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Version: Accepted Version

Book Section:
Forstenzer, J. (2022) Paying tribute : Cornel West's prophetic gratitude as social movement building and self-transcendence. In: Siddiqui, M and Vette, N, (eds.) A Theology of Gratitude: Christian and Muslim Perspectives. Cambridge University Press, pp. 171-185. ISBN: 9781009198400.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009198431.017

This material has been published in revised form in A Theology of Gratitude: Christian and Muslim Perspectives edited by Mona Siddiqui and Nathanael Vette https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009198431. This version is free to view and download for private research and study only. Not for re-distribution or re-use. © Cambridge University Press.

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Paying Tribute: Cornel West's Prophetic Gratitude as Social Movement Building and Self-Transcendence*

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> 'I believe gratitude is the fundamental pre-requisite for a morally and spiritually mature life.' – Cornel West, June, 2020[1]

Socrates, John Coltrane, Simone de Beauvoir, Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Anton Chekhov, Jesus Christ, Martin Luther King Jr., Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Theodore Adorno, bell hooks, Malcolm X, Huey Newton, Eugene Debs, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Ida B. Wells, James Baldwin, W. E. B. Dubois, Loraine Hansberry, Richard Rorty, John Dewey, C. Right Mills, Frantz Fanon, Clifton West Junior, Clifton West III – these are but some of the names that crop up time and again in Cornel West's written work and spoken interventions. At first, these characters can appear to be heralded as mere Westian personal heroes. However, over time, it becomes clear that West calls upon the names of towering figures to draw authority from them but also – and rather remarkably – to pay tribute to them, despite important disagreements and/or temperamental differences he might have with the persons in question. West also regularly invokes lesser known figures or even entirely private citizens to pay tribute to their work or moral character.[2] This practice of paying tribute, though not always couched

* When writing about gratitude, one is perhaps compelled to reflect even more than usual on the support one has received in engaging in this research. First and foremost, Mona Siddiqui and Cornel West have my deepest thanks for their conversation, invitation to engage with them intellectually, and their general support. Both have shown themselves to be wonderful personal and intellectual heroes as well as mentors to me. The kindness they have shown me and their faith in my work have been and continue to be transformative. Second, I am grateful to all the participants of the workshops in Edinburgh and Dubai where I presented versions of this paper for their presentations, questions and comments – those exchanges were invaluable in shaping my thinking on the subject. Third, my thanks go to the Issachar Fund for supporting these profound intellectual exchanges. Fourth, thank you to Nathanael Vette for looking after all of the logistical challenges involved in those workshops and making excellent editorial suggestions. Fifth, I am indebted to Abdi-Aziz Suleiman, Robert Stern, and Henk de Berg for each playing rather fortuitous roles in this project's inception. Sixth, I would like to thank Andrea Antoniou for her conversation, support, and love – were it not for her encouragement, I'd likely have never sat in on Cornel West's 'Race and Modernity' class at Harvard in the Autumn of 2017 and I would have missed out on the most exciting intellectual journey I've ever been on. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude and to pay tribute to my father, Thomas Forstenzer, who passed away not so long ago. It is thanks to him and his efforts to make the world a better place that I know first-hand what it is like to be a part of an intergenerational social movement trying – imperfectly, but always trying – to fight injustice in all its guises.

[1] Mona Siddiqui, host, 'Cornel West opens up to Mona Siddiqui', Living Gratefully (podcast), 24 June, 2020, from 45 minutes 51 seconds to 46 minutes 53 seconds: https://livinggratefully.buzzsprout.com/1126718/4283099-living-gratefully-cornel-west-opens-up-to-mona-siddiqui?play=true [accessed 31 July 2020].

[2] For example, in the chapter entitled 'Gratitude' in West's autobiography, his acknowledgment of the people who have had a profound influence on his life spreads from academic titans – John Rawls, Hilary Putnam, Stanley Cavell, Bernard Williams, Kwame Anthony-Appiah, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Danielle Allen, Walter Kaufmann, Alexander Nehamas, Jeffrey Stout, Sheldon Wolin – to entirely private relationships, such as Robert Gerrard and Neil Brown, who, West writes, are 'exemplary human beings whose fusion of mind, heart, and soul inspire me'; Cornel West, with David Ritz, *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud – A Memoir* (New York, NY: SmileyBooks, 2009), 257.

