

Princeton University

Honors Faculty Members
Receiving Emeritus Status



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colleagues in the departments of those honored.

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Faculty Members Receiving Emeritus Status

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Cornel R. West



This spring, Cornel West retires as the Class of 1943 University Professor in the Center for African American Studies at Princeton University, and joins the illustrious ranks of our professors emeriti. For nearly 40 years, Cornel has had a deep and abiding relationship with Princeton, and we celebrate his enormous contribution to the Princeton community, and to the world at large.

Cornel was born on June 2, 1953, in Tulsa, Okla., the grandson of the Reverend Clifton L. West Sr., pastor of the Tulsa Metropolitan Baptist Church. Cornel's mother, Irene Bias West, was an elementary school teacher (and later principal), while his father, Clifton L. West Jr., was a civilian Air Force administrator. From his parents, siblings and community, young Cornel derived "ideals and images of dignity, integrity, majesty and humility." These values, he has written, provided him "existential and ethical equipment to confront the crises, terrors and horrors of life."

He completed his undergraduate education at Harvard University in 1973, where he graduated magna cum laude after three years and received a B.A. in Near Eastern languages and civilization. Martin Kilson, the first African American tenured at Harvard, and one of Cornel's professors, recalls him as "the most intellectually aggressive and highly cerebral student I have taught in my 30 years here."

Cornel first arrived on Princeton's campus in 1973 to begin his doctoral work, and in 1980 earned a Ph.D. in philosophy. Characteristic of his prodigious gifts, deep commitment to justice and passion for the life of the mind, he published his first book, "Black Theology and Marxist Thought" the year before completing his graduate education.

The title of his doctoral dissertation was "Ethics, Historicism and the Marxist Tradition," which was later revised and published under the title "The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought," his sixth book, published in 1991.

After receiving his doctorate at Princeton, he returned to Harvard as a W.E.B Du Bois Fellow before becoming an assistant professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. In 1984, he accepted a position at Yale Divinity School that eventually became a joint appointment in American studies. While at Yale, he participated in campus protests for a clerical labor union and divestment from apartheid South Africa. One of the protests resulted in his being arrested and jailed. As punishment, the University administration canceled his leave for spring 1987. As a result, Cornel had to commute between Yale, in New Haven, Conn., and the University of Paris, where he was also scheduled to teach. He then returned to Union for one year (1987-88) before joining Princeton as a professor of religion and the director of the Program in African American Studies (1988-94).

Cornel has produced an extraordinary body of scholarship that has been transformative in the areas of American pragmatism, black theology and contemporary Marxist thought. His works include: “Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity” (1982), “Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion and Culture” (1988), “The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism” (1989 and winner of the 1992 Critics Choice Award), and the simultaneously published “Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism: Volume I: Prophetic Thought in Post-Modern Times” and “Volume II: Prophetic Reflections: Notes on Race and Power in America,” which were collectively granted the American Book Award in 1993.

Cornel has also consistently shared his genius and oratorical brilliance with a larger public, by using accessible and engaging language to illuminate complex social issues. In 1992, he published the seminal “Race Matters.” The book quickly achieved bestseller status and gained the attention of Time magazine and Newsweek, leading both publications to run extensive profile articles about him in June 1993. “Race Matters” was also named a New York Times Notable Book of the Year in 1992. “Race Matters” firmly established Cornel as the premiere black public intellectual in the United States, and dramatically increased his illuminating appearances on our

airwaves and in our print media. “Race Matters” has sold more than 400,000 copies, has been translated into several languages, and undoubtedly changed the course of America’s dialogue on race, justice and democracy. Ten years later, Cornel extended this project with the book, “Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism,” which offers a brilliant and unflinching critique and diagnosis for the failures of contemporary democracy.

Cornel has frequently collaborated with other thinkers, and this reflects his commitment to deep intellectual and political engagement. His collaborations include: “Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life” (1991) with groundbreaking black feminist thinker bell hooks; “Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin” with Tikkun magazine editor Michael Lerner (1995); “The Future of American Progressivism” with Brazilian legal philosopher Roberto Unger (1998); “The War Against Parents: What We Can Do For America’s Beleaguered Moms and Dads” with economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett (1998); “The Future of the Race” with literary scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1996); and, most recently, “The Rich and the Rest of Us” with radio personality Tavis Smiley (2012). He also co-edited “African American Religious Thought: An Anthology” with his Princeton colleague Eddie Glaude (2003), as well as “Post-Analytic Philosophy” with philosopher and art historian John Rajchman (1985).

In addition to his scholarly and public work, Cornel has also been a great contributor to the universities where he served as a professor. In 1994, he returned to Harvard as a professor jointly appointed in African American studies and the Harvard Divinity School. In what was popularly known as the “Dream Team” era of Harvard’s African American studies department, Cornel emerged as one of the most popular instructors at the university; his introduction to African American studies course regularly enrolled 500 students and often had to be held at Sanders Theater as no classroom could accommodate all of its students. In 1998, he was appointed the first Alphonse Fletcher University Professor at Harvard. Cornel used this freedom to teach not only in African American studies, but also in religion and philosophy.

In 2002, Cornel returned to Princeton. He said, “It’s a turning towards something that is positive, something that is visionary, something that is appreciative.” He later would become the first faculty member with a full appointment in the Center for African American Studies.

To say that Cornel is a public intellectual is something of an understatement. He has made two forays into popular music in the form of spoken word albums composed with remarkable collaborators. “Sketches of My Culture” was released in 2001, and “Street Knowledge” in 2004. In 2006, he released “Never Forget: A Journey of Revelations,” which recalled the historical rebelliousness inherent in hip-hop music and youth culture. Among several other rap and R&B artists, Andre 3000, Prince, Gerald LeVert, KRS-One, Dave Hollister and Killer Mike all made guest appearances on the album. Additionally, Cornel made guest appearances in two of the “Matrix” films, “The Matrix Reloaded” and “The Matrix Revolutions.”

But perhaps most impressive for a man with such an extraordinary career, filled with accolades and recognition, has been Cornel’s consistent commitment to social justice, principles of Christian love and dignity for all. He continues to cast his lot with the least among us and offers his voice on behalf of the disenfranchised — from demonstrating for civil rights while still in high school to occupying the U.S. Justice Department in 2012. He is, as he describes himself in his memoir, “Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud” (2009), “a bluesman moving through a blues-soaked America, a blues-soaked world ... the bluesmen sing of real life, here and now experiences of tragedy and comedy even as they offer up help ... I try to give heart to intellect by being true to the funk of living ... I try to live the good fight and keep moving on.”

