

Philosophy, Soul Music, and the Learning Community Blues: Making Philosophy of Education in Memphis, TN

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What does it mean to take seriously the place where we do philosophy of education?

— Eduardo Duarte, [2015 Philosophy of Education Society Conference Program Chair Interview](#)¹

For what we are pursuing is the depth of being: what we are after is the transformation — as with synesthesia, as with resurrections — instituted through the rhythm of being.

— Jessica Wiskus, *The Rhythm of Thought: Art, Literature, and Music After Merleau-Ponty*²

...a thunderous collision of differing worlds; a clash whose outcome is the creation of a new world which we call a work of art. Technically, each piece comes to being just like the earth was made — from catastrophes which can produce, out of a cacophony of instruments, a symphony, which is called the music of the spheres. The creation of a work of art is the creation of a world.

— Wassily Kandinsky, *Rückblicke*³

Ω Σωκράτης, εθη, μουσικὴν ποιεῖ ἐργάζεσθαι [Socrates, make music, and work at it.]

— Plato, *Phaedo*⁴

HOWLIN' WOLF: [guitar playing, Wolf singing] Yeah, if you see my little red rooster, pleeeeee drive him home. [guitar playing ends, Wolf speaking/teaching] I'm just showin ya how to do it. Ya know, now you and he ... take it. Now you gotta play it that way.

ERIC CLAPTON: Right. You're sure? Why don't you play acoustic on it? *With* us. Yeah, ya see, if you played *with* us, Wolf, then we'd be able to *follow* you better. Like you were doing it right there, man. That's how we should record it. I can *follow* you, I can see what you're doing.

HOWLIN' WOLF: [overlapping] Nah, I can't play ... you see I can't

CHORUS [CLAPTON, KEITH RICHARDS, STEVE WINWOOD, RON WOOD]: Yeah, yeah, come on Wolf!! Come on man! Really man, you just sit there and do it. Yeah, it'll be cool.

HOWLIN' WOLF: Alright ... let's everybody get together, there, and we'll try to make it.

ERIC CLAPTON: Ok, let's try it. I doubt if I can do it without you playing it.

HOWLIN' WOLF: Oh man, come on. [guitar picking] You got ain't nothing to do but count it off, and, ah [acoustic guitar playing of "Little Red Rooster" intro] and ah, change, and ya know, when ya say [guitar playing continues, others join], "one ... two ... three ... four," ya change. You see? He drops in when you say [Wolf plays chord], when you say "Boom!" ["Little Red Rooster" is played together by all, tentatively, in a reverent rehearsal style]

HOWLIN' WOLF: [Wolf alone on acoustic] Always stop at the top, see. Don't stop up here, see. [Wolf alone on acoustic] Alright, let's get on it.

— *The Howlin' Wolf Sessions*⁵

On April 26, 1996, in a philosophy department seminar room on the second floor of the Graduate Faculty building at 65 Fifth Avenue, I began the defense of my doctoral dissertation by playing a short dialogue between the Memphis blues legend, Howlin' Wolf and some British rockers who had joined Wolf in a London studio for some recording sessions (May 2–7, 1970, Olympic Studios). As the tape rolled on that April morning, I kept my eyes on the transcript of the conversation I typed up and had distributed to my committee and waited for the arrival of the communal spirit (*koinonia*) of dialogue to enter the room through the music (*mousike*) and gather

us, my committee and me, into that place where we would be thinking together as a learning community, doing philosophy in *communitas*, letting the soulful blues of Howlin' Wolf take us beyond the "normal" order of an academic proceeding (*la ley academica*) and into the time (*kairos*) and place (*open region*) where originary thinking happens.