in the language of 'thankfulness' or supplemented with explicit words of gratitude, acts as an expression of recognition, of esteem, and – ultimately, I will argue – of thanks. In doing so, West 'dares to resist the condition of namelessness' for those who have made a positive impact on him and the world.[3]

I will be investigating the meaning and purpose of this practice in this chapter. My central contention is that West's tendency to pay tribute is far from an incidental habit of speech, rather it is a key ethical and spiritual practice with: (a) a political dimension in that it helps create and sustain an intergenerational bridge among those invested in the struggle for justice by enacting 'a kind of democratic piety';[4] and (b) a personal existential dimension providing those expressing gratitude with an experience of self-transcendence which finds its fullest significance in the pursuit of justice. The role of gratitude in West's explosive cocktail of pragmatism, existentialism, democratic socialism, and Black prophetic Christianity, I will thus argue, is to serve as an edifying public pedagogic practice directed at sustaining a social movement dedicated to fighting injustice over time, as well as to provide a salutary experience of selfless joy, which in turn enables the continued cultivation of justice-enhancing virtues.[5] This practice of recognition and care is necessary because the cause of justice is almost always fought in the face of despair-inducing odds of success.[6] Westian gratitude is thus a social practice of solidarity and a source of joy which serves as a powerful bulwark against despair.

To show this, I will present West's wider project in his existential (1) and intellectual contexts (2), before offering my interpretation of the role of gratitude therein (3).

1. The Westian Existential Ground

> As a youth, I resonated with the sincere black militancy of Malcom X, the defiant rage of the Black Panthers, and the livid black theology of James Cone. Yet I did not fully agree with them. I always felt that they lacked the self-critical moment of humility I discerned in the grand example of Martin Luther King Jr. Such humility has always been a benchmark of genuine love for, and gratitude to, ordinary people whose lives one is seeking to enhance. I witnessed this same kind of integrity and dignity in the humble attitude to black folk of my early heroes: the Godfather of Soul, James Brown; the legendary baseball player, Willie Mays; my pastor, Rev. Willie P. Cooke (of Shiloh Baptist Church in

[3] West, *Brother West*, 255

[4] West, *Black Prophetic Fire*, in dialogue with and edited by Christa Buschendorf (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2014), 96.

[5] The structure of my interpretation of West's conception of 'gratitude', which considers two dimensions of experience yet ultimately seeks to integrate them under a wider functional role, is resonant with the intellectual ambition he expresses when analysing the history of American pragmatism: 'The fusion of the intrinsic interest (or hedonistic effect) and the instrumental interest (or political use) of American pragmatism is the goal of this social history of ideas' in *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 7.

[6] Perhaps surprisingly for a Protestant thinker, West focuses much more on practices than on beliefs. One way to look at this is through the prism of West's pragmatism (it is the lens through which I tend to understand it), but another is to trace West's intellectual filiality to the Jewish prophetic tradition, where deeds are much more of a central concern than beliefs. Raymond Guess claims that for traditional Judaism '[r]eligion … was not about individuals, but about a people, and it was about action, not mental states' in *Who Needs a Worldview* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 25. Though West is less invested in the strict oppositions Guess presents here (i.e. individual vs. community, belief vs. practice), we find more than a hint of this kind of thinking in West's work. At the very least, Jeffrey Stout suggests that we should take West seriously when he says that he is indebted to the Hebrew prophets, in 'A Prophetic Church in a Post-Constantinian Age: The Implicit Theology of Cornel West', *Contemporary Pragmatism* 4 (2007): 9.

> Sacramento, California); and my older brother, Clifton L. West III, to me an exemplary human being. In this way, Martin Luther King Jr. has always been to me not so much a model to imitate but *the* touchstone for personal inspiration, moral wisdom, and existential insight.[7]

Cornel West is a philosopher, public intellectual, political activist, man of letters, and a Christian voice rooted in the Black prophetic tradition. One of the most remarkable features of his intellectual opus is its disciplinary pluralism. His training in the classics and philosophy, as well as his attention to historical detail, literary flair, religious outlook, and musical sensibility result in a highly idiosyncratic intellectual style in both written prose and spoken word. But beyond that style lies a substantive stance, a commitment to 'a Christian ethic of love-informed service to others, ego-deflating humility about oneself owing to the precious yet fallible humanity of others, and politically engaged struggle for betterment'[8]. His goal is to provide 'existential and ethical equipment to confront the crises, terrors, and horrors of life'.[9] He explains his approach thus:

