

Demoralization and Teaching: Lessons from the Blues

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In conversation with Toni Morrison, Cornel West makes the following observation: “Since 9/11 all Americans feel unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence and hated and that’s been the situation of black folks for 400 years.... And I think we’re at a moment now in which a blues nation has to learn from a blues people.”¹

There is, to use Ralph Waldo Emerson’s language, provocation here.² West compares the situation of all Americans in post-9/11 America — one structured by violence, vulnerability, and hatred — with the reality that black Americans have lived since there has been an America. Black Americans created — and continue to create — the blues in acknowledgement of this reality,³ and West asks white Americans — who may have never seen themselves as inhabitants of a blues nation — to realize how their newly imposed vulnerability⁴ puts them in a position to learn from the blues and from a blues people. West’s words come to us from ten years ago as a challenge, one that I don’t think was adequately responded to. Though the vulnerability felt by many in the United States on and after 9/11 can be extremely educative, I worry that the country did not learn the types of lessons West finds taught by the blues. Instead of learning through vulnerability, I worry that the certainty of violence (actual and ideological) was chosen over the difficult reality of the blues.⁵ Instead of seeking a blues education, America — once again — chose knowingness,⁶ thereby foreclosing possibilities of growth.

In this essay, I resound West’s challenge within the context of teaching and teacher education. Specifically, I explore Doris Santoro’s analysis of demoralization⁷ and argue that the blues may offer one way of responding to the demoralization of teachers. Though there are many ways of thinking and writing about the blues and its significance for education,⁸ I build my understanding of the blues and the possibilities it offers educators from James Baldwin’s 1964 essay, “The Uses of the Blues.”⁹ In particular, I make the case that Baldwin believes that the blues is a stance, or a way of being, one that, as West writes, “encourages us to confront the harsh realities of our personal and political lives unflinchingly without innocent sentimentalism or coldhearted cynicism. The blues forges a mature hope that fortifies us.”¹⁰ I argue that this mature hope forged by the blues may offer a powerful response to demoralization and conclude by discussing some of the implications for teacher education if this argument is taken seriously.

DEMORALIZATION

Santoro has done the profession of teaching a great service by developing, through qualitative research and theoretical work, the significance of demoralization in the lives of teachers.¹¹ What she describes as demoralization is often described as burnout, but they are not the same thing, and conflating the two has adverse theoretical and practical consequences. As Santoro writes, “Unlike burnout, which suggests the exhaustion of an individual teacher’s personal resources, demoralization comes

from a teacher's inability to access moral rewards in the practice of teaching. Moral rewards are an unlimited resource that lies in carrying out the profession, rather than an individual possession that is apportioned in limited quantities."¹²

There are two very important points to draw out from this passage. First, while burnout is generally seen as a problem experienced by individual teachers due to an exhaustion of their personal resources, demoralization turns our attention in the direction of structural features of the work a teacher does. Second, demoralization draws our attention to the moral rewards of teaching and their potential as an unlimited resource that teachers can access as professionals. Santoro argues that it is the entire climate of public education — one characterized by high-stakes forms of assessment to which many teachers object as professionals — that proves demoralizing. This climate affects all teachers, not just individuals who do not have access to the limited resources more of which all teachers and schools need.¹³ Demoralization occurs because teachers are being cut off from the moral rewards of teaching. Teachers are not burning out; they are, in the language Santoro develops in another article on this topic, conscientiously objecting to the types of mandates, assessments, and practices that are being forced upon them.¹⁴

This is a key point. Demoralized teachers are teachers who believe in ambitious instruction, best practices in assessment, and creating a caring and inclusive environment where every child experiences growth in the light of meaningful standards of learning. The moral rewards of teaching are found in these dimensions of the work, not in scripted instruction, invalid and inauthentic forms of assessment, or a learning environment that takes a very superficial view of the value added by a teacher.¹⁵ It is important to note that the stance Santoro describes is not a reactive one. As Lorna Earl cautions in her discussion of teachers' objections to high-stakes assessments, "Just moving assessment back to teachers' control, on its own, is not a positive change. Returning to some fictional 'golden age' will not move the agenda forward."¹⁶ For a teacher to accurately be described as demoralized, she must be looking to access the specifically moral rewards of teaching, that is, pushing the profession forward and supporting student learning and growth; she cannot just — as important as this work is — point out the numerous limitations of current educational practices and policies. The demoralized teacher once had access to the unlimited moral rewards of the profession that were not mediated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB)¹⁷ and seeks an educational climate where those rewards can be more clearly lived in her practice.¹⁸