The London sessions are a signature moment in the ongoing cultural offering made by the blues, a music that W.E.B. Du Bois describes as "the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.... The songs are indeed the sifting of centuries; the music is far more ancient than the words."⁶ As a signature moment in that spiritual heritage, the May 1970 sessions in Olympic Studios document the blues as the incarnate realization of the redemptive creative force that remains always capable of interrupting and transgressing the asymmetric power relations that reproduce the violence of racism as the "normal" order of everyday life. If we listen closely to what happened in that studio, we are prepared to hear the expansive region of the blues as one that encompasses a historical struggle capable of interrupting the "normal" proceedings of everyday life and revive the human spirit's desire for freedom, beauty, joy and justice. And when we realize the blues can render any gathering of kindred hearts and minds into a *studio*, we are then capable of thinking the blues soteriologically, as a *soul music* that expands via the rhythm and melody of euphonic sounds to include the liberating art of philosophy.⁷ When philosophy is gathered into the historical movement of the blues it becomes part of a collective working out of the redemption of the human spirit via the collective artistic mediation of struggle and suffering. The origin of this history is identified in what Du Bois called the Sorrow Songs, "the rhythmic cry of the slave — [that] stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas."⁸

Insofar as they arise within a history of cultural struggle that has propelled the transgressive rhythms, melodies, lyrics and performances of the blues, Howlin' Wolf's London sessions exemplify the pragmatic intentionality of philosophy in the form of critical social theory. Understood in this way, the blues are a poetic praxis intent on revealing the contradictions of lived experiences and at one and the same time resolving those contradictions through the building of an alternative dynamic of being-together: a counterculture where truth, beauty, joy, and justice prevail as principles of inspiration and aspiration. Attentive listeners feel the revival of that history in the dialogue between Wolf, Clapton, and others (Keith Richards, Steve Winwood, et al), a revival that is also a renewal of the human spirit and a celebration of community. Those same listeners will also recognize the pedagogical dynamic that is played out in the May 1970 Olympic Studio sessions, which is to say, they will hear the exchange as a teaching/learning dialogue happening in the working out of the song "Little Red Rooster." And we, who subsequently receive the record of that revival within a span that is extended by the force of spiritual renewal, are positioned in that unique location of the philosopher for whom the historical movement of Spirit opens, *kairologically*, in the twilight between today and tomorrow.

In hearing Howlin' Wolf teach the blues we are gathered into the blues revival and compelled to participate in the building of an alternative form of being-together.

The preceding meditation on those first moments of my dissertation defense is the necessary point of departure for introducing *Philosophy of Education Society 2015*, which is a collection of the papers presented at the annual conference of the Philosophy of Education Society (PES 2015), organized under theme of "The Blues/Soul Music: Making Philosophy of Education." The foregoing meditation moves within the aforementioned blues horizon that unifies my work then and now, providing the same firm ground from which I took a leap of faith that philosophy could and should moved by force of the counterculture.

Nineteen years after beginning my doctoral defense with Howlin' Wolf, I chaired PES 2015, which congregated in a Memphis hotel across the street from the legendary Gibson guitar factory, a block away from Beale Street, the proverbial home of the blues, and a short walk away from the National Civil Rights Museum at the Lorraine Motel where, on April 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. As I envisioned it, PES 2015 was an occasion for undertaking philosophy within the historico-cultural horizon where the spiritual heritage of the blues continues to unfold as countercultural struggle against the banality of evil that is reconstituted in the "normal" events of everyday life, and most perniciously and yet conventionally within academic conferences.



Figure 1. This portrait of Howlin' Wolf, which is the icon I selected for our gathering, depicts the sound of Wolf's voice with Pentecostal Fire, and encircles his beating heart with Christ's Crown of Thorns.⁹ (Photo courtesy of Eduardo Duarte)

Today when we describe education as “soul music,” we are identifying the ongoing cultural formation of self and society, individual and community, that is happening via a liberating arts education where philosophy is undertaken as an interdisciplinary nexus of analytic, critical, and creative modalities. In turn, the philosophy collected in this volume should be read as a blues revival that is also a retrieval of the critical and pedagogical legacy initiated by Socrates who, as Plato tells us, was compelled to “make music, and work at it.”¹⁰

“The Blues/Soul Music: Making Philosophy of Education” was a conference inspired by the concrete cultural life and historical memories of Memphis, Tennessee, USA. In addition to calling for a thinking that was grounded in the aforementioned historicity of Memphis, I also invited my colleagues to take up the Socratic philosophical project that is one part *parrhesiastic praxis* (speaking truth to power) and another part *mousike* (pedagogical soul music). How might we bridge that history of philosophy with the spiritual heritage of the blues? This was the meta-question that addressed us as we gathered in Memphis.

