

READINGS AND CONVERSATIONS

CORNEL WEST

June 25, 2003

PATRICK LANNAN:

Thank you very much. You've all disappeared but I know you're still out there; I can hear you. Welcome to the final event of our 2002/2003 Readings and Conversations series, and this final event is always a cultural freedom event, so you've seen the program and you know what's going to happen, but it'll be the same format.

I just want to mention a couple things before I introduce Amy. We have an event that's not part of this series, but we have an event we're sponsoring and doing with the Santa Fe Art Institute on Saturday, July 19th, at 5:00 p.m. It's an event called Writers Reading the Border, and the authors will be Dénise Chávez, Rubén Martínez, Benjamin Saézn, Luis Urrea, and Ofelia Zepeda. So I encourage you to come. It's at 5:00 o'clock. It'll be in the Institute courtyard and I think it'll be a really nice event. And these brochures are available outside when you leave, so this is just a reminder.

I also thought I'd take this occasion to introduce our ... tell you a little about our 2003-2004 Readings and Conversations series, and I would add I may leave a few names off of interviewers, but all the detail will be on our website effective tomorrow and, of course, the posters will go up later in August. It's a good season, I think. We're going to start off on October 1st with Seamus Heaney being interviewed -- and he'll be interviewed by Dennis O'Driscoll. [Applause] So starting with a Nobel Prize winner, we thought that was a good start. On October 15th, in support of the Santa Fe Library, the Santa Fe Book Festival, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Quincy Troupe will be here. [Applause] On November 5th, Rita Dove, and you all know Michael Silverblatt; he'll be interviewing her that day. [Applause] On November 19th, Tariq Ali will be here from London. [Applause] On December 3rd, another Nobel Prize winner -- I can't believe it -- Nadine Gordimer [applause] will be here with Steven Wasserman. On January 21st in 2004, we're going to have Eavan Boland, she's going to come over from Stanford. She'll be interviewed by Nicholas Jenkins. On February 11th, Alistair MacLeod, the incredible Canadian short story writer will be down here on February 11th. On March 3rd Susan Sontag's coming with Michael Silverblatt [applause]. An Irish novelist and short story writer, John McGahern will be here on April 7th. Timothy Farris will be here with the director of the Griffith Observatory, Ed Krupp, on April 28th, and on May 12th Joyce Carol Oates will be here [applause] also with Michael Silverblatt. And our final event, on May 28th next year, will be a cultural freedom event in support of the International Parliament of Writers, and I know it'll include Russell Banks, Wole

Soyinka, and Bei Dao, and others, and I'm not sure who the others will be, but it will be a big event. [Applause]

So, again, we thank you for your support, and also we're here tonight with KUNM's audience. They're broadcasting tonight. So I'll just, without delaying anything, please join me in welcoming Amy Goodman. I know you know her. [Applause]

AMY GOODMAN:

I am just introducing the great orator tonight. I want to first say hello to the listeners of KUNM, who are listening throughout New Mexico right now [applause] and to the lucky hundreds who got into the theater. I understand that when the tickets for Dr. Cornel West went on sale, they went ... they were sold within hours, and it is no wonder when you read his books, when you've heard what he has to say before. And it is a special privilege to be introducing him tonight.

And today on this hundredth anniversary of the birth of George Orwell [applause]. No, Dr. Cornel West is not about newspeak and rewriting history, unless it's history that is written by generals or the white power structure in this country; that's setting the record straight. Of course, George Orwell was writing in 1984 about the changing of history to serve those in power, and it's so important that we seriously look at that prophecy today. It's so refreshing, important, essential to hear Cornel West today, not afraid to throw around terms like white supremacy, because they are real and they have to be dealt with. And he's not just about identifying problems, but about talking about solutions. He's about hope. It's a very important week to be hearing Dr. West, the week of the most important decision on affirmative action coming down from the Supreme Court [applause] in a quarter of a century. This year also mark the hundredth anniversary of W.E.B. Du Bois's book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, and in Dr. Cornel West's book, *Race Matters*, he talks about that first, the issue that W.E.B. Du Bois raises, the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line, and I'm sure he'll be addressing that tonight.

Dr. West has been described as one of America's most vital and eloquent public intellectuals. He was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Years before, that was considered the black Wall Street, before the U.S. government cracked down and might well have bombed that area, though the history has never been told correctly. And as I talk about Dr. West as perhaps the greatest public intellectual alive today, I think it's important to take on the media and why we don't see him more, as one of the regular pundits on television. I put that question to Al Hunt once, of CNN's Capitol Gang, and I said, as we showed on the TV show -- that's *Democracy Now* -- Dr. West's picture. Why don't we see Dr. West on a regular basis on programs like yours, instead of these pundits who know so little about so much? [Laughter] And he said, especially as we took on the issue of war and why we don't hear more people speaking out against war, like Dr. West -- Al Hunt said, Well, of course you hear them. We have Patrick Buchanan on. [Laughter]

Anyway, tonight I am fortunately not introducing you to Patrick Buchanan [laughter] but Dr. West, who was recently appointed Class of 1943 University Professor of Religion at Princeton University. In groundbreaking books such as *Race Matters*; *Restoring Hope*; *The American Evasion of Philosophy*; *Jews and Blacks*, *Let the Healing Begin*; *The War Against Parents*; *The*

Future of American Progressivism; and his latest, *The Cornel West Reader*, he teaches how the growing divisions in our society foster the despair and distrust that undermine our democratic process.

