

Requiring of Us a Song: Longing, Hard Listening, and the Blues

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In his autobiography, *Father of the Blues*, W. C. Handy describes his horror when the scorched skull of a black lynching victim was flung into Beale Street. According to Adam Gussow, Handy's "furious disillusionment" with life in Memphis eventually would "drive him away."¹ "All the savor had gone out of life," wrote Handy. "Only a sense of ashes in the mouth remained."²

Initially, I resisted Bill Lawson's term, "disappointment," as a characterization of blacks' response to centuries of virulent racism. But in grasping the concept through the language of the blues, I came to feel its power. "What sets blues song apart from ... other post-Reconstruction black secular song forms," Gussow observes, "is an intense focus on the singer's own emotion-laden experience, often grounded in bodily distress: I'm tore-down."³ Sexual yearning and heartbreak in the blues, Angela Davis argues, serve to express worldly desires more generally.⁴ "Social disappointment" is about being set up again and again for what may never be.

"The shadow of a deep disappointment rests upon the Negro people," said W. E. B. Du Bois.⁵ Had African Americans not fought oppression in every way possible, the undoubted gains in black civil rights would not have occurred. But although racial progress seems to herald fundamental shifts in white supremacy, promises of change continue to be betrayed at almost every turn. Lawson's powerful address invokes the doubleness of black suffering in the United States. Dispossession, disenfranchisement, rape, murder, enslavement, torture, imprisonment, second- and third-class schooling, poverty, police and mob brutality, segregation and job discrimination, inadequate health care, and other forms of material oppression all are rationalized through relentless discourses of blame. Bodily harm is compounded by spiritual violence.

To the extent that equality between blacks and whites requires whites to relinquish the certainty of our integrity — our good intentions, our trustworthiness, our superior fitness as judges — hope for change may be as unreliable as a faithless lover in a blues tune. It has been necessary to the white psyche — specifically, James D. Anderson argues, because Americans believe in liberal democracy — to practice self-delusion about racism.⁶ To reconcile our belief in freedom with the practices of white supremacy, we have had to provide ourselves with justifications for treating black, brown, and beige people as "not us" — as slaves, illegal immigrants, illegal first peoples, criminals, dependents, guest workers, and second-class citizens. "The ancestors of the people who became white and who require of my captivity a song," wrote James Baldwin, demanded the "song less to celebrate my captivity than to justify their own."⁷ Echoing Baldwin, the a capella ensemble Sweet Honey in the Rock sings: "[They] carried us away to captivity; required of us a song. How can we sing our holy song in a strange land?"⁸ Despite "expect[ing] us to provide first-hand accounts of black experience," writes bell hooks, whites have "felt it was their role to decide if these experiences were authentic."⁹

Control over narrative meanings, over voice, has been a white privilege. In challenging dominant frameworks of perception, the arts offer a potent site of African American protest. As Lawson observes, black playwrights investigated lynching in ways that refused the contemptuous white practices that sold salacious newspapers and postcards. Similarly, Jacob Lawrence's haunting "Another Cause was Lynching" (panel 15 from his *Great Migration* series) evokes the horrors of lynching without spectacularizing the act, focusing instead on the grief of the victims' families.

Part of the purpose of practices of degradation and dehumanization, Carter G. Woodson argues, was to enslave black minds.¹⁰ Lawson's focus, though, is less on "the mis-education of the Negro" than on the mis-education of white people. The fiction of the public schools as affording a reboot button — releasing each generation from the history of colonization — has offered a crucial alibi to whites intent on evading racial accountability. Yet the primary audience for that alibi is ourselves. "Every reasonable black person thinks that most white people do not mean him well," one of John Gwaltney's interviewees told him.¹¹ Another observed, "Most white people — anyway, all the white people I know — are people you wouldn't want to explain anything to."¹² The recognition that nothing can be expected from whites in the way of soulful understanding is perhaps an instance of what Lawson refers to as social disappointment.

Despite the "spell of racial inferiority" cast over African Americans, Lawson writes, their "dogged strength and determination ... not to become the radically racial 'other' in the land of their birth" has fueled centuries of black resistance. At a talk given at the University of Utah some years ago, Cornel West noted that "to be a blues man or woman is to be a prisoner of hope." No one, he said, has been a better friend to white people or kept greater faith with white people than black people have. No one has loved or believed in the United States more.¹³ Suggesting a similar theme, Lawson invokes Ray Charles's lament, "I want to know / ... Do you believe me, child? / I'm a fool for you." The betrayal of expectations for full citizenship, significant engagement, and meaningful change teaches the kind of social disappointment that schools can hardly expect to undo.