To return directly to Santoro's argument, demoralization is a function of educational policies that affect all teachers. This does not mean, as I suggest above, that all teachers are demoralized, but it does mean that teachers seeking the moral rewards of teaching will, most likely, find themselves demoralized given our current educational climate. As teacher educators, it is important that we prepare teachers for this reality. One major way to do this is to make teachers aware of the climate they are entering while preparing them to be advocates — to parents, administrators, other teachers, their elected officials — for the educational policies and practices they believe in. Moreover, we have to help teachers find ways to access the moral rewards of teaching, even in the face of, at times, overwhelming demands that make good

teaching feel almost impossible.¹⁹ Even with all of this — preparing teachers to be advocates, preparing them to do good work in difficult times — teachers will likely still feel demoralized. In conversations I have had with state educational officials, one message becomes resoundingly clear: For the foreseeable future, high-stakes testing is here to stay, and assessments of teacher quality will be determined (to varying degrees²⁰) based on the results of these tests. There is no way around this reality; we have to prepare teachers to live in it. Santoro's research on teachers who leave the profession is particularly troubling.²¹ The teachers who find value in the moral rewards of teaching are those teachers who we should be particularly troubled by as they leave our profession. As teacher educators, we may do well to consider West's provocation and make a parallel claim: Since NCLB teaching is now a blues profession, teachers have to learn from a blues people. Put otherwise, I wonder if teacher educators can use the blues to help teachers respond to demoralization and, in the process, learn how to continue to find meaning and value in teaching, even as they live in the full acknowledgement that they aren't doing the type of work they know they should be doing — not because of any personal failing, but because of the climate they find themselves in. Before fully turning to this line of thinking, I develop what I take to be one of the lessons of the blues based on a reading of James Baldwin's "The Uses of the Blues."

THE BLUES

As I mention in the introduction, there are many ways to think about the connections between the blues and education.²² I turn to the work of James Baldwin in this essay both because he is beginning to receive serious attention by philosophers of education²³ and because I believe his short essay offers a particularly good entry point for teacher educators interested in thinking about the implications of the blues for the work that they do with future teachers. Baldwin begins the essay this way:

The title "The Uses of the Blues" does not refer to music; I don't know anything about music. It does refer to the experience of life, or the state of being, out of which the blues come. Now, I am claiming a great deal for the blues; I'm using them as a metaphor — I might have titled this, for example, "The Uses of Anguish" or "The Uses of Pain." But I want to talk about the blues not only because they speak of this particular experience of life and this state of being, but because they contain the toughness that manages to make this experience articulate.²⁴

A number of important moves are made in this short passage. First, Baldwin makes the claim that he knows nothing about music, but his close readings of songs in this and other essays²⁵ is meant to underscore the fact that he takes the blues to be a stance — or an orientation — that one takes toward life. Music is one of the most prominent manifestations of this stance, but music alone does not circumscribe all of its possible manifestations. Second, Baldwin takes pain and anguish to be something like the source of the blues, but what makes the blues significant is the fact that it makes this experience of life articulate. That is, the toughness of the blues finds ways to turn — or trope²⁶ — any experience (no matter how full of anguish, or how full of pain) into something that must be made manifest in such a way that learning (and therefore the possibility of growth) is possible.

A blues person turns pain and anguish into possibility. It is not as if the social or material conditions of life change — one still must confront and respond to the same

life that one has always lived — but one’s understanding-filled articulations of that life somehow make a difference. The blues written for a teacher will not change the fact that a teacher must do too much test preparation; it will not change the fact that she must watch as her third graders (who don’t have enough background with the English language to demonstrate what they know on a test; or who begin to equate school with standardized assessment and not the development of habits of mind conducive to further growth) spend far too many hours taking tests and learning the consequences of how the results of those tests will impact their lives in intended and unintended ways. This can cause a teacher to be demoralized, but I think the blues also suggest another response. Baldwin puts the point this way: “And there’s something funny — there’s always something a little funny in all our disasters, if one can face the disaster. So that it’s this this passionate detachment, this inwardness coupled with outwardness, this ability to know that, all right, it’s a mess, and you can’t do anything about it ... so, well, you have to do something about it.”²⁷

I in no way want to diminish the significance of demoralization and just how difficult the lives of teachers have become given the pervasiveness of standardized assessments and the continuing efforts to delegitimize and deprofessionalize teaching.²⁸ But does Baldwin have a point here that teachers might resonate with? If we can face the disaster that is the current reform movement in education, can we hold in mind the tension, We can’t do anything about it, so, well, we have to do something about it? Can we, as teachers, confront all of the ways in which we are forced to follow policies we know to be wrong with “passionate detachment”? Can we detach ourselves and our professional identities from those things we are made to do, while retaining a passion and a space of resistance that will never accede to those policies? That though we will externally conform, we will never accept; and that this, though not a solution, provides a living response that can — even in its small way — make a difference?