Having recently released a new -- that's right -- CD, *Sketches of My Culture*, Dr. West continues to explore new avenues for teaching and communicating. I hope we will hear later about why it was, when he was a professor at Harvard University, that the president, former employee of the World Bank, Lawrence Summers, took him to task for putting out this CD, which can reach so many people and generations. Well, by working to create an ongoing dialog between the myriad voices in our culture, Dr. West pursues his vigilant and virtuous efforts to restore hope in America. Dr. Cornel West. [Applause]

DR. CORNEL WEST:

Oh, what a blessing to be in Santa Fe, New Mexico. What an honor to be here in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I can't see you but how privileged I am. [Continued applause] The great city of Santa Fe, New Mexico. What a blessing. What a blessing indeed! I'd first like to thank my very dear sister, my comrade, my friend. She's been a freedom fighter for decades now, and there's simply no one like her or no voice like her. The radio and now, see, she's ... she's now extended her work into the realm of television. Let's give sister Amy Goodman another hand. [Applause] I'd like to thank the Lannan Foundation for being so kind to allow me to come all the way from New Jersey [laughter] to Santa Fe, New Mexico. I thank J. Patrick Lannan, Sr., for his vision 43 years ago [applause] -- 43 years ago. It's the vision that brings together culture, artistic creativity, with political engagement. It's what the Greeks call *paidea* at its best, the formation of attention *and* the cultivation of a self and soul that makes available to those artists, composers, painters, writers in our world who are trying to lift their voices in the wilderness. And I'd like to thank J. Patrick Lannan, Jr., for executing that vision in such an exemplary way. [Applause] I know it takes struggle to do that. Most of these foundations these days have a lot of money but not a lot of vision. [Laughter] Lannan Foundation has vision. I hope they have as much money as the others but [laughter], I haven't asked as of yet, but they've got enough to bring me here. I'd like to thank my new friend and dear sister, Jaune Evans, who not only picked me up at the airport; she's executive director of projects and she is simply a gem. Let's give her a hand at last. [Applause] I don't know where she is. Last but not least is sister Christie Davis, who I just met, but is part and parcel of the team along with sister Barbara Ventrello. They constitute the Foundation as a whole. Let's give them a hand. [Applause] Let's give them a hand.

And I'd like to thank each and every one of you for coming out tonight. I hope I say something that unsettles you [laughter] that unnerves you, maybe even for an instance un-houses you. I must say I get very excited when I come to Santa Fe, New Mexico, because this city has a very special place in my heart, that my lovely and precious daughter, [?] was born here at St. Vincent Hospital [applause] on St. Michael's Street. So I shall go to my grave with very, very pleasant memories of [laughter] Santa Fe, New Mexico. So even as I come to unsettle you, I do it in a spirit of generosity [laughter]. Simply. Very much so.

But this is, in fact, serious business that we're focusing on today. That's why I want to begin on a Socratic note. I don't think it's possible to talk about cultural freedom without talking about the example of Socrates. Yes, that flat-nosed, big-lipped, huge neck, potbelly, barefoot Athenian, who went around doing what? Infecting people with the perplexity that he had been infected with. That's the line in *Thyestes* in Plato's *Dialogues*.

And for me it's impossible to talk about cultural freedom; it's impossible to talk about political vision; it's impossible to talk about existential engagement, without acknowledging the legacy of Athens and turn to line 38a and play those Apologia, "The unexamined life is not worth living." And, of course, Malcolm X adds, "The examined life is painful." To engage in Socratic activity, the activity of self-examination, self-interrogation, self-questioning, requires courage, courage to do what? To think for one's self. William Butler Yeats is right when he said, "It takes more courage to dig deep into the dark corners of one's own soul and wrestle with what one finds than it does for a soldier to fight on the battlefield." Part of the problem in our nation, in our world, is we don't have enough fellow citizens and human beings who are willing to exercise the courage to think critically, for themselves. America's always been, as the great Richard Hofstadter put it in his classic of 1963, *Anti-intellectualism in America*, "America's always been an anti-intellectual culture." Americans love intelligence but fear intellect. There's a big difference. Hofstadter's right, intelligence is a manipulative faculty. It comes in and evaluates the situation, draws a conclusion, accents the results. Intellect is a critical faculty. It evaluates the evaluations. It's a meta-activity. It says let's examine the basic assumptions and pass at presuppositions the unarticulated prejudices of a framework, of a paradigm, rather than just thinking within the framework and the paradigm.

Americans have always been frightened by intellect. Ask Mr. Melville: *Moby Dick* selling 500 copies in the first 75 years. [Laughter] Thinking it's just a story about a whale, you know. [laughter] Ask Mark Twain; people think he's just making jokes, rather than writing some of the great epic characterizations of the challenges of a civilization with Nigger Jim and Tom on a raft, and Huck on a raft. Ask Eugene O'Neill, who has to preserve his best work to be performed after he dies. They give him a Nobel Prize for good work but not the great work. "Ice Man Cometh", "A Long Days Journey Into Night" – we were just talking about seeing Vanessa Redgrave on the Broadway stage just a few days ago. Anti-intellectual culture. Why, in part? It's a business civilization; it's a market-driven civilization, what Henry James called a hotel civilization [laughter]. Obsessed with comfort, convenience, contentment. Not wanting to engage in Socratic activity that unsettles and unnerves and un-houses people.