> 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. I am primarily a dramatist of philosophic notions and historical narratives that partake of blood-drenched battles on a tear-soaked terrain in which our lives and deaths are at stake.[10]

Born in the Jim Crow South in the early 1950s, he came of age in Sacramento during the Civil Rights era, and studied at both Harvard and Princeton throughout the 1970s. His democratic socialism emerged as a direct response to America's inability, or unwillingness, to confront what Martin Luther King Jr. once called its 'three major evils': the evil of racism, the evil of poverty, and the evil of militarism.[11]

Time and again, West begins his interventions by placing the wider topic under discussion in the context of a late American empire in decline, infected by moral decay, where the cult of greed and callous ruthlessness are near enough domestic doctrines of state and where white supremacy (at home and abroad) is its barely hidden underpinning foundational creed. In 1991, he presciently begins *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* with the following analysis: 'America is in the midst of a massive social breakdown. Never before in U.S. history has national decline and cultural decay so thoroughly shaken people's confidence in their capacity to respond to present-day problems. America remains the premier military power in the world, yet has a waning influence on the global scene.'[12] In 2017, West's new introduction to 25th Anniversary edition of *Race Matters* remarks:

> We live in one of the darkest moments in American history – a bleak time of spiritual blackout and imperial meltdown. … In our time, the heartbreak cuts

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[7] West, *Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2008 [originally published in 1991]), xv-xvi, emphasis in original.
[8] West, *Ethical Dimensions*, xv.
[9] West, *Ethical Dimensions*, xv.
[10] West, 'Introduction: To be Human, Modern and American', in *The Cornel West Reader* (New York, NY: Basic Civitas, 1999), xv.
[11] Martin Luther King Jr. 'Three Major Evils', Speech given at The Hungry Club Forum, 10 May, 1967: https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/02/martin-luther-king-hungry-club-forum/552533/ [Accessed 31/07/2020].
[12] West, *Ethical* Dimensions, xi.

> much deeper and the hope has nearly run out. The undeniable collapse of integrity, honesty, and decency in our public and private life has fuelled even more racial hatred and contempt. The rule of Big Money and its attendant culture of cupidity and mendacity have so poisoned our hearts, minds, and souls that a dominant self-righteous neoliberal soulcraft of smartnesss, dollars, and bombs thrives with little opposition. The escalating military overreach abroad, the corruption of political and financial elites at home, and the market-driven culture of mass distractions on the Internet, TV, and radio push toward an inescapable imperial meltdown, in which chauvinistic nationalism, plutocratic policies, and spectatorial cynicism run amok.[13]

In the face of this bleak reality, '[o]ur last and only hope', West contends, 'is prophetic fightback – a moral and spiritual awakening that puts a premium on courageous truth telling and exemplary action by individuals and communities'.[14] He remarks: 'My writings constitute a perennial struggle between my African and American identities, my democratic socialist convictions and my Christian sense of the profound tragedy and possible triumph of life and history.'[15] West's struggle is thus self-consciously and whole-heartedly rooted in the African-American struggle for liberation and social justice, but its ultimate goal is the achievement of universal genuine democratic relations free from domination, be it caused by 'empire, white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, homophobia, transphobia', for all people and achieved by means of 'self-respect, self-defense, and self-determination of persons, communities, and societies'.[16]

In a sense, these are simply the commitments resulting from West's democratic socialism: the ultimate goal of cultural, social, and political struggle is nothing less than the universal overcoming of all conditions of oppression by democratic means. In another sense, these commitments are the natural consequences of his prophetic Christianity: all souls are worthy of equal respect and moral consideration in the eyes of West's Christian God. One of West's most remarkable contributions to the democratic socialist project in the U.S. is his willingness to imagine, describe in detail, and argue for concrete approaches to making this project practically effective, while couching its rationale largely in spiritual terms.[17]

For West, this project is envisioned from the perspective of '[t]he greatest tradition of prophetic fightback in the American Empire', namely: 'the Black Freedom Struggle'.[18] Yet, he anchors this project in an even more personal experience: his earliest upbringing. With a good deal of regularity, West acknowledges and celebrates the terrain in which his deepest commitments emerged. He thus writes of his 'closely knit family and overlapping communities of church and friends', with explicit reference to his brother, sisters, father, mother, grandparents and early pastor as central figures in his moral universe.[19] West explains that these people showed him what 'Christ-based love' looks like in practice: 'They modeled humility. In their own way, they washed the feet of those they served, just as Jesus washed the feet of his disciples.'[20]