I will return to these questions. But I want to remind us of the conditions from which the blues arise: slavery and its aftermath. A slave had to create freedom in a world structured to dehumanize her, turn her to property, and to murder her soul.²⁹ It is almost impossible to imagine the conditions of slavery outside of its experience. Even more, it is equally difficult to even begin to comprehend not only the strength it takes to survive the manifold brutalities of slavery but also the strength and the thought it takes to turn this experience into one of the most educative (and beautiful) expressions of the human that we have: the blues. I don’t want to make too much of this, but I do think that the research on teachers and privilege is important to engage here. Santoro mentions the relative privilege of teachers prior to our current era of demoralization,³⁰ and there have been countless other influential articles about the “demographic imperative” in education.³¹ That is, while the public school population in the United States has become increasingly diverse, teachers have not. As such, much research on teaching has focused on how teachers can unlearn privilege so that they might best educate each one of their students, knowing now that many of the teacher’s students will not share her cultural, racial, or class background.³² Again, I don’t want to make too much of this, but I do think there might be a connection

between teacher privilege and demoralization that is worth our attention. If a teacher is habituated to the privilege of being white, then one can see why she might be particularly prone to demoralization; she is not accustomed to life on the other side of privilege, and so she becomes demoralized instead of seeking the blues. James Baldwin writes,

There is a sense of the grotesque about a person who has spent his or her life in a kind of cotton batting. There is something monstrous about never having been hurt, never having been made to bleed, never having lost anything, never having gained anything because life is beautiful, and in order to keep it beautiful you're going to stay just the way you are. . . . America is something like that. The failure on our part to accept the reality of pain, of anguish, of ambiguity, of death has turned us into a very peculiar and sometimes monstrous people. It means, for one thing, and it's very serious, that people who have no experience have no compassion.³³

I am not suggesting that teachers don't know pain or have never been hurt. You can't stay in your cotton batting very long as a teacher. The point is this: the privilege of whiteness can cause anyone under its influence to have atrophied resources when it comes to turning the worst possible experience to something somehow redemptive. I see this as a real challenge — and opportunity — for teacher educators. Our students need to be aware of the demoralizing climate that they are entering, and in addition to giving students the resources they will need to change this climate, we have to stress the strength of the blues and of blues people. We don't want good teachers conscientiously objecting and leaving the profession; we need to think together about what we can do to help them become blues people: looking a disaster they can do nothing about in the face and then doing something about it.

A teacher, even an entire professional organization like the American Educational Research Association, cannot change the climate of high-stakes assessment in the United States. While we can hope, and while we can petition, and while we can continue to voice our resistance far and wide, we have to know that nothing may change. This reality is demoralizing, but the blues can help us rethink the change we might become. Baldwin puts the point this way:

People who in some sense know who they are can't change the world always, but they can do something to make it a little more, to make life a little more human. Human in the best sense. Human in terms of joy, freedom which is always private, respect, respect for one another, even such things as manners. All these things are very important, all these old-fashioned things.³⁴

Baldwin is not being resigned in this passage; rather, he realizes that the human can come through in even the worst moment. Joy, private freedom, respect, manners; perhaps minor things all. But when they are exhibited in moments where others feel like no action can make a difference, a difference is made. As Cora Diamond emphasizes across much of her writing on ethics, ethics does not only exist in overtly ethical actions where one decides between options that are made to feel fixed.³⁵ The grace with which one makes the choice; the callousness with which one acts; the generosity of spirit that is felt even when one has to choose the lesser of two very bad options — these all matter. Baldwin helpfully reminds us that this is a key lesson of the blues. Even when we have to overtly conform to a policy or a script we know to be miseducative, there is a space of freedom, a way of being human that, though it cannot change the conditions that lead to demoralization, it can make a difference.