Let's be even more specific, the Greek in that line 38a says, "The unexamined life is not a life for the *human* being." human derives from the Latin *humando*, which means burying. When America is a death-dodging, death-ducking, death-denying civilization. This is what you would expect out of a hotel civilization. [Laughter]. Like Disneyland and Disneyworld have bragged that no one's ever died on their premises. [Laughter] Oh, so American. Sentimental, melodramatic, superficial, and yet we know in the end we're federalist, two-legged, linguistically conscious creatures born between urine and feces on our way to unavoidable extinction. That's us. [Laughter] Raise gender, sexual orientation, region, nation; get below that into where these acculturated organisms -- to use the wonderful language of John Dewey - transacting with environment, conscious of the fact that there will come a time in which we will no longer be, and

maybe we're most human when we bury our dead, forced to bring together the three dimensions of time: past, present, and future. To be death denying is to deny history, reality, mortality. And thank God, the Lannan Foundation acknowledges that in talking about cultural freedom we have to talk seriously about the various forms of death in our midst, past, present, and future. To do what? To become more alive, to think more critically, maybe to be more compassionate, maybe even muster the courage to want to sacrifice for something bigger than us.

You see, I come from a tradition of struggle, of a particular peoples who have been on intimate terms with forms of death. American slavery – 244 years - was a threat of social death. So when a death-denying civilization, and yet forms of death. No legal status, no social standing, no public value; only a commodity to be bought and sold. And if you don't come to terms with death in that context, there's no way you can live psychically and culturally because it's clear that your labor will be exploited and there's no rights that your fellow human beings of European descent have that you have access to.

Intimate terms with death... indigenous brothers and sisters. American imperial expansion fascinates me. We're talking about the invasion of Iraq. It's the first time America invaded a country. Whoa! [Laughter] My God, really. Grenada, Panama, we can go right down the line. [Applause] But no, 1783, George Washington himself says that we do not want to involve ourselves with the affairs of Europe, but we do expect expansion of population and territory. You say, Mr. Washington, there's some people on that land you have in mind - [laughter] - human beings whose lives are just as valuable as yours, on intimate terms with death, with imperial expansion. The same would be true with Latino brothers and sisters, with moving borders: Mexico one day, U.S. the next. It's not mediated with argument. It's imperial expansion. Forms of death. Struggle for black freedom. Civic death. Jim Crow. Jane Crow. Lynching. I'd call it American terrorism.

Who wants to interrogate the dogmas of, in Socratic fashion, white supremacy, male supremacy, economic growth by means of corporate priority, the deep dogma shot through American life. Who wants to interrogate? Many have, no doubt. Norman Thomas, the ex-Presbyterian minister. Upton Sinclair..[], Emma Gold. A number have, pushed to the margins. Why? Because Americans love to be experimental within certain dogmatic frameworks. Let's be as highly innovative and experimental as we can be without in any way Socratizing the framework, examining the basic assumptions of the paradigm within which, one's highly innovative. It's no doubt, Americans have some of the most creative minds in the world, but very few are willing to examine the basic assumptions that constitute the paradigm in which they are imaginative. And when they do, the fame devalued, and sometimes when the movement escalates, repressed, shot down, murdered.

And, of course, it's true, Socrates ends with the hemlock, too. He's cutting against the grain, but in part because of what he calls *parrhesia*. That's line 24, *Plato's Republic*. Socrates says, "Parrhesia is the cause of my unpopularity." Parrhesia is a Greek word that means plain speech, frank speech, telling it like it is in a sophisticated way but from the soul. And being willing to live what one says, attempting to enact one's convictions, fusing one's analysis with one's life. That's what I love about Socrates. Raising that fundamental question, who am I really? You always begin with yourself. Always begin with self-criticism. What are the ways in which *I* am

conforming? What are ways in which I am complicitous to the powers that be? What are the ways in which I am too complacent? Then moving out, who are we really in our neighborhoods, our community? What kind of people are the American people, really, when you get beyond the myths and chivalries and clichés? This notion that somehow America has some special connection with the deity. [Laughter] It goes all the way back to the founding of the country, city on the hill, moral exemplar to the world, God's chosen people. My God.

Privilege? Yes. Hardworking? Yes. Sacrificial for material gain, national security? Yes. More special than Lithuanians? No. More special than Guatemalans? No. More special than Israelis? No. More special than Palestinians? No. More special than Iraqis? In the eyes of God? No. Oh, boy, that cuts against the grain of the country, doesn't it? You'd never win office speaking those kinds of truths. That's parrhesia. [Applause] Plain speech, frank speech. And who does that today? The artists, for the most part. The artists, from blues singers to Tennessee Williams, blues playwright. Blues novelist, William Faulkner. Blues playwright again, Tony Kushner. Blues novelist, Toni Morrison. Blues white brother novelist, Thomas Pynchon, Russell Banks. Parrhesia. Thank God there's a foundation around that still believes in parrhesia, which is a precondition for any substantive talk about cultural freedom. And how do we support those who are willing to exercise their frank speech, their plain speech in a self-critical -- not a self-righteous -- a self-critical mode? So very important. Connected to what? *Humando*, forms of death.

One of the fascinating things about Socrates, of course, is that unlike many of the recipients of the Foundation, he never wrote a word. Reminds you of Jesus and a few other figures who've had some impact in human history. Never wrote one word. If it were not for the fascinating *Dialogues* of Plato, deeply conservative in its political vision but probably the most profound attempts to put on paper the play of critical intelligence. Wise but wrong; it's a fascinating juxtaposition, isn't it? Profound but wrong, unconvincing. Platonic dialogues. Rendering his master and mentor as agent. Or *Xenophone*, much less profound than Plato's *Dialogues*, but fascinating. Nietzsche's favorite, for example. Or the satirical depiction of Socrates in Aristophanes', *The Clouds*. Those three sources, the only sources we have to give us access to Socrates as an agent. But what's fascinating about those three sources is that they never, ever depict Socrates shedding a tear. He never cries. And that's always fascinated me. It fascinated Thomas More, right before he was dying in the Tower of London, his famous dialogue. He says, you know, why is it that my hero never cried, because I'm shedding a lot of tears in this tower? Something's missing. He actually only laughs twice, and it's a smile and a grin, but we won't go into that right now [laughter]. Never cried.