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[13] West, *Race Matters*, Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2017), xv.
[14] West, *Race Matters*, xv.
[15] West, *Ethical Dimensions*, xxviii.
[16] West, *Race Matters*, xxi.
[17] For versions of the practical agenda espoused by West, see: Roberto Unger and West, *The Future of American Progressivism: an Initiative for Political and Economic Reform* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1998); Tavis Smiley and West, *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto* (New York, NY: Hay House, 2012).
[18] West, *Race Matters*, xx.
[19] West, *Ethical Dimensions*, xv.
[20] West, *Brother West,* 39.

But these embodied practices of love and humility take their full significance in response to his existential reckoning with his own finitude – his experience of what he calls the 'death shudder [which is to say] a deep anxiety or dread connected to the overwhelming fragility of life in the face of death'.[21] Why? Because West maintains that Thanatos and a deep life-orientated Eros are ensconced in a perpetual dance in which we must consciously and lovingly take part in to live a truly human life. He explains that the task demands that we 'understand that the tragi-comic character of the world is such that suffering, pain, and grief sit at the corner of our reality. Upon that terrain we struggle to preserve our compassion, no matter what'.[22]

Bearing witness to the suffering of others ('especially [that of] the wretched of the Earth'), standing in the truth of one's own finitude and fallibility, and yet finding a way to act such as to help alleviate human suffering, these are some of the key practical commitments at the heart of West's project.[23] It is therefore no wonder then that much of his public explicit words of thanks are dedicated to his family, Jesus, God, and fellow travelers on what West affectionately calls the 'love train'.[24] 'Since I'm a Christian,' he writes, 'I'm clear that we've also got to spill our love over into other communities. The essential thing is to make love absolutely real.'[25] This, it turns out, requires struggle.

2. Prophetic Fightback

> Prophetic pragmatism is pragmatism at its best because it promotes a critical temper and democratic faith without making criticism a fetish or democracy an idol. … The major foes to be contested are despair, dogmatism and oppression. … The critical temper motivated by democratic faith yields all embracing moral and/or religious visions that projet credible ameliorative possibilities grounded in present realities in light of systemic structural analyses of the causes of social misery (without reducing all misery to such historical causes).[26]

West readily acknowledges the tri-partite foundation which sustains him: 'family, the Socratic spirituality of seeking the truth, and the Christian spirituality of bearing witness to love and justice'.[27] Yet, the specific way in which he actualises these commitments is worth discussing in more detail.

His Christianity is of a democratic kind: 'I am a Chekhovian Christian with deep democratic commitments. By this I mean that I am obsessed with confronting the pervasive evil of unjustified suffering and unnecessary social misery in our world.'[28] His commitment to seeking the truth is understood against a more general anti-foundational pragmatist epistemic

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[21] West, *Brother* West, 27.
[22] West, *Hope on a Tightrope*: *Words and Wisdom* (New York, NY: SmileyBooks 2008), 83-4.
[23] Miriam Strube and West, 'Pragmatism's Tragicomic Jazzman: A Talk with Cornel West', *Amerikastudien*/*American Studies* 58 (2013): 293.
[24] Zaid Jilani, '"You've gotta get in on the love train": Cornel West stumps for Bernie Sanders', *Salon*, 17 September, 2015: https://www.salon.com/2015/09/17/youve_gotta_get_in_on_the_love_train_cornel_west_stumps_for_bernie_sanders_partner/ [Accessed 31/07/2020]. Reflecting upon his early behavioural challenge and the support he received from his parents, West writes: 'And I say, "Thank you, Jesus, for giving my folks the wisdom to push for my change – and push in exactly the right direction," I mean it from the bottom of my heart.' *Brother West*, 19.
[25] West, *Hope on a Tightrope*, 156.
[26] West, 'The Limits of Neopragmatism', in *The Cornel West Reader*, 186-7.
[27] West, *Brother West*, 22.
[28] West, 'Introduction: To be Human, Modern and American', xv.

project which marries fallibilism with the hope that 'a political form of cultural criticism' can affect social change.[29] His relationship to Christianity is therefore not uncritical. He explains:

> On the one hand, I assume that religious traditions are, for the most part, reactionary repressive and repulsive without heavy doses of modern formulations of rule of law, gender and racial equality, tolerance and, especially, substantive democracy. On the other hand, such modern formulations can be based on or derived from the best of religious traditions.[30]

Thus, I think we can understand this to mean that his commitment to combatting injustice takes precedence over any one religious doctrine. Moreover, this struggle requires a robust, critical, intellectual framework to identify the underlying social structures which govern human interactions by providing an 'understanding of history, society and culture [such as to] highlight latent and manifest multifarious human struggles for identity, power, status and resources'.[31] Pervasive injustices, the fragility of human life, and the imperfection of personal and collective action demands that we adopt a prophetic stance, whereby we acknowledge 'the indispensable yet never adequate capacities of human beings to create error-proof or problem-free situations, theories or traditions'.[32] The prophetic task set out by West is therefore reconstructive through and through. He explains:

> Prophetic thought and action is preservative in that it tries to keep alive certain elements of a tradition bequeathed to us from the past and revolutionary in that it attempts to project a vision and inspire praxis that fundamentally transforms the prevailing status quo in light of the best of the tradition and the flawed yet significant achievements of the present order.[33]

The prophetic praxis resulting from this stance has three dimensions: (a) an existential dimension, 'guided by the value of *love* – a risk-ridden affirmation of the distinct humanity of others that, at its best, holds despair at bay'; (b) a communal dimension, 'regulated by *loyalty* – a profound devotion to the critical temper and democratic faith that eschews dogmatism'; (c) a political dimension, 'guided by *freedom* – a perennial quest for self-realization and self-development that resists all forms of oppression'.[34] More colloquially put, West explains that 'the black prophetic tradition is the collective fightback of sustained compassion in the face of sustained catastrophe'.[35] What does this mean in practice? In the Westian view, prophetic fightback occurs on many fronts: in society via political struggle, in community via fostering loving and respectful relationships, in each individual's personal experience via 'the turning of the soul, the transformation of yourself, not just as such to gain a job or acquire a skill in order to be visible, but to be a certain kind of human being who has undergone a *periagoge*, a *metanoia*, a conversion, a transformation'.[36]

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[29] West, 'On Prophetic Pragmatism', in *The Cornel West Reader*, 151.
[30] West, 'The Crisis in Contemporary American Religion', in *The Cornel West Reader*, 359.
[31] West, *Ethical Dimensions*, xxiii.
[32] West, *Ethical Dimensions*, xxviii.
[33] West, 'The Crisis in Contemporary American Religion', 359.
[34] West, 'The Limits of Neopragmatism', 187.
[35] George Yancy and West, 'Cornel West: The Fire of a New Generation' (blog), The Stone, *The New York Times*, 19 August, 2015: https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/08/19/cornel-west-the-fire-of-a-new-generation/ [Accessed 31/07/2020].
[36] West, 'Transcript: Cornel West's 2017 Convocation Address', *Harvard Divinity School*, 8 September, 2017: https://hds.harvard.edu/news/2017/09/08/transcript-cornel-wests-2017-convocation-address# [Accessed 31/07/2020].

Perhaps the over-arching notion which connects these three dimensions of prophetic practice is the Greek concept of *paideia* – that is, 'deep education' distinct from schooling, which demands that we develop a profound and intelligent sensitivity to injustice, holding ourselves to the highest moral standards of integrity, responsibility, and self-critique.[37] *Paideia* of this kind calls upon us to 'keep track of any form of harm, of unwarranted hurt' while proudly, lovingly, and – whenever possible – joyously taking action to make this harm cease. Indeed, West's prophetic pragmatism 'analyzes the social causes of unnecessary forms of social misery, promotes moral outrage against them and organizes different constituencies to alleviate them, yet does so with an openness to its own blindnesses and shortcomings'.[38] Or, on a more personal level, '[t]o be human means choosing to have the courage to think, love, hope, and fight for justice and freedom'.[39] *Paideia* is therefore a type of 'soulcraft' with a thoroughly ethical and practical dedication to improving the world.[40]

