

“Something Funny” about Conserving Humanity and Teaching: Lessons from the Blues

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Reading Jeff Frank’s thoughtful reflection on teacher demoralization and its application to teacher education is a humbling and gratifying experience. As a teacher educator who studies the moral sources of teacher dissatisfaction, I live a life of praxis. Frank engages seriously with the conceptual questions raised by demoralization and asks how teacher educators might respond to the effects of demoralization. I agree that teacher educators, particularly philosophers of education, have a role to play in attenuating demoralization. However, I’d like to extend Frank’s focus on resistance. Conserving the humanity and integrity of the practice of teaching may give teachers a solid ground for the kinds of resistance they need to respond to the situations they face. Furthermore, teacher educators increasingly face similar threats to the integrity of their work, and we might better cast ourselves as mutual allies through coalition-building rather than through positioning ourselves as service providers.

Frank begins with Cornel West’s assertion that 9/11 produced a kind of anxiety and loss of security that may provide white folks with insight into the condition, existential and physical, faced by the black population in the United States. It is a feeling, described by James Baldwin in “The Uses of the Blues” that powerfully extends W.E.B. Du Bois’s question: How does it feel to be a problem? Baldwin describes the condition of black Americans in the following terms: “I am talking about what happens to you if, having barely escaped suicide, or death, or madness, or yourself, you watch your children growing up and no matter what you do, the force of the world that is out to tell your child that he has no right to be alive.”¹

In an age in which we witness the non-indictments of killers of black youth, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Ramarley Graham, to name but a few, Baldwin’s words speak to an experience that the parents of white children will never know. It is essential that we acknowledge that the parents of white children do not experience the pain faced by the parents of black children who encounter a world in which their children are twenty-one times more likely to be shot dead than their white counterparts by the police in the United States² and that parents of black children in Memphis, where we now meet, know that they cannot count on the courts to treat their children justly.³

Drawing an analogy between West’s prescription that in the wake of 9/11 a “blues nation can learn from a blues people,” Frank argues that the blues could serve as a means to respond to what I have called demoralization in teaching.⁴ He claims, “Since [No Child Left Behind] teaching is now a blues profession, teachers have to learn from a blues people.” Although Frank does due diligence to draw out the distinction I make between demoralization and burnout, I see a problem in his epidemiology. He locates the source of demoralization in the potentially too-comfortable lives of the predominantly white teachers who work in the profession. I agree with

his perspective that the blues offer resources to address demoralization, but I also think we might consider *hearing* demoralization as the expression of a kind of blues.

Demoralization, Frank notes rightly, has a temporal aspect. Just as a nuclear reactor set to be deactivated must first be activated, demoralization suggests that a demoralized teacher once had access to the moral rewards of her work. Frank says, “The demoralized teacher once had access to the unlimited moral rewards of the profession that were not mediated by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and seeks an educational climate where those rewards can be more clearly lived in her practice.”

In his paraphrase of my definition of demoralization, Frank has moved the modifier “unlimited” in a way that may change the meaning of my sense of “unlimited” moral rewards. Unlimited moral rewards, in Frank’s usage, suggests that teachers once occupied a pedagogical paradise, perhaps pre-NCLB or in their own idealizations of what teaching has to offer. However, my use of the term “unlimited” is offered in distinction to the limited personal resources that each individual can possess. While some teachers may have more energy to stay late for meetings with parents or more capacity to listen deeply to students, there is a finitude to the amount of time or attention any individual is able to provide. In contrast, the “unlimited” moral rewards of a practice — whether associated with farming, painting or teaching — reside in the practice and are not apportioned in the limited quantities associated with any particular human life.⁵

I make this point to ensure that there is no presumption of an original state of unlimited goodness, no Eden, in the philosophical concept of demoralization or in the empirical experiences of the teachers I have interviewed. While moral rewards are technically unlimited, they may be experienced by teachers in small, limited ways, for instance, the ability to respond to a child’s needs, opportunities to draw on one’s passion to inspire others, instances of collaboration with colleagues. So, while any individual teacher may have a limited capacity to collaborate with other teachers, teaching, conceived as a practice, or a form of life, does not have pre-established limits.

Now, the practice of teaching takes place in many contexts, including, but not limited to, the context of public schools that are in the midst of market-based reforms. Distinct contexts of teaching already provide various affordances and barriers to access the moral rewards of the practice. For instance, a teacher working on an island school off the coast of Maine may have few opportunities to engage in collaboration with colleagues or a teacher working in a first-grade class who is passionate about reproductive rights may experience challenges in integrating those interests into his curriculum. What is distinctive about demoralization, especially for the experienced teachers whom I interviewed, is that the rewards previously available through the work are no longer available.