And I think part of the problem is, and this has so much to do with cultural freedom that when you talk about the courage to think critically, one can allow the intellect, as crucial and precious as it is, to become a refuge that hides and conceals one's own emotional underdevelopment. [Applause] For someone who's never really cried, I'm not sure they've ever really lived. Because they've never really loved. Sappho was right. Love is "sweet bitter" - that we translate as "bittersweet" but the Greek says "sweet bitter". It's ecstasy and terror simultaneously. Frankie Beverly says its joy and pain, at the same time. And what we need at this particular moment is an attempt to bring together those who are willing to think critically, to muster the courage to think critically, look at the basic assumptions of a public discourse, the way our

history is told, the way we've come to conceive ourselves. But it has to be connected to tears, and this is where for me the legacy of Jerusalem is so very important. This is where the Hebrew Bible becomes for me indispensable and fundamental, whether one is religious or secular. It's hard to conceive of what it means to be human, without the notion of each person being unique, distinctive, irreducible, irreproducible, everyone unusual in part because they are them. Everyone is who they are and not somebody else. They have a unique dignity in lieu of their individuality. That one gets the genesis of the Hebrew bible, written by a people who themselves were dispersed and scattered and had to re-conceive of themselves and tell stories about themselves that bestowed a value on them in the face of them being devalued. And then the Christian extension. The Palestinian Jew. So that the eyes flowing with tears, when Amos says "let justice roll down like waters of righteousness, like a mighty stream." And the Christian New Testament saying Jesus wept. Socrates never did. He argued. Jesus wept. The question is how do you bring together the rich spirituality of Socratic questioning with the rich tradition of loving, giving, sacrificing, serving others?

Now, again, I could just turn on John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme" and sit down. [Laughter] I could. Because that's precisely what you get. I could simply read a slice of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. I could read Baby Sugg's sermon "In the Clearing," speaking really hip, from her heart. She's doing what? She's questioning a dogma of white supremacy that's so deeply inscribed in American life that she's also trying to get people to do what? To love themselves, their flesh, their noses, their hair texture, their hips, because a certain culture has told them that they are less than...less intelligent, less beautiful, less moral. And they have come to believe it. Turn on Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On"? The love ethic shot through but doing what? Questioning America about its imperial presence in Vietnam. Questioning America about its political brutality. Questioning America why it is that they're so fearful of the Black Panther party as some kind of version of violent insurrection against the U.S. government but seeming to not want to talk about the major violent insurrection - although the U.S. government calls it confederacy - in 1861 and the legacy that's gone up to this very day. And God bless the Maddox family -- Lester Maddox died today. He's part of the white supremacist legacy, God bless him. No doubt about it. We also lost Maynard Jackson the day before, same city. He's struggling against it. Who wants to exercise parrhesia and talk frankly about it, without losing sight of their humanity?

For me, one of the great moments of American culture actually occurred in August of 1955. Very few people want to talk about it. In 1955, of course, Emmett Till was murdered by fellow citizens, a victim of U.S. terrorism, the body thrown in the Yazoo River, the Tallahatchie Bridge, under the Tallahatchie Bridge. But his body was brought back to Chicago, and the first major civil rights demonstration took place, 125,000 fellow citizens walked by to take a look at Emmett Till. His mother left the coffin open so they could see. It was at Pilgrim Baptist Church, led by the Reverend Julius Caesar Austin. And he introduced Mamie Till Mably, and she walked to the lectern. She looked over at her baby, who's head was five times the size of his normal head, and she looked in the eyes of America as well as the folk at south side Chicago. She said what? I don't have a minute to hate. I'm going to pursue justice for the rest of my life. That's a level of spiritual maturity [applause] and moral maturity that does not give up on the Socratic attempt to interrogate the mendacity and the hypocrisy of American life, but is rooted in something deep. It's rooted in an attempt to keep track of the humanity of the very people who have dehumanized

you. Use *that* as a standard of responding to terrorism, in light of the last two and a half years. [Applause] My God. How fascinating. Here's Moms Mabley speaking on her behalf and speaking for the best of tradition. Martin King's in the background. Fanny Lou Hamer's voice is there. A. Philip Randolph's voice is there. And many nameless and anonymous black leaders who knew they had to deal with a situation in which they were unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence, and hated for who they were. That's what it meant it mean to be a nigger. Unsafe, unprotected, subject to unjustified violence, and hated. Now, after September 11th, all America feels unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence. [Applause] And hated. You say, hmm, now that the whole nation's been niggerized, let's see what the response is going to be. [Applause] Interesting.

I come from a tradition that says in the face of terrorism, it's justice not sweet revenge, not short-term retaliation. It's justice. Hunt them down if they committed a crime, yes. Demonize, no. And even within the black tradition there are black folk who demonize, they are criticized based on that tradition in light of their not aspiring to the standards of Emmett Till's mother. And if that's the case -- that's certainly the case with George Bush and other leaders. Crucial, indispensable, bringing together the best of the legacy of Athens and the best of the legacy of Jerusalem, but in the New World context in which legacies of slavery, Jim/Jane Crow, police brutality, lynching, discrimination, red-lining in bank loans. On and on and on. Always connecting one's vision about one's own freedom to the plight and predicament of others, sisters of all colors, gay brothers, lesbian sisters, physically challenged brothers, indigenous brothers and sisters. So that they all constitute overlapping and intertwining traditions of struggle, but knowing that the courage to think critically and the courage to love, but I think we need to talk publicly about the courage to love. That's what I love about the best of the black freedom movement.

