



Cornel West Tells Stockton Audience: 'Question America,' as Fannie Lou Hamer Did

College Holds 10th Annual Symposium Named for Civil Rights Activist

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Galloway, NJ –Dr. Cornel West, public intellectual, weekly radio host and television commentator, told a sold-out audience Thursday at the 10th Annual Fannie Lou Hamer Human and Civil Rights Symposium at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey to “question America,” as Hamer did.

He told the students in the audience, “You all like to be unsettled and pushed” to levels of academic achievement, but you have to “get beyond the me, me, me, I, I, I, selfishness of our market-driven culture – that’s Fannie Lou Hamer.”

He said the civil rights activist for whom the symposium is named was “committed to integrity” and exemplified what education should be about – “turning away from petty things and fleeting pleasures” and working on behalf of rights of “the ordinary people.”

“There is no Barack Obama without Fannie Lou Hamer and her legacy,” West said. “I love the brother, but I hate injustice and folks suffering,” he added, questioning Obama’s use of drone warfare.

“A baby killed in Yemen or Somalia by a drone, is just as precious as a baby killed in Newtown, Connecticut ... or a baby killed on the east side of Los Angeles,” he said.

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West, perhaps best known for his classic, *Race Matters, Democracy Matters*, is professor of Philosophy and Christian Practice at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and has taught at Princeton, Harvard and Yale.

He frequently appears as a commentator on networks including CNN, MSNBC and PBS and programs such as *Real Time With Bill Maher* and *The Colbert Report*. He made his film debut in *The Matrix* and has appeared in over 25 documentaries and films. He can be heard weekly on his national public radio show with Tavis Smiley, "Smiley & West."

West was introduced by President Herman Saatkamp, who called him "one of the most thoughtful, challenging, democratic intellectuals in the country."

The symposium, which also included a panel discussion, was co-sponsored by the college's Africana Studies Program and the Unified Black Students Society.

At Thursday's event, West noted that "no other institution of higher learning in the United States salutes this giant, this freedom fighter, Fannie Lou Hamer."

"What is it about Stockton College that led to you all falling in love with Fannie Lou Hamer?" he asked.

He drew a parallel between Richard Stockton, the signer of the Declaration of Independence who was imprisoned and tortured by the British, and Hamer, the Mississippi freedom fighter who was beaten and jailed.

West said Stockton, for whom the college is named, "cut radically against the grain," in the 18th century, as did Hamer in the 20th.

Hamer helped organize the Mississippi Freedom Summer voter registration drive for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1964. She also helped found the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to oppose her state's all-white delegation at the 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. Mrs. Hamer, who died in 1977, brought Mississippi's civil rights struggle to the national stage during a televised speech at the convention.

Dr. Patricia Reid-Merritt, Distinguished Professor of Social Work and Africana Studies, brought Dr. West in as a speaker. She also chaired the committee that successfully advocated for the creation and 2012 installation of a statue to honor Hamer in her home of Ruleville, Mississippi.

She said in opening this year's program, *Voice of Courage: The Enduring Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement*: "We are still struggling for a more free and just society."

West also joined a panel discussion that included Dr. Gwendolyn Long Harris, executive

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director of the Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs at Rutgers University, and former Commissioner of Human Services, State of New Jersey; James Harris, president, New Jersey NAACP; and Dr. Michelle McDonald, associate professor of History at Stockton.

West told the audience to focus on the fundamental questions of life, as Hamer did.

“What does decency do in the face of deception? How does virtue meet brute force?” he asked.

He said they should not give in to “inertia and apathy” when confronted with inequalities, such as in education, where “the rich get taught and the poor get tested.”

“I never allow despair to have the last word,” West said.

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