The progressive solution has been to exhort teachers to be heroes. There is no doubt that teachers need to be heroes. But the emphasis on what individual teachers can do to bring about change may return the gaze of whites (and other teachers) to ourselves. The empathetic/identification response, as Megan Boler argues, helps "redeem" the observer, while affording her "the voyeuristic pleasure of listening and judging the other from a position of power."¹⁴ My point is not that individual, caring responses to students and colleagues aren't valuable and necessary, nor that nothing meaningful can be done in the face of all but overwhelmingly hostile institutional and structural arrangements. Countless thoughtful scholars have helped us to see the necessity of both organized and intimate engagements in educational struggle. As I understand Lawson, though, the call of the blues to white people is not for John Brown-style heroism; rather, it is a call for a response founded in our own yearning and loss. While it is not unusual for whites to lament our loss of a sense of control and certainty, what is at stake in the blues is a wrenching tear in the fabric

of belonging: Ray Charles's "You didn't love me no more" is retroactively realized as "*I'm a fool*." The long-distance call announcing Muddy Waters's betrayal is a bulletin from the future.

Although the blues plays with exaggeration, dramatization, and mordant humor, the distancing mechanisms of camp, irony, and sentimentality are largely absent from the blues. As Lawson notes, the blues are about immediacy. They call out the listener. They're addressed to "you." Mourning a lover's murder, silence, betrayal, or callous indifference, tracing wounds, dwelling on unbelonging and loss, the blues teaches us about disappointment. As with camp, the expression of longing maps the chasm between faith and betrayal. But whereas camp is coded for insiders, consolidating an "us" unknown to "them," the blues is framed as direct speech to an unreachable audience. Lawson asks *how* you teach about disappointment. I would ask, also, *what* the blues teach us about disappointment. Can they teach us about how we enact faithlessness?

Lawson's analysis suggests at least two answers for educators. One is that the language of engagement — the scholarly language with which we receive anger, outrage, and pain, for example — cannot be allowed to mask our own vulnerability. In contrast to Lawson's writing, which is at once scholarly and impassioned, dominant approaches to philosophical writing typically evacuate any emotion that might undermine the writer's appearance of disinterested authority. "Neutral, impersonal writing styles," argues Patricia Williams, lack any element of risk. "Because we have lost the courage and the vocabulary to describe" our emotional responses, the personal is dismissed from our accounts, yet "this is where our most idealistic and our deadliest politics are lodged, and are revealed."¹⁵

A second implication of a blues-based reframing of education is a challenge to the inspirational framing of social justice education as a story of redemption, salvation, and hope. Although that narrative is meant to be student-centered, it is keyed to the identities of teachers. Educators figure as noble, strong, competent, good, and reliable shepherds through an otherwise hostile world: failure is the backdrop against which the main narrative unfolds. The teacherly expectation that we can listen adequately, that what we hold is possibility, steels us against our inevitable failures and losses. Empathetic, supportive, caring — even heroic — though individual teachers might be, the framing of education and teacher education as redemptive may mean that we fail to recognize the need for a different kind of hard listening.

By acknowledging yearning and disappointment, we let the blues reach us in our brokenness. For white antiracist educators, a sometimes suppressed question is, "Can I be a good white teacher? Who am I if I can't be a good person?" Reframing the project of cross-race relationality in terms of the blues offers the possibility of setting aside the seduction of goodness, with its echoes of security and sustainable whiteness. To grow into the blues, struggling with disappointment, Lawson teaches us, is to be rehumanized.

1. Adam Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 106.

2. W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography* (1941; repr., New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 178, quoted in Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here*, 106.
3. Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here*, 37.
4. Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).
5. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 11.
6. James D. Anderson, "How We Learn about Race through History," in *Learning History in America: Schools, Cultures, and Politics*, eds. Lloyd Kramer, Donald Reid, and William L. Barney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 87–106.
7. James Baldwin, "The Price of the Ticket," in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948–1985* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), xx.
8. Sweet Honey in the Rock, "Waters of Babylon," music by Brent Dowe and Trevor McNaughton, text adapted from Psalm 137, on *Feel Something Drawing Me On* (Chicago: Flying Fish Records, 1985). Sweet Honey in the Rock's version of this song invokes the African experience of slavery.
9. bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 11.
10. Carter Godwin Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933; repr., Washington, DC: The Associated Publishers, 1972).
11. John Langston Gwaltney, *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America* (New York: Vintage, 1980), 7.
12. *Ibid.*, 67.
13. Cornel West, "A Right Delayed is a Right Denied" (lecture, Martin Luther King Keynote Lecture, Salt Lake City, UT, University of Utah, January 2008). Audio available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pRmgL4vA1U4> The quoted statement appears at 52:50. Because the university's recording of the event does not include the Q & A following the formal address, the second (paraphrased) statement does not appear in the audio recording.
14. Megan Boler, "The Risks of Empathy: Interrogating Multiculturalism's Gaze," in *Philosophy of Education 1994*, ed. Michael S. Katz (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1995), 214.
15. Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 93.