It's very rare that you find progressives. These are my dear white brothers and sisters, speaking publicly about love. So why is that? Well, it's a long story. We won't go into it. [Laughter] Just don't. Abraham Joshua Heschel did. Dorothy Day did. Early Michael Harrington did; the later Michael Harrington, whom I worked with very closely, he had shifted from a certain Catholicism to a certain socialism, but was consistent across the board; and he was my comrade in both instances. He just changed his mind on some things.

But James Baldwin talked about love explicitly as the most difficult, dangerous, but also the most significant force in the world. Why? Because if you come from a people who have been so hated, love can become subversive and transformative, beginning by loving yourself. Marcus Garvey talked about love explicitly. Yes, Elijah Mohammed didn't talk about loving white brothers and sisters, but that wasn't his only point [laughter]. There are other people in the world other than white brothers and sisters. That he was immature to have to base the love of black people on devaluing white people, but he talked about black people loving themselves.

Mr. Louis Farrikhhan the same way. Much progress and evolution necessary in terms of his building on Elijah at that early stage. Yes, but he's talking about loving themselves. Why is that important? Because it's a form of agency. It gives people a sense of confidence. And part of the problem in America is what? People don't feel like they have any agency. They don't feel that they're confident in making a difference at all. And especially in the states, where it might

not ... what was it in the election ... the last election? Eighty percent of white America thought the election was fair and eighty percent of black America thought it was unfair? And somebody's right and wrong about this thing. I'm not a relativist at all. There's a fact about the matter. Thirty-two percent of black people for the war. Nearly 75 percent of white America for the war. There's a difference here. Agency makes the difference for people who are cutting against the grain in their perceptions. Love becomes a form of agency. And not only that, but it helps break down the barriers, the walls of demarcation, and so even when the black rage and the black fury, the righteous indignation of having to look white supremacy in the face in all of its dimensions and still persist, the language of love still allows white brothers and sisters to recognize that it's not all of them or it's not genetic. White brothers and sisters can make choices. John Brown is part of the *movement*. Tom Hayden's part of the movement because it's all about choices, decisions, commitments, no one is locked into a pigeonhole. Or some category. So that love becomes crucial.

And not only that but, of course, I believe that it's impossible to talk seriously about fundamentally transforming America or any other country, but especially America. It's impossible to do that without talking about forms of spirituality and especially music. But spirituality is all about how do you deal with your constraints and limitations? When you run up against that anyway, those constraints and limitations, you're going to need something to fall back on like a community that is sustained by levels of spirituality which have to do with contesting, which have to do with sharing, which have to do with sustaining persons so that they don't become short-term freedom fighters.

Miles Horton, that great freedom fighter of the twentieth century, the white brother who founded Highlander Center where Rosa Parks and Stokely Carmichael and a host of other freedom fighters would come out to Tennessee, move down to the south. He wrote a wonderful autobiography called *The Long Haul*. We need freedom fighters like Amy Goodman who are in it for the *long haul*, and that's hard to do. I know there are a lot of brothers and sisters from New York and Boston who made it out to Santa Fe trying to get a little distance from urban context. [Laughter] I can understand that. But you bring that tradition *with* you, because even in Santa Fe the same struggles go on. Context a little different, bluer sky, okay. [Laughter] With more beautiful mountains, yes, okay, I grant you that. No doubt. But you are the same moral, spiritual, politically committed human being here that you were in New York, in D.C., Philadelphia, Chicago, wherever else you come (from) and meet those who have been here for a long time. Brown brothers and sisters. Go back generation after generation after generation. Of course, our indigenous brothers and sisters, century after century after century.

How do we bring them together? That Socratic legacy on the one hand, and the Judaic-Christian, I would even Islamic in terms of Ashanti Ati and other prophetic thinkers building on the best of their tradition. On the other, in light of our present moment, we come now to our present moment and what do we see? A bleak moment [laughter]. Let's be honest. [Laughter] One of the bleakest moments in the history of the civilization. America is now [applause] ... it's not only in empire, but in scope, in depth, in power it exceeds the British *and* the Roman empires. Nothing like it in the history of humankind. No countervailing force at all. The repressive and regimenting Soviet empire went under twelve years ago. It was a countervailing force. It supported Mandela when he was a terrorist for 27 years. We like to remind Americans of that.

But there's no countervailing force at all. And like both empires, it's arrogant; it's hubris, feels as if it can shape the world in its own image. Dictate its terms in terms of what it wants to do. And as my dear brother, Noam Chomsky reminds us, not only puts forward a new doctrine of preemptive strike, - that's a doctrine that says that if it looks as if someone's about to attack you, you attack them before they're able to. That's not what the new doctrine is. This doctrine says if a nation has a set of elites who are contemplating possibly challenging the U.S. power, they are subject to attack. That's preventive war. That's a new norm in international relations. It's the law of the jungle, and it sends signs and signals. Troops in a hundred nations, bases in seventy nations, a major carrier in every ocean. Internally, 1 percent of the population owning 48 percent of the net wealth ... financial wealth. Five percent own 70 percent of the wealth, and that's before the tax cut. [Laughter] And the result is what? As you can imagine the most vulnerable, beginning with who? The children. Because already 22 percent of *all* of America's children live in poverty, in the richest nation in the history of the world. It's a disgrace! It's a disgrace! [applause]. The *children*. It's 7 percent in Canada, it's 6 percent in Japan, it's 22 percent in America. Forty-two percent of red children, 39 percent of brown children, 37 percent of black children. They are 100 percent of the future. Poverty educates. It shapes the way they look at the world, gives them a sense of who they are, the untrustworthiness of existence. And here *the* greatest empire in the history of the world has this Plutocratic oligarchic, to some degree still pigmentalcratic hierarchy in its economy. And then the most vulnerable, the children. And who are connected to those children? Poor women. Workers of [?], handicapped. Disproportionately black, brown, and red? Yes, but numerically mainly, white brothers and sisters.