As chair, I called for philosophical papers that would respond to the stated intention of understanding our gathering in Memphis as an occasion to exhibit new theoretical and conceptual strategies, novel discursive forms, alternative ways of approaching perennial questions and authoritative figures, as well as bold initiatives for organizing the way we gather to share and support the work of philosophy of education. Taking again the same the leap I took with my New School committee when I enacted the thesis regarding philosophical praxis as a critical social theory that mediates thinking as a counter-cultural event, I invited my PES colleagues to join me in stepping outside of the “normal” parameters of our annual meeting, which, I argued, had been stultifying rather than promoting what, drawing on Reiner Schürmann, I identify as “originary philosophy.”¹¹ In this way, I hoped our meeting in Memphis would not be “just another PES,” but, rather, a philosophical event, a moment in what our colleague the late Ilan Gur Ze’ev described as an *Orcha*: “an improvised moment that is to find/create its own destiny.”¹²

In the Call for Proposals, I included Michel Foucault’s observation that there is no sovereign philosophy, but rather a *philosophy in activity*:

There is no sovereign philosophy, it’s true, but a philosophy or rather a philosophy in activity. The movement by which, not without effort and uncertainty, dreams and illusions, *one detaches oneself* from what is accepted as true and seeks other rules — that is philosophy. The displacement and transformation of frameworks of thinking, the changing of received values and all the work that has been done to think otherwise, to do something else, to become other than what one is — that too is philosophy.¹³

The preceding is helpful in providing context for the readers of this volume, which is a collection of essays that, when held together, represent what Foucault calls “philosophy in activity,” precisely because they are responding to a call for experimentation, historical rootedness, and for transgression of the “normal” parameters of philosophy of education.

The essays published in this volume can be placed into one or more of the following thematic sets: the blues, experimentation, and/or critical theory. Our opening plenary by Bill Lawson is an exemplar of the essays that interrogated the relationship

between philosophy, education, and the blues. Like Lawson, and his respondent, Audrey Thompson, essays by David Mosely, Kristen Locke, Jeff Frank, Jared Kemling, Kevin Gary, Eli Kramer, Reagan Mitchell, Julie Meadows, Vasco d' Agnese and Andrew Scheiber demonstrate the emergent forms of interdisciplinary work in the field that is combining philosophy with cultural theory that draws on music, visual art, historiography and literature. The boundaries of this emergent interdisciplinary work are tested in the experimental pieces offered by Samuel Rocha, René Arcilla, Rachel Longa, Naoko Saito, SunInn Yun, and Paul Standish. Frank Margonis, who delivered the Presidential address, has again set the highest standard for the critical social theory work in our field. His respondents, Kathy Hytten and Troy Richardson, both offer compelling rejoinders that exemplify the description of philosophy I made at the introduction of the presidential session: philosophy is the academic equivalent of a contact sport. Margonis's address finds excellent company with the essays by Ariana Stokas-Gonzalez, Jason Wozniak, Tyson Lewis, Ashley Taylor, Stefano Oliverio, Barbara Applebaum, Samir Haddad, and Sally Sayles-Hannon. Another important aspect of this yearbook is the large number of emergent scholars and first-time voices who are published in this volume, such as Christina Commarano, Florelle D'Hoest, Cara Furman, Patrick McCarthy-Nielsen, John Fantuzzo, Emily Sadowski, Derek Ford, Nassim Noroozi, Mary Jo Hinsdale, Mike Schapira, LeAnn Holland, Dan Fisherman, Brett Bertucio, Walter Gershon, and Igor Jasinski. This substantial show not only demonstrates that the next generation of philosophers of education has arrived, but also indicates the field is thriving.