Baldwin connects the blues with “pain” and “anguish.”⁶ Yet demoralization is more than simply a feeling, it is a process. It has a temporal dimension of a before and after. However, it is not a change from the state of ignorance to one of awareness that West argues white America experienced pre- and post-9/11. It is a change in the ability to access dimensions of the good in an already imperfect situation. While I am

no expert on the African diaspora, I see one use of the blues, and their predecessors, what Du Bois calls the “sorrow songs,” as claiming the humanity and the *integrity of being* of black Americans in the face of horrifying dehumanization — antebellum slavery, the Jim Crow South, or post-Ferguson United States — not to harken back to an idyllic time.⁷ The sorrow songs and the blues make ontological claims. They announce, I exist, despite your claims that I do not.⁸ Du Bois contends, “The Negro folksong — the rhythmic cry of the slave — stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas.”⁹ While I am very hesitant to draw parallels between demoralization in teaching with the dehumanization of black Americans, I hear in teachers’ discussion of demoralization¹⁰ claims that teaching is more than it is currently viewed under current conditions. Teaching has an existence beyond the ways it is conceived in current pedagogical policy mandates. Demoralization resists the narrow and unlovely definition of teaching that posits the profession as little more than an inefficient informational input mechanism.

I hear the “something funny” of the blues in the singing, in the making oneself heard, even in a society that negates the very being of those singing. The “passionate detachment” I read in Baldwin is the persistence of song in the face of white Americans’ negation of the lives of black Americans. It is the reclamation of sorrow, pain, and anguish and the use of those to make one’s voice heard. The “something funny” comes from the absurdity of song in the face of dehumanization. There is also a sense of absurdity when teachers are given the moral charge to help students flourish but then must engage in practices that they believe stunt and harm students.

The blues entail action; they are a way of engaging with a problematic state of affairs and retaining dignity in spite of conditions intended to paralyze and denigrate. Frank wonders if teachers might take a cue from Baldwin’s description of the blues attitude. He suggests that teacher educators might help teachers facing demoralizing conditions to “externally conform” but “never accept.” I believe that teacher educators have something much more significant to offer — they can provide a language, or if you’d like, the lyrics of resistance. Teacher education can remind teachers to sing — to name the reasons for resistance, including moral, in the face of policies and practices that diminish teachers, students, the teaching profession and public education. Teacher educators can act as conservationists who protect the broad purposes of teaching in a hostile environment. Philosophers of education are uniquely poised as conservationists who can sound the refrain of the multifaceted and moral practice of teaching.

Finally, Frank makes a leap from the description of the phenomenon of demoralization (that is, the loss of the previously available rewards in one’s work) to presupposing the psychological composition of teachers. He suggests that the whiteness of teachers and the privilege whiteness accords may make teachers more susceptible to demoralization. For the psychological dimension Frank addresses, I think a more apt term would be “disillusionment.” Furthermore, my own hesitance in using the phrase “blues people” comes from the same resistance I have to accepting Frank’s logic that white privilege leads to fewer experiences of hardship. To return

to the condition that Baldwin describes as belonging to “blues people,” some parents of black children are white. Frank’s claim harbors an essentialism that makes me uncomfortable; I caution him against deploying this dubious logic given his own subject location as a white man. I want to make perfectly clear that I acknowledge the privileges that whiteness accords, but I also know that it is a mistake to assume that whiteness buffers the inevitable pain and anguish present in a life. I am much more comfortable asking what the blues offers teaching than what white teachers can learn from “blues people.”

1. James Baldwin, “The Uses of the Blues,” in *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (New York: Vintage, 2010), 60.

2. Nicole Flatow, “Black Male Teens Are 21 Times More Likely To Be Killed By Cops Than White Ones,” ThinkProgress, October 14, 2014, accessed October 1, 2015, <http://thinkprogress.org/justice/2014/10/10/3578877/black-teens-were-21-times-more-likely-to-be-shot-dead-by-the-cops-reported-deaths-suggest/>.

3. Carrie Johnson, “After Discrimination Finding, Jury’s Out On Memphis Juvenile Courts,” *National Public Radio*, April 6, 2014, accessed October 1, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/2014/08/06/338086226/after-discrimination-finding-jurys-out-on-memphis-juvenile-courts>.

4. 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.

5. See Alasdair MacIntyre. *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1984). inkProgress, “the paper that is being responded to.”

6. Baldwin, 57.

7. “Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department,” United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, March 4, 2015, http://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson_police_department_report.pdf.

8. For a nonmusical example, I see a similar effect in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis, MN: Greywolf Press, 2014).

9. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (New York: Bantam Classics, 1989), 186.

10. And to be clear, it is I who placed that label on teachers’ concerns about their work.