Where is the discourse? Where's the outrage? Where's the indignation? Or is it that the sleepwalking taking place has become so normative that we feel as if we can't make a difference? [Applause] What is going on? Thank God, again, for our artists. When they get beyond the family dysfunctionality in vanilla suburbs, they have broader canvases; many do. [Laughter] So Lord, there's some dynamics going on in the global scale, and we know what? No empire lasts forever. All empires come and go. They ebb and flow [applause]. Chickens do come home to roost. You're going to reap what you sow. Sooner or later reality is going to come back on you. You can only live in a state of denial for so long. You can only hide and conceal your structures and institutions in place that don't at the present highlight the dilapidated school systems in chocolate cities, unavailable healthcare for 44 million fellow citizens [applause], difficulty of gaining access to childcare, especially given the welfare reform signed by a spineless Democrat named Bill Clinton. [Applause] Playing political football with the lives of poor people to win the next election, trying to triangulate with the Republican Party. He ought to be ashamed of himself. Now, he's a friend of mine -- I've told him this -- so I'm not speaking behind his back. [Laughter] I told him this at the White House, why I didn't vote for him, the second time. But I supported him when they tried to impeach the brother; I thought that was wrong. [Laughter] But just plain speech, frank speech. That's all. Just trying to tell the truth. With love. [Laughter] In the spirit of self-criticism.

But our moment is one in which what? Our media, about as un-Socratic as one can imagine, for the most part, mainstream media. Oligopoly at the top. Journalists afraid to raise questions to the powers that be. Thank God for Pacifica and the other voices. [Applause] Very important. We must support them. It's an indispensable service. Even in our universities, professors running scared. Afraid to speak out. A host of different issues. On the Middle East, can't even

criticize the government's policies without being cast anti-Semitic. You say, wait, wait, wait a minute, now here. You've got the Israeli Left engaging in such powerful critique of their government? If they can do it in Tel Aviv, how come you can't do it in Chicago, New York, and Santa Fe? Anti-Semitism is a vicious form of bigotry; there's no doubt about that. It can also be used to silence critics. You see a variety of different languages deployed, trying to hide and conceal certain truths that ought to be highlighted. Black folk do it, white folk do it, women do it, Jews do it, Italians do it, Russians do it. Across the board. Do we have what it takes to exercise our parrhesia? To exercise fronesis, the practical wisdom rooted in compassion? And I don't believe it's just a matter of election to election. This past week the Supreme Court spoke, five to four. It was a very significant decision, very important. I didn't applaud but I was slightly delighted. [Laughter] It was much better than I expected. The reason I didn't applaud, of course, is because it just struck me still ass so narrow. That institutions of higher learning could have such long traditions of sons gaining access to these institutions, not always meeting high standards, but no debate. Geographical diversity, two from Idaho and Montana gaining access; not always meeting the highest standards. No debate whatsoever. Athletes gaining access to these slots, not always meeting the highest standards [laughter]. No debate. Even when they are [?] children, black folk.

But after 244 years of slavery in which it was against the law for black people to learn how to read and write, Jim Crow in which they paid ... we paid taxes for public institutions of higher learning and couldn't even think of sending our children to those institutions. Almost a century. And finally getting a foothold and a toehold, and as soon as the black folks show up you get a national debate about their deficiency and how rigorous the standards ought to be. That's a level of hypocrisy we ought to be honest about. [Cheering, applause] We ought to be candid about that. If they don't meet minimal qualifications, they don't belong. But how many meet minimal qualifications? My God, at Harvard 9,000 do. They've only got 1,800 slots. What are you going to do? Ted Kennedy met minimal qualifications, barely, and got in and took some Irish working-class brother's slot who was brilliant and went to Boston College. And I've said this to brother Kennedy, too, so I'm not speaking behind his back. [Laughter] He knows he got in by legacy, son of, grandson of, brother of. When he showed up was there a national debate broadcast around the world, every corner of the globe, about the deficiency of Irish rich folk? [Laughter] No! When George Bush showed up at Yale, was there a debate about rich WASPS? [Cheering, applause]. No! But, no, let Jamal show up, let Letitia show up, and the whole machinery kicks in, and all of a sudden now everybody's so concerned about everybody having 780 on their board scores or above, or, if not, we're going to sue you. And we should keep in mind that the three white fellow citizens who sued, they could have chosen white students who had board scores much lower, too. They didn't. They chose the Negroes. What's going on? Hypocrisy. Let's be honest about it. So I was slightly delighted. [Laughter] But some folk had a party, and I stayed home and listened to Luther Vandross [laughter, applause]. God bless him, he just left the hospital. He's in a rehabilitation center. Thank God, almighty.

I'll bring this to a conclusion, here, now how is my clock doing? Yeah, I got good time. I've got very good time. But what we have is an American empire with three basic pillars: the free-market fundamentalism and all forms of fundamentalism for those who were engaged in Socratic activity, worthy of deep suspicion. All forms of fundamentalism reduce complexity, create Manichean views of the world, all good on one side, all evil on the other. Free-market

fundamentalism says what? The market is a fetish; it has magical powers. [Laughter] If you have a social problem, marketize, privatize, commodify, commercialize. And somehow, some way, things will be all right. [Laughter] Markets are legal constructions created by human beings to be used for good or for ill. There are sick markets like healthcare. There are highly competitive markets like supermarkets. Free-market fundamentalism says what? Privatize *even* those mechanisms that have to do with satisfying people's most basic needs, like the Bush administration's attempt to privatize Social Security. That's just one instance among others. So that what happens, common good, public interest, wanes. And the market, that legal construction that requires some non-market values to operate, begins to run amok, becomes more and more unedited, unregulated.

