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Review of Keith Gilyard, *Composition and Cornel West: Notes Toward a Deep Democracy*. So. Illinois Press. 2008

Linda Flower, Carnegie Mellon University, July 2, 2009

William James argued that for a difference to be a difference, it must make a difference. He would have liked Keith Gilyard's new book on the relevance of Cornel West to composition. One strand of the book is a lucid theoretical guide to West's intellectually expansive yet deeply passionate call to public engagement. The other strand is an artfully performed guide to actually being an educator in the experimental, improvisational tradition of American pragmatism.

After opening with a 1998 airplane conversation over Pennsylvania with West, Gilyard overviews the theoretical terrain of Cornel West's prophetic pragmatism—his reworking of American pragmatism's progressive tradition (rooted in Emerson, James, and Dewey) into a more robust form of social engagement built on prophetic witness. West's grounding in Christianity, Marxism, and the African American struggle has allowed him to move the rational secular discourse of progressivism into a form of criticism grounded on faith in the capacity and agency of everyday people and on a vision of transformation that, in West's hands, is unashamed of its foundational norms of individuality and democracy, even as it subjects them to critical questioning.



The book's central chapters explore three critical concepts that develop across West's work. The first, West's Socratic commitment, is "a relentless examination of received wisdom coupled with a willingness" to engage in fearless "confrontation with irresponsible power" (p.5). For Gilyard this means strategies for reading and writing that reveal social and political realities embedded not only in obvious choices of discourse style but also in nuances of conversation and language. The second organizing theme, prophetic witness, names a style of unflinching criticism which starts, in West's words, with "the causes of unjustified suffering and unnecessary social misery and highlights personal and institutional evil, including the evil of being indifferent to personal and institutional evil." However, it is a style that takes us beyond an objectivist progressive agenda into a passionate, though not naïve, commitment to a transformative vision and to the possibilities of individual fulfillment and democratic connectedness. Just as prophetic witness draws on West's roots in Christian spirituality (not to be confused with dogma), his notion of tragicomic hope captures West's own intellectual style. In George Yancy's terms, West speaks as an African American "blues man in the world of ideas . . . affirming life in the midst of tragedy." In a gem of an essay in chapter 5, Gilyard parallels this intellectual style with his own evocative reading of how the soul and funk music of the 60's and 70's morph into current hip-hop. He shows us how to catch the artists' "double voiced rhetorical strategy" that combines critique, pain and popular appeal, with an assertive identity that "keeps on keepin' on."

Gilyard makes good on the promise of his title—Composition and Cornel West—by illuminating the powerful subtext running throughout West's work: the way discourse shapes our perceptions of and responses to the pressing issues of our time. Gilyard's Deweyan end-in-view is what he calls a rhetorical education in the strategic uses of language, which would recast composition as a "highly political term" as it draws students into a life of engagement (p.3). Although Gilyard defines critical composition as an analysis of oppression, I am



even more drawn to his own practice of reflective awareness of our own interpretive process. He invites us into a classroom discussion of a powerful but indirect short story portraying the (unexplained) cool reception given by one woman to another (a visitor with a Jewish name). As students are asking “what’s the point?” this classroom dialogue gradually reveals how powerful currents of assumption, bias, and rejection are carried out and revealed in nuances of language.

Not afraid to bring this questioning stance to topics where many would fear to tread, Gilyard’s view of rhetorical education (like his own writing) invites students into dialogue about spiritual discourse, class division, and race matters. For example, what would it mean to bear “prophetic witness” (as a writer or teacher) when your goal is not winning an argument or promoting your position, but eliciting a reflective inquiry? Or what shape might deep democracy take in the “protopublic classroom” of rhetorical education?

Like the jazz men and women both writers valorize, Gilyard often performs his own rhetorical improvisations on philosophical arguments. Discussions of Foucault, or race or class segue into mini-dramas set in a classroom dialogue or in a revealing conversation with black graduate students. These vignettes form an on-going conversation with the reader that instantiates complex theoretical claims in the differently complex understandings of situated knowledge. They take us into a space where ideas and arguments are embodied and performative—able to express the rich webs of context, motive and consequences in which they are embedded. Such situated knowledge, in my own experience with community rhetoric, has the power to turn mere talk into intercultural inquiry and democratic dialogue. It lets Gilyard translate the notion of deep democracy into rhetorical practice.

The book’s opening plane conversation comes full circle in a fascinating closing dialogue between these two jazzmen of ideas. Gilyard throws some hardballs (e.g., Plato’s criticism of rhetoric and



literacy) and West tosses back, “I have a very distinctive view of that line, 607b in book 10 of Plato’s Republic...” We soon find ourselves in a synesthetic world of poetics/rhetoric/philosophy with an African American beat: “West: You know Nietzsche talks about a danceable education. Give me a Socrates who dances. A god who dances. A gay Socrates... A singable paideia” (p. 103). Such conversation—in its effortless modulation from questioning social practice, to dissecting dualisms, to discussing spiritual striving—models both the intellectual life West argues for and the engaged rhetoric Gilyard invites us to teach toward.