3. From Hope to Gratitude – and back again

> When I think of race mattering, I first think of gratitude. See I am proud, I am glad to be a black man. I thank God that God made me a black man. I think that black people have been able to undergo catastrophe and dish out unbelievable creativity. It's hard to find a people in the modern world who's been hated so chronically for four hundred years – slavery and lynching and spit on and rebuked – and yet keep dishing out love warriors like Martin Luther King Jr. and Fanny Lou Hammer and Stevie Wonder and Ray Charles and John Coltrane. So there is something that's very positive about the response and resistance and resilience to something so ugly.[41]

West's written and spoken word is replete with virtue talk: piety, solidarity, compassion, attentiveness, respect, humility, truthfulness, love, and courage crop up time and again. But, hope is the virtue West enjoins us most regularly to cultivate (echoing, albeit in a less overtly optimistic fashion, Dewey's democratic hope). Talk of gratitude, however, is less present.

In a sense, this is not wholly surprising, since pragmatists have a tendency to focus on the future more than on the past.[42] However, my contention is that we should understand practices of gratitude in West's statements as having a crucially important role to play; perhaps, one that is as important as hope, despite the lesser attention given to gratitude in his work. Why so? Gratitude, much as hope, singles out salient features of the lifeworld. It draws our attention to that which is worthy of recognition and celebration, not in the future in the way hope does, but in the past: if hope is a proleptic stance (a future-orientated relationship to events to come

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[37] Myrka Gilbreath, 'The Power of Deep Education with Dr. Cornel West', *The Westfield Voice*, 26 March, 2020: https://www.brown.edu/news/2018-03-06/westtalk [Accessed 31/07/2020].
[38] West, 'The Limits of Neopragmatism', 186.
[39] West, *Hope on a Tightrope*, 81.
[40] West goes on to explain: 'Soulcraft is the formation of attention that gets us to attend to the things that matter, not the things on the surface. It's the cultivation of thinking critically for yourself so you're willing to speak in such a way that you exercise what Socrates called *parrhesia*, which is clear speech, frank speech, fearless speech, unintimidated speech, speech that flows from your soul not to show that you're clever and smart, but to show that you're courageous and wise'; in Peter Cunningham, 'In keynote address, Cornel West urges integrity, action, and "soulcraft"', *YaleNews*, 5 February, 2018: https://news.yale.edu/2018/02/05/keynote-address-cornel-west-urges-integrity-action-and-soulcraft [Accessed 31/07/2020].
[41] Siddiqui, 'Cornel West opens up to Mona Siddiqui', from 25 minutes 35 seconds to 26 minutes 30 seconds.
[42] See, for example, John Dewey, 'The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy', in *On Experience, Nature, and Freedom: Representative Selections*, ed. Richard Bernstein (New York, NY: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960), 27: 'What should experience be but a future implicated in a present!'

by way of the imagination),[43] then gratitude is an analeptic stance (a past-orientated relationship to antecedent events by way of the imagination). Though the ultimate focus in the Westian view remains firmly on the future (and on improving it as much as possible), he recognises that understanding and remembering the past as well as cultivating a sense of tradition are crucially important to shaping that future.

In fact, West identifies two ways in which gratitude serves to foster the conditions for overcoming injustice when he remarks:

> [The] major weapon against narcissism for me is a kind of spirituality or spiritual strength that accents … gratitude – what it means to be a part of a long tradition that has produced you and allowed you to have the self-confidence – because self-confidence does not drop down from the sky; it is cultivated over many, many years owing to earlier people, antecedent figures who had the same kind of self-confidence – so gratitude on the one hand, as a kind of democratic piety in that sense, if piety is understood as the debts you owe to those who came before tied to the tradition and community and legacy of struggle, and on the other hand, there is an indescribable joy in serving others.[44]

In other words, for West, gratitude is both politically significant in its capacity to create an intergenerational bridge among those invested in the struggle for justice by enacting 'a kind of democratic piety' and personally significant in the experience of 'an indescribable joy' that comes from serving others. I will discuss each of these in more detail now.

