

Cornel West, Curtis Mayfield, and Fan Activism

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In the summer of 2014, Ferguson, Missouri became the centre of the most severe civil rights disturbances in the last two decades of American history. Antagonism between local citizens and the authorities rapidly escalated after news spread that an unarmed black teenager called Michael Brown had been fatally shot by a police officer who suspected him of committing a robbery. Widespread anger ignited a series of incidents that ran from full blown riots to more peaceful demonstrations. Brown's death at the hands of Officer Darren Wilson was seen by many as a combination of heavy-handed policing and racist assumptions. At the end of November 2014, unrest in Ferguson was re-ignited when a grand jury failed to indict Officer Wilson despite one witness saying that he had basically executed the teenager. To the dismay of Brown's family, in March of the following year the US Justice Department released a report clearing Wilson of any civil rights violations. In a study released in the same month, the Justice Department exposed a culture of racism endemic to the St Louis County police and court system. It unearthed a wide range of injustices that included everything from the imposition of unduly harsh penalties to the circulation of racist jokes. In what follows I will examine the way in which a prominent African American public intellectual and celebrity activist, Professor Cornel West, was inspired by his love for the soul singer Curtis Mayfield to mobilize others against racial intolerance and human injustice. I will suggest that because music fans know they share a communal strength of feeling for the same person, in some circumstances they can draw on their hero's values to emotionally mobilize each other for particular political causes.

One place to start our discussion is to say that the neoliberal era is, according to many academic commentators, one in which ordinary people are disenfranchised from democratic

politics. It is also one in which, many commentators claim, music has lost its political charge. In parallel with these changes, media fans have become more prominent in the public sphere as a consumer group. According to Liesbet van Zoonen (2005), the idea that fans and citizens represent radically different social formations and identities is untenable because politics and entertainment are converging. She adds that there is “an urgent practical need to explore and imagine how fandom and citizenship can be connected” (56). A growing stream of work has emerged in fan studies examining fandom’s relationship to activism (Scardaville 2005; Jenkins and Shresthova 2012). Several researchers have noted the facilitative role of social media in political activity. Critical attention to such approaches reveals a number of issues, one the most significant of which is that they tend to emphasize the role of communication technologies or tools over human motivations.

In my 2013 book *Understanding Fandom*, I borrowed a term sometimes used in connection with Bert Helliger’s family constellation therapy: the ‘knowing field.’¹ I argued that:

While fans are not in need of healing and fandom has no obvious relationship to family dynamics, I think that a loose borrowing of the ‘knowing field’ idea does capture some of the important elements: that fandom is not (just) a performed role, but rather a means of entry in to a realm of emotional conviction where one’s feelings can seem highly personal and yet not quite one’s own, since the experience of feeling something strong and positive is shared by many others. (162)

In other words, the ‘knowing field’ an internal terrain of affect, bounded by a threshold beyond which one can say, ‘Yes, I know that I am a fan.’ It is a form of *emotional* knowing – a sense of enlightenment that seems to resemble something almost carnal or mystical, not simply the acquisition of a stock of appropriate knowledge. Living in the knowing field means occupying an internal territory - an experience reflected in both personal conviction and recognition of the collective thrill experienced by others in the fan base. The knowing

field is, then, a positively charged space that is *both* inside each of us and shared by everyone in the fan base.

Just like commentators sometimes assume that fandom is not political, so scholars in both fan and celebrity studies tend to position celebrities as separate individuals. Fans and celebrities are, however, not necessarily different people. They are different *roles* that the same person can occupy. In some cases celebrities can also be understood as fans who makes use of their privileged voice in the public sphere.

Cornel West is Professor of Philosophy and Christian Practice at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. He is one of the leading black male intellectuals in American public life. West rose to popularity in 1993 with his book *Race Matters*. As well as speaking out about the way in which the African American population has suffered under the ‘new Jim Crow’ (Alexander 2010), in recent years West’s praxis has connected him to other contemporary oppositional movements and he has featured in many national radio and television shows. Cornel West is not, however, simply a commentator and activist. He is also a music fan. Amongst West’s diverse pop music heroes is the soul singer Curtis Mayfield, an inspirational figure in the 1960s civil rights struggle who died in 1999. Spencer Leigh wrote in Mayfield’s obituary that:

He believed in the creed “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you,” and he idolised Martin Luther King... His music was more melodic and less raucous than James Brown's and, hence, less threatening to a white audience.

At best Mayfield created soulful, anthemic, and compellingly catchy hits like ‘Move On Up’ which were, as Leigh noted, ‘less threatening’ to white audiences, despite having lyrics that consistently melded black protest with assimilationist ideals. In his memoir *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud*, Cornel West described Mayfield as a “towering figure from my childhood who continues to inform my soul to this very day.” (West 2009, p.35) The idea that

Curtis Mayfield “informed his soul” locates West firmly on the ‘knowing field.’ It also begins to register the intensity of his passion for a musician he regards as a creative genius and ethical role model. Like Mayfield himself, Brother West is known for keeping it ‘funky’: he strategically anchors his political advocacy in a set of foundations that start with the value of love. West’s Christian concern for America’s poor allows him to rail against the neoliberal economic policies that foster a racial underclass, fuel white supremacist fear of a black Other, and overpopulate the country’s penal system with black inmates from the lower classes. For example, quoting Matthew 25 verse 40 from the bible, West often reminds audiences that we will be judged by how we treat those least fortunate in society. His set of ethical role models does not stop at religious and civil rights leaders, but includes musicians whose songs and values have personally moved him. In West’s oratory musical and ethical engagements are therefore not separate spheres, but work together in support of racial equality. Indeed, West makes constant references to Mayfield. As one commentator put it, “His powerful and prophetic talk is laden with sweeping gestures, sly wordplays, and good references to Curtis Mayfield” (Borger 2009).