What might this mean for teacher education? It is hard to say. If I had to spend valuable instructional time preparing third graders for assessments I did not believe in, I don't know if I would have the strength I am calling for here. And, as Gayl Jones helpfully reminds us, "Some black writers and critics have rejected the blues" because "it teaches resignation and the acceptance of reality."³⁶ I don't mean to downplay just how demoralizing it can feel to teach using a script or to watch children shaped by a culture of high-stakes assessments; and I don't mean to suggest that teachers should be resigned and accept the reality that we are living at this moment in schools. But, I also don't want teachers to leave the profession, especially teachers who know just how wrong the current climate can be. While we, as teacher educators, should continue to teach our students how to resist and how to advocate for the type of instruction that promotes student learning and growth, we also have to show teachers that when they cannot find a way around a policy, there are lessons to be learned from the blues. That even though one is externally conforming to a policy, one's inner resistance has a human impact that matters.

This sounds a hopeful note, but this note must find its balance with the realization that the line between complicity and possibility is hard to demarcate. When does continuing to teach signal that one is complicit in the policies governing one's work, and when is continuing to teach an enactment of a blues stance that opens possibilities of resistance? When does walking away from teaching express unnecessary resignation and defeat, and when does staying represent mere conformity where the claim to opening possibilities is delusion? I believe these are important questions; questions that cannot be answered, only lived.

As we work with practicing teachers, and future teachers who are only beginning to live these questions, it is important to maintain this tension as the difficult reality that it is. We have to think together about how power is best confronted in our lives as teachers; teaching active resistance while being mindful that a moral and political response does not only issue forth in moral or political action, or what is generally taken as such. There is defeat and there is defeat; fully succumbing to policies that one knows to be harmful is one thing, subverting those policies through our being human is another. Humanly fearing complicity and the not living up to our ideals, but manifesting what we value, even in the nonideal that we live and have always lived as teachers; somehow, through something like the grace that the blues express.

The blues means acknowledging that one will never arrive at that place where one is fully fallen or fully redeemed; it means going down the road holding that as bad as things are, there is still movement, a space of resistance that allows for the living of the better and not the worse. Educators need this strength. Not only does it add to the resolve that a better future is possible and achievable; it teaches that even though one has not arrived at that future, one is not — one will not be — defeated. In the face of terribly detrimental educational policies, students need teachers who manifest this blues stance. Though it may not immediately bring about the change we would like to see, its effects — the indelible mark it leaves on students — should not be dismissed. Moreover, focusing on these effects might be the very thing that reconnects demoralized teachers with the moral rewards of teaching, even as we

know how hard these rewards are to perceive through the lens of current educational policy and how it is implemented and impacts the varied contexts in which teachers live and work.

1. Cornel West, in conversation with Toni Morrison, "Blues Love and Politics," *The Nation*, May 24, 2004, 18. For more of West's thinking on the significance of the blues, see Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin, 2004).
2. "Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul." Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Divinity School Address," in *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 79.
3. Here, acknowledgement is meant in the sense developed by Stanley Cavell, especially in *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).
4. Note that vulnerability is a broader concept than normally thought, and it is certainly not a wholly negative one. For an excellent discussion of vulnerability, see Erinn Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability: A Feminist Analysis of Social Life and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
5. Here, difficulty of reality is meant in the sense developed by Cora Diamond in "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," *Partial Answers* 1, no. 2 (2003): 1–26.
6. For more detailed discussions of the phenomenon of knowingness, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), especially pp. 221–222 and Jonathan Lear, "Knowingness and Abandonment: An Oedipus for Our Time," in *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).
7. Doris A. Santoro, "Good Teaching in Difficult Times: Demoralization in the Pursuit of Good Work," *American Journal of Education* 118, no. 1 (2001): 1–23.
8. For some examples, see Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Harper, 1963); Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans: Black Experience and American Culture* (New York: Outerbridge, 1970); Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976); Albert Murray, *The Hero and the Blues* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973); Roberta S. McGuire, "Dewey's Pragmatism Extended: Education and Aesthetic Practice in *Train Whistle Guitar*," in *Albert Murray and the Aesthetic Imagination of a Nation*, ed. Barbara A. Baker (Tuscaloosa: Pebble Hill Books, 2010); Walton M. Muyumba, *The Shadow and the Act: Black Intellectual Practice, Jazz Improvisation, and Philosophical Pragmatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
9. James Baldwin, "The Uses of the Blues," in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage, 2010).
10. West, *Democracy Matters*, 216.
11. This service has certainly been recognized and appreciated in ways that much work in philosophy of education has not. Santoro's thinking on demoralization has found a large and receptive audience amongst teachers. For an example, see the responses here: <http://neatoday.org/2012/02/07/how-bad-education-policies-demoralize-teachers/>.
12. Santoro, "Demoralization," 12.
13. These types of resources include, but are not limited to, money for better instructional material, money for better technology, money for creating more aesthetically and intellectually engaging classrooms, money for teacher salaries and professional development, and so on.
14. See Doris A. Santoro (with Lisa Morehouse), "Teaching's Conscientious Objectors: Principled Leavers of High-Poverty Schools," *Teachers College Record* 113, no. 12 (2011): 2670–2704.
15. For an overview — and criticism — of value-added measure of teacher effectiveness, see Moshe Adler, "Review of Measuring the Impacts of Teachers," April 10, 2014, <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-measuring-impact-of-teachers/>; and Sean Corcoran, "Can Teachers Be Evaluated by Their Students' Test Scores? Should they Be? The Use of Value-Added Measures of Teacher Effectiveness in Policy and Practice," 2010, <http://annenberginstitute.org/sites/default/files/product/211/files/valueAddedReport.pdf>. For a philosophical discussion of teacher evaluation, see Gary Fenstermacher and Virginia Richardson, "On Making Determinations of Quality in Teaching," *Teachers College Record* 107, no. 1 (2005): 186–213.