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The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise.

— Walter Benjamin¹⁴

The call for experimentation and transgression resounded in our gathering in Memphis through an experiment undertaken at the conference that unsettled the entire proceeding and thereby ensured all who attended and participated would be taken up by the *ενεργεια* (spirit, power) of philosophy in activity. Turning, again, to Foucault, the “masked philosopher” experiment was an attempt to disrupt the “normal” organization of the conference that, through an inherited convention, has had the effect of reproducing relational hierarchies based on institutional affiliation and name recognition. The masked philosopher experiment at PES 2015 was an interpretation of what Foucault proposed in an interview he gave to *Le Monde* in April, 1980. Foucault submitted the proposition that academia designate a “year without a name.” He explained:

Why did I suggest that we use anonymity? Out of nostalgia for a time when, being quite unknown, what I said had some chance of being heard. With the potential reader, the surface of contact was unrippled. The effects of the book might land in unexpected places and form shapes that I had never thought of. A name makes reading too easy. I shall propose a game: that of the “year without a name.” For a year, books would be published without their authors' names. The critics would have to cope with a mass of entirely anonymous books.¹⁵

Thus, in addition to calling for a blues revival and a retrieval of Socratic music-making philosophy, PES 2015 was also “year without a name.” Might the masking

of names and institutional affiliations as we gathered in Memphis have the outcome of making the challenge of reading/hearing the papers more *difficult*, and, thus, as a result, the thinking more *truthful*? (Here, perhaps, the experiment offered an opening for moving into the countercultural horizon.) The experiment with anonymity was a trial (with anticipated error) in the possibility of unsettling a norm that contradicts the sacrosanct “blind review process.” In a “normal” year, the identities of the primary authors are disclosed to those who have been invited to write rejoinders, which are presented and then published alongside each essay. The masked philosopher experiment was initiated well in advance of the conference gathering when the philosophers who agreed to write critical rejoinders were sent papers without the author’s name attached. They, in turn, wrote their response without divulging their name, and when we arrived at Memphis the program schedule for the conference only included titles, times, and room locations. The experiment was unsettling and thereby philosophically thought-provoking for all who attended. The outcome of the experiment is eloquently summarized by Claudia Ruitenberg, who foregrounded her thinking through the experience of writing a rejoinder to a masked paper:

In response, I want to celebrate not human communion but the liberation of the text, the text’s freedom to wander after it is set free from the expectation of expressing the meanings and intentions of the human who writes or speaks it. The “Masked Philosopher” experiment of this year’s Philosophy of Education Society conference freed me from worrying about any human communion that would ensue or fail because it freed me from knowing the author and thus imagining the writer. I could engage with a text *qua* text and could produce a text that engaged with a text — not with a person.¹⁶

When Claudia writes of her experience of responding to a liberated text, to a text that is wandering freely after it has been set free, she is describing what I call learning. Learning unfolds when thinking is emancipated “from the sovereignty of the authoritative self. Thought unbound moves beyond the authority of the thinker and with this phenomenal appearance something new is born into the world. We call this appearance of the new that happens with freed thought *learning*.”¹⁷ With learning, we encounter a communion that is constituted by the force unleashed when thinking is emancipated from the sovereign self. This is not a human communion mediated by intentional relations, but a communion gathered by the force of free thought. Philosophy in activity generates this force, but what activates this activity must come from outside the philosopher.

There were some who vigorously dissented to the experiment. However, as we moved toward the conclusion, a consensus emerged that our Memphis conference was a tour de force. And when PES 2015 President Frank Margonis described me as “an artist” to the congregated gathering on Sunday evening, I heard this as a confirmation that we had, as a community, made of our annual conference a collective work of art. In the end, the conference was inspired by an *ενεργεια* that moved us into an alternative region of thinking where our work could move freely and dynamically, which is to say, transcend any singular philosopher’s claim to “own” it. PES 2015 was a collective and communal philosophical event.