And Adam Smith understood so very well. There's no accident he wrote not only *The Wealth of Nations* but also *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Both books are very important in understanding the early theories of the market because he knew that a contract was predicated on non-contractarian values like trust and loyalty. When we look at free-market fundamentalism run amok, we see Enron, we see World.com, we see corporate elites acting as gangsters. And I use the word *gangster* because, of course, there's been a lot of debate about gangster rap, but stole and embezzled. They get put on the front page and stay there. Corporate elites get a little hit on the wrist. We've got a corporate responsibility act that we were very upset about. We're going to [laughter] -- please. Free-market fundamentalism will undermine the very condition for the possibility of democracy because a democracy is predicated on a vital public life. And you end it with a younger generation that believes, in fact, that the market way of life is the human way of life. To be human is to be stimulated, titillated, rather than nourished, rather than deeply empowered, believe that buying and selling and promoting and advertising are the fundamental ways of being in the world. Learn how to package yourself, go to school ... high school and college, not in order to engage in paideia, in cultivation of self and soul, but to acquire a skill so you can gain access to some dynamite job and live in some vanilla suburb [laughter]. What an impoverished way of being in the world. [Applause]

Eugene O'Neill said it so well in *The Iceman Cometh*, at least in his interview prior to *The Iceman Cometh*. In 1946 he said, "Americans suffer from this notion that somehow they can possess their souls by means of possessing commodities. Don't they recognize that they'll end up a nation and an empire who has the capacity to conquer the world, but has completely lost its soul?" Oh, Eugene, we need you, we need you, brother. Your insight still ripples down through these 57 years since *The Iceman Cometh* with the pipe dreams of Hickey and his partners in Harry Hope's Saloon, dangling the empty carrots of an empire that on the outside is so powerful but on the inside is so hollow and shallow, when it comes to its spirit and soul. It's no accident that Martin Luther King, Jr., entitled the theme of the freedom movement, the slogan of the Southern Leadership Christian Conference, what? Saving the Soul of America. He didn't have to read Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* to know what he was talking about.

Of course, Malcolm X suggested, Brother Martin, America has no soul, brother. [Laughter] You're missing the point. It's about power. And Martin said, I'm not naive, Malcolm, I know very much about power, but a democracy must also be about common good and public life, and I'm a democrat, small *d*. And if you play only the game of power, then Thrasymachus is right in Plato's republic: might makes right. And I refuse to simply play the game of power, even

though I bring power to bear with a moral vision. And, of course, as Malcolm continued to grow, he said, you know, Martin, I'm beginning to see your point more clearly now. You're absolutely right. Even your language of love makes sense to me. Because it is, in fact, better to fight to save the soul rather than to blind one's self and live a soulless life in an imperial country. [Applause] It's a certain way of being in the world, a certain bearing witness. Even if you're unable to bring about the kind of changes you want in your generation, somebody will know ten years from now, twenty years from now, fifty years from now, you bore witness. You tried to speak the truth and expose lies so that you could then bequeath that legacy to them. Tradition is not something you inherit, T.S. Eliot says, you have to fight for it in order to actually gain access to your tradition. You can't keep a tradition of struggle for freedom and democracy alive without people willing to bear witness, even in a bleak moment when they know that they will never see the positive results in their lifetime. That's part of our challenge today. [Applause] That's part of our challenge, [applause/cheers] at this historical moment.

That's one reason why we live in the age of Chekhov. Oh Anton Chekhov, grandson of a slave, medical doctor, administers to the poor during the day and writes short stories and plays at night. And his age is one of what? Deep disillusionment, deep disappointment, deep disenchantment, and yet what? Endurance through suffering. Struggle through darkness. Why? Because it's not about just winning. It's about testifying and bearing witness. You get this even in our dominant forms of religiosity in the United States, especially Christianity. American Christianity's a *market* form of Christianity, for the most part. It's all about identifying with a winner. That's why Easter Sunday the churches are full, but Good Friday they're empty. [Laughter] I'll show up when the winner pops up. [Laughter] But don't tell me about the main protagonist being treated like a political prisoner by the Roman Empire. Don't tell me about a senseless death based on injustice. And certainly don't tell me about the Saturday in which, echoing Nietzsche, God is dead, even for Christians. You don't get too much theo-thanatology in Christian thought these days. But God is dead that Saturday, and there was no thought of a bounce back. That's why Peter himself said, I didn't know the brother, three times. [Laughter] Never seen him, no recollection of him [laughter]. And that's Peter, that's the foundation of the church, right? [Laughter]

To live in the age of Chekhov says what? Yes, we can look at that stuff. We can look at the Patriotic Act I, the Patriotic Act II, the escalating authoritarianism, the violation of rights and liberties of Arab brothers and sisters and Muslim brothers and sisters, and if they start there... and Arab American is just as American as any other American in this nation. They start there and it easily creeps, it's easily extended. We can look at our aggressive militarism: in Iraq today, Syria, Iran, North Korea tomorrow. It's very dark. And then Chekhov says what? Keep smiling, keep fighting, keep thinking, keep loving, keep serving, keep sacrificing. It's not about the win overnight, it's not about the quick fix, it's not about the pushbutton solution. It's about what kind of human being you want to be, what kind of legacy you want to live. It reminds one very much of the blues: "been down so long that down don't worry me no more, that's why I keep keeping on anyway." It's not logical. Not logical at all. If you depend solely on the logic, you're in deep trouble.

