



The Black Intellectual Tradition and the Great Conversation

with Christine Perrin, Dr. Anika Prather, Dr. Zena Hitz, and Dr. James LaGrand

Panel 3: The Poetry of Tyehimba Jess

Outline:

The Poetry of Tyehimba Jess

- **Dr. Anika Prather (07:50):** The Fisk Jubilee Proclamation
 - The Fisk Jubilee singers helped popularize and preserve the Negro spiritual.
- **Christine Perrin (10:17):** Why do singing and pain have this relationship?
 - **Dr. Anika Prather:** Two purposes of the Negro spiritual:
 - The slaves camouflaged what they felt with the spirituals. They were not allowed to express their pain. They masked their pain behind the words of the Bible in Negro spirituals. Field songs were symbolic to more inspirational thoughts.
 - They were hidden words to show you how to escape to freedom. They were code language for escape or getting to freedom.
 - The Negro spirituals are a canon of black literature.
 - The Negro spiritual dispels the misinformation that Christianity is a white man's religion.
 - **Dr. James LaGrand:** They identified with Christ's suffering. God uses these Biblical accounts. They had a deep Christian identification.
 - **Christine Perrin:** What bold intelligence to put yourself in an narrative that identifies with Christ and the past.
 - **Dr. Anika Prather:** The Bible was one of the few books that the master would allow them to have. They would "steal" books from the master's library.
 - They took whatever texts and words that were available to them to find their voice and their identity and to get rid of the stigma that they were less than human.
 - The words told them that they were a child of God.
 - **Dr. Zena Hitz:** These words don't belong to the slave owners. They support human dignity.



- **Christine Perrin (22:00):** People don't own a song. The oral tradition gets past and is made and remade.
 - **Dr. Anika Prather:** They didn't just sing a song, they created a whole new type of song. From the blue note of the Fisk singers came blues and jazz.
 - **Dr. James LaGrand:** One of the things that strikes me as powerful, beautiful, and true is the way the notes of hope (the garden of freedom, of liberation, and of possibility), and the ability to draw on the Christian biblical past, the American past as well as acknowledging deprivation, cruelty, and suffering.
 - **Dr. Zena Hitz:** "Every tongue unfurled as the bodies' flag." It is very honest, beautiful, and hopeful without covering anything over.
 - **Christine Perrin:** There is a taking in of the song, and then offering it back up. This is a deeply human task, but it is a very specific task to the African American people in dealing with America's sin.
- **Christine Perrin (32:04):** Change in African American history was always tied to something that was also a concrete benefit, not just an idea, a feeling, or a thought. Jess is always reminding us of actual gains that people made that changed the game for others – they raised money, they saved the school.
- **Dr. James LaGrand (35:25):** The reference to one blood is the text. That is more lost in our time. If there would be one social justice slogan, it would be one blood.
- **Christine Perrin (37:15):** It is historical stewardship of the first order. We are uncovering the stewardship of the Civil War to World War II in this country, but even the Christian stewardship that we are talking about.
 - **Dr. Anika Prather:** It is ok to honor each of our narratives, but at the end of the day we are bringing those narratives together as humanity. We are showing everyone that your heritage is not slavery, it is something bad that happened to you. Your heritage is in Africa, your heritage is in those who were freed.
 - **Dr. James LaGrand:** Jess deeply understands music.
 - **Dr. Anika Prather:** We are different, but we are one. "We are more alike than different." Maya Angelou
 - **Dr. Anika Prather:** It is instinctive for us to bring things together.
- **Christine Perrin (52:26):** What does it mean to be free? It means to live for something greater, not just your own survival. Jess could heal his own mind through these characters.
 - **Dr. James LaGrand:** One of the ways he climbs into their story is in part the physical pain, the rebukes, and the slights. Jess' understanding is that these are also spiritual beings. **It is a harder thing to do, to imprison a man or a woman's soul.**
 - **Dr. Anika Prather:** Why didn't Douglass just escape and go to Canada and live happily ever after? He set his mind free and becomes an abolitionist. He wanted to set everyone else free.



- **Dr. Anika Prather (01:06:34):** We had no other choice but to take on these white centuries or we would have no heritage. We created a heritage. We created a culture. We had to start someplace.
 - Black people were taken from Africa. There was a whole process to get them as distant as possible from their culture. They were taken to a spot which was a “Door of no return.” They would separate you from others who spoke your language, then you were chained to the bottom of a boat in layers.
 - Millie Christine said that I’ve been born in this deformed way, but somehow I am going to make a song out of this.
- **Dr. Zena Hitz (01:10:38):** There is an edifice built up that the black American people reveal for what it is (reveal the idolatry of wealth and power).