Democratic Piety and Social Movement Building

Public expressions of gratitude are a regular feature of political life and they are mobilised precisely for the purpose of fostering a sense of tradition and legacy among a group of people. For example, in France and the United Kingdom and other countries, every 11 November, the date of the end of the First World War, celebrations are made to thank members of the military and veterans for their sacrifice and to honour the memory of those fallen in combat. In the Westian project, we find a parallel practice, but here the dominant site of political and moral action is not the state, rather it is the movement – social, spiritual, cultural, artistic, and political – which embodies and sustains the struggle for liberation from oppression. Thus, when West takes the time and effort to name, celebrate, and acknowledge people whom he recognises as having contributed to the cause, he does so with a sense of the importance of that acknowledgement to sustain and keep alive the tradition of prophetic fight back.[45]

Why is this worth doing? Firstly, this acknowledgement is of critical pragmatic importance in the task of sustaining an intergeneration movement with no smaller ambition than overthrowing all forms of oppression.[46] Indeed, when imagining a direct conversation

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[43] Thank you to Robert Stern for drawing my attention to this helpful characterisation of hope.

[44] Cornel West, *Black Prophetic Fire*, 96.

[45] See, for example, West's underlining African-American gratitude towards Jews for their support during the 1965-66 period of the Civil Rights movement in Michael Lerner and West, *Jews and Blacks: A Dialogue on Race, Religion, and Culture in America* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1995), 89.

[46] Prima facie credibility for the notion that gratitude builds relationship, though at a smaller scale, is borne out by empirical studies. For example, social psychologists, Sara Algoe, Jonathan Haidt, Shelly Gable, suggest that gratitude may function to promote relationship formation and maintenance in 'Beyond Reciprocity: Gratitude and Relationships in Everyday Life', *Emotion* 8 (2008): 425-429. Furthermore, Algoe, Barbara Frederickson, and Gable maintain that their study lends support to the notion that 'the emotion of gratitude uniquely functions to build a high-quality relationship between a grateful person and the target of his or her gratitude, that is, the

between Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr., West suggests that the former would say the following about the latter's appeal to love:

> It's a certain way of being in the world, a certain bearing witness. Even if you are unable to bring about the kinds of changes you want in your generation, somebody will know ten years from now, twenty years from now, fifty years from now, that you bore witness. They will know that you dared to speak the truth and expose the lies so that you could bequeath that legacy to them.[47]

Secondly, the Westian project aims for edification. West thus invites us to remember, cherish, and acknowledge the efforts of people who are of admirable character and whom we should look up to as sources of inspiration. The list of people and the acts he denotes are carefully selected and reflected upon because they are deemed worthy of acknowledgment and, in a sense, emulation. Thirdly, West correctly – I think – identifies the need for this acknowledgement in the likelihood of repeated failure when fighting for the cause of justice. He reminds us: 'There's never been any guarantee of victory in history. There never has been, there never will be. Nevertheless, if we commit to loving, serving, and understanding each other – recognizing that we are far more alike than we are different – we have a chance.'[48] In the face of this, gratitude, from the perspective of sustaining a tradition committed to the liberation of all from oppression, provides a firm deliverable promise: though one may fail in the over-arching endeavour of ending oppression in the immediate, one's efforts will not be lost; they will be seen, appreciated and built upon by those who arrive later to keep the flame of prophetic justice alive. Acknowledging the work and sacrifices of those who have fought in previous generations against injustice helps build resolve and fortitude in the face of likely frustration and overt resistance encountered by those still in the heat of battle, for it offers a modicum of succor in the midst of the bitter sorrow of probable defeat. Finally, gratitude is also just what is owed in repayment for the moral debts we owe to previous generations of 'love warriors'. And yet, the experience of gratitude is also a more immediate gift for the grateful.

The Joy of Serving Others

When asked directly about the value of 'gratitude', West says:

> I believe gratitude is the fundamental pre-requisite for a morally and spiritually mature life. Now it spills over to piety, of course, because piety is the sources of good in our existence that has helped shape us to move from Mama's womb to tomb, but piety still has a sense of indebtedness whereas gratitude is just… We are not talking about indebtedness at all. We are talking about the sheer acknowledgment of being thankful. And when gratitude operates inside of one's heart, mind, and soul, it leaves less and less room for egotism and tribalism and parochialism. It is forever trying to burst out of the ego, to burst out of the tribe, to burst out of the nation to make that deep human connection…[49]

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person who performed a kind action'; in 'The Social Functions of the Emotion of Gratitude via Expression', *Emotion* 13 (2013): 605-609.

[47] West, *Hope on a Tightrope*, 158.

[48] West, *Hope on a Tightrope*, 158.

[49] Siddiqui, 'Cornel West opens up to Mona Siddiqui', from 45 minutes 51 seconds to 46 minutes 53 seconds.