Because West was a fan before he entered into academic life and the public sphere, we can say that his public endorsement of Curtis Mayfield is not simply a matter of pursuing a rhetorical touch stone. It is evident that West is not just using Mayfield’s name or sound for his own political purpose. He is not appropriating the soul singer’s music and articulating it with a tangential cause, but instead tapping into Mayfield’s own deep concerns for human equality. Furthermore, West does not primarily evoke Mayfield as historical figure or voice from the past. Instead, he sees him as someone who made appropriate ethical choices in a struggle that is still ongoing.

Cornel West's response to Michael Brown's shooting culminated in his participation in the 'Moral Monday' demonstration in Ferguson in mid-October 2014. His political action began before well that protest, however. Early in October, West discussed the resourcefulness of African Americans with the hosts of an independent daily news show called *Democracy Now!*:

In the face of terror, in the face of trauma, in the face of stigma, 400 years of black people wrestling with all three, what did we produce? This caravan of love, this love train—love of justice, love of poor people, love of working people. But it's weak and feeble these days. It's weak and feeble, trying to bounce back. But in Ferguson, among the young people, we're seeing it... When you heard Curtis Mayfield sing 'We're a Winner,' where does his hope come from? Where does his joy come from? You've got to keep track of the creativity. You've got to keep track of the sense of community, the we-consciousness.²

West's efforts to address the injustice of Brown's killing continued with a tour in which he spoke with the aim of mobilizing protest. Four days before 'Moral Monday' he addressed an audience at Seattle Town Hall and drew a link between Curtis Mayfield and the leader of the Black Panther movement:

You don't look forward unless you first look back... The landmarks set the standards... they're crucial, they're necessary, they're catalysts for the work that you do... The musicians are a constitutive part of the tradition. They're not marginal. They're not ornamental. There's no Stokely [Carmichael] without Curtis Mayfield.

The next day, West addressed a black audience at the Leadership and Social Justice Conference at St Mary's College of California:

I'm on my way to Ferguson. We're going to have a mass demonstration... We're going to jail; we're going to jail on Monday! We're going to fill the jails... You can still follow the great Martin Luther King Junior who said justice is what love looks like in public... what Martin didn't add - this is the addition of Curtis Mayfield - justice is what love looks like in public, but tenderness is what love feels like in private. I come from a tradition of a people who not only talk about justice, but also talk about militant tenderness, and subversive sweetness, and radical gentleness.

When he reached Ferguson, West joined many others, in the rain, outside of the Police Department. When he attempted to cross lines and speak with officers - along with at least 48

other protestors, including members of the clergy - he was knocked to the ground and arrested.

Cornel West was not the only person to connect Curtis Mayfield with the civil disobedience at Ferguson. He was joined by a range of ordinary Mayfield fans who also made the connection. Staff and contributors of the creative pop culture commentary blog *Vannevar* took part in an August 2014 march through Boulder, Colorado, to protest against the Ferguson killing. One contributor wrote an untitled poem for Michael Brown afterward that said: “It’s too bad that artists, writers, musicians, activists, our president—people dedicated to talking meaningfully about our time here on the planet— continue to stay silent. Who among us would... Walk with Curtis Mayfield? Marvin Gaye, Nina Simone? I did.”³ Some took to Twitter. Using the hashtag #Ferguson they posted links to songs like ‘People Get Ready,’ ‘Power to the People,’ ‘We Got to Have Peace,’ ‘New World Order’ and ‘This is My Country.’

In conclusion, I hope I have shown how Cornel West drew on his fandom to pursue his civil rights activism. What I am arguing is that those on the ‘knowing field’ of music fandom like West not only proclaim individual passion for their hero’s material, but also know that they share enough in common with other fans – emotionally and intellectually – that they can reach out and politically mobilize those also on the fan base. Music fans are therefore not *apolitical or depoliticized*. Instead they can are a group of individuals who recognize the degree of emotional conviction that they all share and – given a suitable political context – contagiously energize and mobilize each other by expressing their hero’s values. In March 2015, during a the National Bar Association event called, “Ferguson where do we go from here?” West once again impressed upon the audience that it takes support to achieve anything. *The St Louis American* reported:

He [West] specifically pointed to Pamela Meanes, president of the association, and said, “That’s what so magnificent about the leadership of my dear sister Pamela. She wants the young folks to know, ‘I’m part of the love train that Curtis Mayfield was singing about. Don’t need no ticket just get on the love train.’” From the audience, Meanes jumped out of her seat and yelled, “That’s right,” as the full room cheered loudly.⁴

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1 For a definition of the 'knowing field' in its original, therapeutic context, see Helliger (2001, p.8).

2 Unless otherwise stated, quotes from West at live and media events are taken from various respective videos on YouTube.

3
Vanessa Angelica Villareal's words were taken from Ramirez (2014).

4 Taken from Rivas (2015).