All philosophers are like Socrates who throughout his life received a call to “make music and work at it.” Philosophy is put underway (activated) by the call to

think, and it is kept in activity by the ongoing reception of this call. In turn, the being and becoming of philosophy begins with a reader/listener, with the one who receives the force of thinking that is always already unbound from the authority of the author *and* the text, from the predetermined intentionality of the subject, speaker, and the spoken. Here, then, at the conclusion of my introduction to this volume, I invite you, the reader, to enter into dialogue with the essays, which is to say, to be moved into that region of thinking where thought is always already freed beyond the singular thinker and unfolds as the shared experience of a learning community. As reader/listener you alone are capable of ensuring that the thinking offered in this volume continues to be heard as the soul music that was made in Memphis. If we hear it in this way, the thinking that happened in March, 2015, will continue happening as “an improvised moment that is to find/create its own destiny.”¹⁸

Listen attentively, openly, critically, and creatively to the thought offered here. Be moved by it, and move it. Take up the modality of the learner, the practitioner of philosophy in activity who detaches oneself from the dominion (hegemony) of any one singular discourse (language game) and thereby takes up the more difficult task of learning how to move within a multiplicity of discourses and, in doing so, develops the capacity to improvise. And, as Howlin’ Wolf taught, “Now you gotta play it that way.”

1. Thanks to videographer Marc Parroquin for accepting my invitation to film podcaster Paula Davis interviewing me at the conference. The interview is an important supplement to this introduction and can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/124652894>.

2. Jessica Wiskus, *The Rhythm of Thought: Art, Literature, and Music After Merleau-Ponty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 123. Wiskus precedes this statement by asking, “If, for Merleau-Ponty, art as expression aims at ontology – at elucidating the structure of being, which is itself expression -- what remains for philosophy?” One needs only to read the beginning of Plato’s *Phaedo* (cited in the fourth epigram above) to recognize that the question put forth by Wiskus via Merleau-Ponty is a contemporary example of art compelling philosophy to return to the point of its origin. Her question points to the threshold that the 2015 Philosophy of Education Society conference (PES 2015) was attempting to cross insofar as we were exploring the liminal space where philosophy and art overlap. Correctly mapping that location entails accepting the claim that art aims at ontology by taking up the question of Being (*the meaning/existence question that initiated and continues to animate philosophy*). Exploring the limits of philosophy entails testing how it might respond to art by flipping the script and focusing on form, or the *way* it is made (appears in the world). The initiative set forth at PES 2015 is one of exploring the possibilities arising at an inflection point where philosophy can and must revisit its self-understanding of the forms it takes in response to the question of Being. Of course, the confrontation with its own identity is hardly new, and, on the contrary is the spur that stimulates history of philosophy, or better stated, histories of philosophy.

3. Wassily Kandinsky, *Rückblicke* (Baden-Baden: Woldemar Klein, 1955, 25), quoted in Hajo Duchting, *Paul Klee: Painting Music* (Munich: Prestel, 1997), 20.

4. *Plato*, Harold North Fowler, W. R. M. Lamb, Robert Gregg Bury, and Paul Shorey. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), 61a.

5. My transcript of the exchange between Howlin’ Wolf, Eric Clapton et al, which is heard on “Little Red Rooster” (rehearsal), *The Howlin’ Wolf Sessions* (Chicago: Chess Records, 1971), track 9.