That's another reason why I think that a blues people has so much to teach a blues nation. That these doings and sufferings and visions of black people, in the Chekhovian manner, have much

to teach the United States now that as a nation we have the blues. Not just in our economy; workers have had it for a long time. Not just in our homes; sisters of all colors dealing with domestic violence. Not just in our social life; gay brothers and lesbian sisters devalued, dealing with the hypocrisy of the straights, the insecurity of the straights. No, now it's a national community. And we can all go to France [laughter] and receive a common response, right. [Laughter] No matter what color you are. It's, Oh, my God, I'm more American than I thought. I didn't feel that American in Chicago, but . . . [laughter] I'm very American in Paris. [Laughter] Hmm, what's going on here? Yes. Part of a community that is perceived by the world as being arrogant, disrespectful of international law, unwilling to cooperate with other nations, imposing our will on the world. And I don't believe that's going to change. I don't believe that's going to change.

And, of course, we haven't even begun to talk about Africa and the AIDS epidemic, and what role Africa and Latin America *can* play in possible shaping of a better world, in light of their struggles at this particular moment. Latin America has a long history of American Imperial treatment. *Long* history of it. They have much to teach us. But the blues people in the midst of the American empire, largely but not exclusively peoples of color, have much to teach. If they are willing to step forward . . . the danger, here, of course, is what? There's a lot of cowardice in the black community. Afraid to speak. Want to get in on the goodies, and grab the booty of the empire. And we're seeing it more and more and more.

Black politicians won't mention one word about the prison industrial complex. We have a whole presidential campaign, an election. There's no talk about the connection between the criminal justice system and the prison industrial complex, because they've all agreed to be *hard on crime*. And hard on crime means [applause] war . . . drugs against poor young people. Disproportionately black. And this goes for those black folk in the Democratic Party. I was just with brother Jesse two days ago, Rainbow Coalition. I said, Brother Jesse, it's good to see you stepping out, brother. He's getting upset. He was just at Benton Harbor, Michigan. You all know what happened there. Another instance, peak of an iceberg, part of the 112 yearly young black people who are shot down like dogs by police who happen to pull the trigger when their backs are turned. We figure, Oh my God, Rodney King. Glad we haven't heard about that again. Happening all the time. Cincinnati, Benton Harbor, Los Angeles, New York. Over and over again.

A lot of black leaders don't want to talk about it. People ask me, Oh, brother West, why you hang around with Al Sharpton? Al Sharpton needs to get a haircut. [Laughter] Well, I'm concerned about his brain. What's he thinking? His heart, his soul. Got a flawed history? Absolutely. Absolutely. Has he changed? Is he speaking any truths that make sense, vis-à-vis other candidates in the Democratic primary? I'm just raising questions. I'm not proselytizing. Just raising questions. But who's going to talk about a criminal justice complex? Two million fellow Americans in jail, 50 percent black, 46 percent of young black men between 16 and 25 in Baltimore, Chicago, part of the criminal justice complex. What does it take in the black community? How many of your children need to be in prison before you get indignant? [Applause] Unless you think somehow they're genetically inclined. We still got fellow Americans who think that. They'll always be some of those folk around. White supremacy dies very slowly, even on the pseudoscientific front. What happens when it begins to escalate? The

fastest group going into prison right now is poor white brothers. I'm just as concerned about them as I am poor black. They're human beings like anybody else. Where is the focus? Do we have to wait until the criminal justice system begins to expand over Princeton and University of Chicago? Stanford's all, you know, we think we've got a crisis with young people at this point [laughter]. I think we really need to do something serious. Michael Moore showed that so well in his film, "Columbine". Black kids, brown kids been shooting each other down for decades. You get one major shootout in white America, everybody stops. Got to be very sensitive here, you know, these are very complex situations. This is ... you've got to be nuanced here. These are nice kids. They're like us. They're all-American, you know. Oh, I see, very different approach, yeah. Oh. Mm-mm. What a situation. What are we to do?

End on a blue note. No optimism here. The evidence does not look good. Being a freedom fighter in the twenty-first century is to make a radical distinction between hope and optimism. One must be a prisoner of hope, yes. Unconditional commitment to mustering the courage to think critically, speak freely. Unconditional commitment to a courage to try to keep track of the humanity of each and every person; the courage to love, serve, and sacrifice. And an unconditional commitment to fight for democracy in its substantive form. A rich public life, pervasive common good, with the private sector and its precious rights and liberties protected, yes, but balanced in such a way that it does not suffocate the public forms of expression, of community, of what holds us together, what connects us, so that our glue does not become so weak that we end up so polarized that we're at each other's throats, in part because we're not organized and mobilized against those powers that be at the top.

How rare it is in American history when significant enough numbers of the citizenry organize and look upward, confront the powers that be rather than scapegoat the most vulnerable. That's the easiest thing. And in the end we're talking about leadership that has a blue note and a blue sensibility. But it's also a leadership that by example, in being willing to speak, act, write, fuse, share, laugh, love, with others, that can inspire us and others, so that it becomes contagious. There's never any guarantee of any victory in history. Never. Never been, never will be. But if we can convince each other, become less conformist and less complacent, more Socratic, more prophetic, more radically democratic, we have a chance. And I hope and pray that each one of you, in wrestling with these questions, *tries* to take seriously the Socratic and prophetic and democratic challenges I've put forward tonight. Thank you all so very much. We have good time for dialog with sister Amy. [Applause]

Alrighty, there we are. Dynamite, dynamite, all right.

-- I like it. Uh-huh. Very good. [Audience still applauding]