16. Lorna Earl, *Assessment as Learning: Using Classroom Assessment to Maximize Learning* (Thousand Oaks: Corwin, 2013), 20.
17. And other related policies.
18. This is not to suggest that only experienced teachers can feel demoralized. A new teacher can feel this way if, during her teacher education program, she was able to experience the moral rewards of teaching through her coursework and the ways she envisioned her life as a teacher.
19. Even the best teacher cannot help but be discouraged when she sees just how much of her students' time is being spent taking high-stakes forms of assessment that do not often measure what they intend to measure, let alone what the teacher finds valuable.
20. For example, in Virginia it is recommended that forty percent of a teacher's evaluation is based on student progress as measured by standardized assessments. Other states using value-added measures (Virginia's model is technically not a value-added model, though it shares similarities with this approach) set their recommendations at different percentages. A full discussion of Virginia's teacher performance standards can be found at http://www.doe.virginia.gov/teaching/performance_evaluation/teacher/index.shtml.
21. See Santoro (with Morehouse), "Conscientious Objectors."
22. See n. 8.
23. For examples, see Jeff Frank, "Love and Growth: On One Aspect of James Baldwin's Significance for Education," *Teachers College Record* (in press); Jeff Frank, "Reconstructing Deweyan Growth: The Significance of James Baldwin's Moral Psychology," *Education and Culture* 29, no. 2 (2013): 121-132; and Jeff Frank, "James Baldwin's 'Everybody's Protest Novel': Educating Our Responses to Racism," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 46, no. 1 (2014): 24-31.
24. Baldwin, "Blues," 70.
25. See, in particular, "Stranger in the Village," from his collection *Notes of a Native Son*. For an interesting discussion of Baldwin and the blues, see Nikky Finney, "Playing by Ear, Praying for Rain: The Poetry of James Baldwin," March 3, 2014, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/article/247350>.
26. For more on these themes and the idea of troping, see Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1987).
27. Baldwin, "Blues," 73.
28. For a discussion of these issues, see Diane Ravitch, *Reign of Error: The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools* (New York: Knopf, 2013).
29. See Nell Irvin Painter, *Soul Murder and Slavery* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 1995).
30. Santoro, "Demoralization," 17.
31. For two leading examples, see Gloria Ladson-Billings, *Crossing Over to Canaan: The Journey of New Teachers in Diverse Classrooms* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001); Geneva Gay and Tyrone C. Howard, "Multicultural Education for the 21st Century," *Teacher Educator* 36, no. 1 (2000): 1-16; for an interesting somewhat dissenting view, see Karen Lowenstein, "The Work of Multicultural Teacher Education: Reconceptualizing White Teacher Candidates as Learners," *Review of Educational Research* 79, no. 1 (2009): 163-196.
32. Marilyn Cochran-Smith, "Learning and Unlearning: The Education of Teacher Educators," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 19 (2003): 5-28.
33. Baldwin, "Blues," 79.
34. *Ibid.*, 81.
35. Countless textbook examples of this way of thinking can be given. Does one lie to save the life of an innocent person? Does one steal a drug that will cure your dying wife if you cannot afford it? Trolley, people drowning, and so on. For just two examples of Diamond's thinking on some of these issues, see Cora Diamond, "Losing Your Concepts," *Ethics* 98, no. 2 (1988): 255-277 and "Murdoch the Explorer," *Philosophical Topics* 38, no. 1 (2010): 51-85.
36. Gayl Jones, *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 196.