservative ways that increase the social misery across the board. Giuliani might surprise us, but I'm not holding my breath."

"In that situation, to say, 'Well, better to not have black mayors'... You know, Dinkins kept the libraries open, and that makes a difference for some young kid who might be able to expand the public dialogue and keep radical democratic traditions alive 10 or 20 years from now. He'll be just like we were in Sacramento, stumbling into the library, getting involved in dialogue with folk. Whereas with the library open three days out of six, he's more than likely to be a highly talented entrepreneur within the drug industry. One person makes a difference."

West has been "getting involved in dialogue with folk" nearly as long as he's been alive. He graduated from John F. Kennedy High School in June 1970, around the time that race riots were rocking nearby Sacramento High. In addition to starring in baseball, track, orchestra and academics (West's parents lovingly recount his youthful accomplishments in a foreword to his *Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism* series), West was heavily involved in Shiloh Baptist Church and Kennedy High's Black Student Union. Over the years he's seen Sacramento change dramatically.

"We had racial tension in the late '60s, early '70s," he says, "but we didn't have the gun culture, the malaise, the despair, the desperation. Sacramento's a different place than when I was growing up.

"I grew up in a little segregated town in Glen Ellen, out by Elk Grove—a little portion of town they reserved for blacks. We had a wild life. We didn't know that we weren't getting good resources, that we had bookmobiles while other communities had libraries, but we

"If the best we can come up with are deeply conservative, even reactionary channels," Cornel West says, "then we're all in deep trouble, very deep trouble."

had a wonderful time. We had family, networks, music, athletics—buffers against the devastation of the market forces like the drug industry. The segregation was before the Rumford Fair Housing Act in '66; now Sacramento's like any other chocolate city." West divides most cities into "chocolate" and "vanilla," reserving the latter term for those with few or no black residents.



As student body president at JFK High School, Cornel West was already looking ahead.

West's move to Harvard will unite him with many of America's top black scholars. The idea is to create a center "for dialogue, inquiry and conversation." As always, though, he will try to spread his message outside the "elite institutions of higher learning."

"You do want to try to sustain whatever your links are to the community—prisons, churches, community centers, trade union halls, whatever." As he told Bill Moyers in 1990: "Pursuing the life of the mind is inextricably linked with the struggle of those who have been dehumanized on the margins of society."

West chooses his words carefully when citing certain groups' marginalization; one reason he's favored by Jews and gays is his consistent acknowledgement of anti-Semitism and homophobia alongside mentions of racism. But some people are turned off by the litanies of pejorative adjectives that sometimes litter his written sentences: white supremacist, patriarchal, sexist, Eurocentric, anti-Semitic, homophobic. One conservative journal's review of *Race Matters* ignored West's arguments, listed a handful of his phrases, and concluded the professor was a shallow thinker.

"Well, they could be right," jokes West. "No, really, if people don't want to talk about white supremacy then they're living in a different world. It doesn't mean that I ought not try to communicate with persons across political and ideological lines, but if I'm going to hear about 'affirmative discrimination,' then they should be willing to hear, for instance, 'white supremacy' from me.... There's a certain honesty in calling something what it is.

"Now, you don't want to use words or categories or rubrics simply as sticks to hit people upside the head. You want to be able to use these terms honestly, and only when you think that there's grounds for evidence. Unfortunately, in American society, there's far too much evidence. I wish the evidence did go the other way—then our conservative fellow citizens would be right to say maybe we shouldn't use those terms. But we all have our vocabularies. Pat Buchanan has his vocabulary about kulturkamps and culture wars."

Buchanan's code words are the right-wing politician/commentator's appeals to white rage. But this country is just beginning to think seriously about black rage, to see it as more than

emotional, irrational and, as often as not, violent. West asks us to redefine rage in positive terms, as a moral passion that fuels any intellectual or political movement, as a vital component of any struggle for social justice.

"Rage is an indispensable component of black bodies in any civilization with a white supremacist legacy," he says. "One of the challenges of the black community has always been, how do you look that rage in the face and still try to expand contact with the humanity of other people, still have a sense of integrity and character and moral content to your vision, and still have justice as your end goal? The best of the black freedom strugglers have always been able to meet those challenges, to acknowledge the rage being there, and to know that it cannot simply mirror the worst of American civilization—xenophobia. It's a rage that targets that sense of the absurd that one gets from never being treated as an American, even after 12 or 15 generations here.

"So much of black male rage is turned inward—a lot of it against women—and it becomes self-destructive. The real challenge is trying to channel, organize and mobilize that rage, and only a vision can channel it. It's a question of leadership."

West is still looking for that leadership. In *Race Matters* and elsewhere, he deplores the low quality of black intellectuals and politicians, calling for "race-transcending prophetic leaders" to "put forward a vision of moral regeneration and political insurgency."

After his lucid essays, the reader, more than likely, concludes that West should offer himself as the next prophetic leader. (The inference, intentional or not, is subtle but obvious.) In fact, pre-election, playwright Tony (*Angels in America*) Kushner told *The New York Observer* that West would make an ideal mayor of New York City. A couple of weeks later, West is flabbergasted to hear of Kushner's endorsement.

"Tony said that? I can't believe he said that. You've got to be kidding."

Has West ever seen himself carrying on the tradition of former Chicago Mayor Harold Washington? What would it take to convince him to enter elective politics?

"If I could have an impact far beyond the work that I'm doing as a public intellectual," he says. "But I'd have to pay a cost. That life doesn't leave too much time for the life of the mind, and public intellectuals can do things that public officials can't. Right now I'm much more concerned with generating social motion. Public officials can't do too much of that. Plus, power and publicity are inherently corrupting to your soul; when you're in a position where you have power and publicity and you don't have the kind of democratic pressure from below, it numbs you.

"But," he smiles, "you never know."