This suggests that West envisions gratitude not only as an appropriate response to moral debt (what he calls 'piety') but also as the gracious appreciation of the positive impact of others on one's good fortune. This second dimension of Westian gratitude is the experience and the appreciation of one's own limitations as well as the acknowledgement and celebration of the manifold ways in which others and – ultimately, for him – God have come to our aid. Gratitude in this sense is therefore a self-transcendent experience. Indeed, in this more explicitly spiritual dimension, gratitude is not merely a strategic interaction used to bring about a wished for future, but a point of suspension from the struggle, providing something akin to a freestanding moment of grace and connection. Expressing gratitude and developing a gracious disposition do not so much offer an ulterior reward as they are the reward which comes with the experience of self-transcendence that comes from serving and acknowledging others. Gratitude, in this sense, is a thoroughly existential experience, in the same way as the death shudder. But, in an inversion of the experience of the death shudder, gratitude suspends our experience of time, not by confronting the abyss of existential annihilation, but by joyously embracing the wealth of gifts showered upon us by life itself.

And yet, even in such a seemingly celestial state of suspension, the moral and political significance of that experience remains central to West's concern. He writes:

> Gratitude always pushes out ego. When all the other folk are coming at you tooth and nail, you can look them in the face and say, 'You are not going to make me bitter. You are not going to make me bigoted. I have work to do in the little time I'm here. I have a smile on my face because I have been so blessed.' Thankfulness and praise don't provide the self with a lot of space for the ego to operate.[50]

Thus, gratitude even in its most personal and experiential dimension remains a site of struggle against narcissism, it remains an act of resistance to disconnection and fear, and this in turn allows us to foster the virtues which will enable us to maintain loving, justice-orientated relationships with others. Therefore, even the entirely personal and relatively private inter-personal joyful experiences of gratitude are significant in enabling edification – that is, cultivating the wider justice-enhancing virtues.

But how exactly does the sheer experience of gratitude contribute to this *paideia*? Ultimately, I think it is because the lived experience of gratitude provides a concrete answer to one of West's most challenging questions, namely: 'How do you generate an elegance of earned self-togetherness, so that you have a stick-to-it-ness in the face of the catastrophic, and the calamitous, and the horrendous, and the scandalous, and the monstrous?'[51] Gratitude, by reminding us of our rich interdependence – our being with and for one another – provides succour, develops self-confidence, propels us to press on in the task of fighting oppression, and ultimately helps to build resolve in the face of all too likely devastating loss and failure.

Conclusion

In sum, for West, paying tribute is thus all at once a means of acknowledging those who partake in the fight for justice and a moment of gentle relief, allowing recognition, grief, and hope to coexist in the heart of those who have endured greatly. To fight for justice requires a dedication to confront great sacrifice, suffering, defeat, and loss not just courageously but lovingly.

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[50] West, *Hope on a Tightrope*, 82.

[51] West in Astra Taylor, director, *Examined Life*, documentary film, Zeitgeist Films, scene available here at time mark 9 minutes 32 seconds to 9 minutes 46 seconds: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfD3X3f5C_w&t=546s [Accessed 31/07/2020].

Practices of gratitude are the concrete expression of that commitment. Though gratitude does not of itself deliver justice, it provides the only firm basis to sustain the hope that we might ultimately make the world more just by providing the emotional, spiritual, and political means to fight on in loving solidarity, despite setbacks, across lines of enduring difference as well as across generations. Without gratitude the struggle for justice will always be rooted in bonds of solidarity and hope too frail to endure the storms ahead. Gratitude therefore 'is the fundamental pre-requisite for a morally and spiritually mature life', because gratitude provides the inter-personal as well as personal resources to cultivate a well-grounded hope to change the world for the better through collective efforts sustained over time. Gratitude is not just a means of righteously acknowledging those whose efforts have benefited us; it is crucially a way of sustaining us and enabling us to engage in the continual task of edification and movement building by ensuring that each generation's achievements in the long pursuit of justice are not lost in the shifting sands of history. Rather, gratitude ensures that each step forward is singled out, honoured and preserved for the next generation of the prophetic movement to build upon, draw inspiration from, and find solace in. It is in this sense that Westian gratitude renews the clear-eyed political and social hope that continuously fuels the 'love train' amidst 'the funk of living'[52].

[52] West, *Brother West*, 5.