There is an odd duality in Cornel West’s work. He is a generous thinker and voracious interlocutor, willing to learn from anyone on a sincere quest for insight. But he is also he is an unapologetic admirer of greatness, as stingy with ascriptions of genius as he is lavish with praise for the select few who qualify. “Making Niagara a Cataract” reflects on this duality. I try to explain what motivates West’s commitment to the importance of greatness, and how these motivations emerge from and shape his intellectual project.

If men were equals, the waters would not move; but the difference of level which makes Niagara a cataract, makes eloquence, indignation, poetry, in him who finds there is much to communicate.

Emerson, “On Greatness”

I am first and foremost a blues man in the world of ideas – a jazz man in the life of the mind....

Cornel West, “To Be Human, Modern, and American”

1. Introduction

There is an odd duality in Cornel West’s work. On the one hand, his spoken and written words seem to reveal a generous thinker and voracious interlocutor, willing to listen to and learn from anyone, of any station, on a sincere quest for insight. On the other hand, though, they also reveal an unapologetic admirer of greatness, as stingy with ascriptions of genius, or importance, or profundity, or depth – with, as I’ll say, strong evaluations – as he is lavish with praise for the select few who qualify.

This combination of generosity and extreme selectiveness is puzzling and potentially troubling, but not for what might be the obvious reason. The obvious worry is that a radical democrat who champions greatness must be an elitist and a hypocrite. But this concern arises only if one simplistically equates democracy
with leveling, and ignores the role that culture, cultivation, and self-cultivation
have to play in truly democratic society.

One might more appropriately puzzle over the peculiarly single-minded
nature of West’s judgments of greatness. They reveal an obsession with super-
latives, with designating someone, or specific someones, as the great-est or the
best or the deepest. Sometimes when he writes and speaks in this superlative
mood, it is not even enough for some candidate for evaluation to be, as he
sometimes says, “first-rate.” He is finally most interested in the vanishingly few
individuals or achievements in some domain that truly manage, somehow, to far
outstrip all the rest and achieve true greatness. But just what is at stake in
insisting on superlatives in this way, and in making this strong distinction
between the truly great and the merely good?

Similarly puzzling is the way that particular expressions of this fascina-
tion with superlatives raise thorny questions, particularly when it comes to
evaluating the black intellectual tradition. West wants to say, for example, that
Toni Morrison is the only black writer – black literate intellectual, he says – who
has achieved true greatness. But why does Morrison alone make the grade when
other obvious candidates, like James Baldwin and W.E.B. Du Bois, fall short?
As far as I know, West never systematically takes up this question, or the related
questions that arise from his consideration of the entire tradition of black
writing.

Not only does West decline to take up these specific questions; he
declines to provide any straightforward account of his fascination with great-
ess. What he does instead might be a third source of puzzlement around these
issues. Instead of compiling arguments in support of a system, he layers and
varies certain recurring themes in an intricate musical – and specifically,
polyphonic – structure. This approach is evident in his reflections on greatness.
Instead of offering a general defense of his passion for superlatives, he explores
and develops a number of different complexes of ideas, each of which provides
its own motivation for seriously distinguishing the best from the rest.

This essay is a reflection on these three sources of puzzlement. I will try
to explain what motivates West’s commitment to the importance of greatness,
and how these motivations arise as harmonies in West’s “musical” alternative to
a research program. I will also consider whether these motivations justify some
of West’s more controversial judgments concerning black intellectuals.

2. Evaluation, Superlatives, and Distinction

West’s fascination with greatness takes three principal forms. Sometimes he
offers strong evaluations: he credits some individual, achievement, institution, or
practice with greatness, or he criticizes those that fall short. At other times he
indulges a superlative mood: in addition to finding greatness, he looks for the
great-est, to distinguish the best from the rest. And at still other times, this
superlative mood expresses itself in what we might call strong distinctions. On