6. W.E.B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classic Series, 2003), 178,180.

7. At PES 2015, we tested the claim regarding the *studio* as a *topos* where kindred hearts and minds are gathered together to “make music” (here understood in the widest sense of *mousike* – what Socrates was instructed to do). The claim was tested via “studio sessions” that were scheduled each day of the conference in order to showcase contemporary examples of experiments in alternative ways of doing/making philosophy of education. Some of the notable boundary testing sessions were Paula Davis’s live

podcast, “A Performative Participatory Podcast,” Matt Hastings’s visual art work, “A Graphic Novel Approach to Philosophy of Education,” Samuel Rocha’s performance of his album *Late to Love*, the Latin American Philosophy of Education Society (LAPES) “Simon Rodriguez Writing Studio,” the improvisational sound studies session made by Walter Gershon, Reagan Mitchell, and Samuel Rocha “Sounding Off: Collectively Improvised Philosophy,” Winston Thompson’s live podcast “PIPEline: Profiles in Philosophy and Education,” and Robbie McClintock’s unveiling of *Educationalthought.org*.

8. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 178, 180.

9. “Howlin’ The Blues,” 2006 poster created and distributed by Memphis Music, 149 Beale Street, Memphis, TN.

10. Plato, *Phaedo*, 61a.

11. Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*. Translated by Marie Gros. (Bloomington: University of Indiana, 1987). Originary philosophy, or originary thinking, is an example of critical social theory in the form of what I call poetic prose, or poetic praxis. As a poetic praxis originary thinking is self-consciously and intentionally “history making. It redraws the lines of the given cultural horizon by extending the boundary of the commons. Showing a possible “extension” it indicates a new space that we might describe in terms of a “way out” or a portal of potentiality. So we arrive at an understanding [of] the “style” of poetic prose [that] isn’t simply [a] “form” [that thinking] takes but [a] form it makes. The style marks the distance of the theory, but not of the theorist, who remains rooted, as Arendt would say, in between past and future. From this gap of the present, the writing reveals potential, possibility, alternatives. The distance of poetic prose is the alternative space mapped by the theory as a historical action, oeuvre as praxis. Again, we are returned to the root of the poetic as *poiein*: making.” Eduardo Duarte “Review of Michael Fielding and Peter Moss: *Radical Education and the Common School*,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 31, no. 5, July 2012, 491–500.

12. Ilan Gur Ze’ev, *The Possibility/Impossibility of a New Critical Language in Education* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2010), 157.

13. Michel Foucault, “The Masked Philosopher,” *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, eds. by Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 330.

14. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zohn. Edited with and Introduction by Hannah Arendt. (New York: Schocken, 1968), 257.

15. Foucault, “The Masked Philosopher,” 330.

16. See Claudia Ruitenberg, “You Are Not the Writer Imagined” in this volume.

17. Eduardo Duarte, “Kant, the Nomad, and the Publicity of Thinking,” *Philosophy of Education 2008*, ed. Ronald Glass (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009), 373.

18. Gur Ze’ev, *The Possibility/Impossibility of a New Critical Language in Education*, 157.

First and foremost I want to thank Frank Margonis for inviting me to chair PES 2015 and for supporting this project each and every step of the way. Frank is a comrade in philosophy, *y un hermano*. Second, I want to thank my editorial committee who made certain that our gathering in Memphis was a blues revival and a philosophical experiment. Next I want to express gratitude to Katherine Jo, whose tireless work, good humor, and exceptional patience throughout the editorial process have brought this project to a most positive conclusion. Katherine has been roundly applauded by the contributors to this volume who recognize her talent for careful and considerate editorial feedback. I join them in applauding her excellent work. I am grateful for the support I received from Sean Fanelli, Dean of the School of Education, Hofstra University. With a view towards the long journey this project has taken, I want to acknowledge the members of doctoral committee and graduate advisors (Richard Bernstein, Agnes Heller, Axel Honneth, and the late Reiner Schürman) who were willing to move with me into a location that was outside the location where they took up their philosophical work, but, nevertheless, well within the interdisciplinary region of social theory that occurs at the New School for Social Research, then and now. I remain grateful for their faith in my potential. Finally, I acknowledge the love and unending support I receive from the Duarte family, specifically Kelly, who sustained me as I experienced the highs and lows with this project. Katerina and Zsofia Duarte provided organizational assistance during the review process, and Jaime Duarte fed my spirit with his positive energy. Delta and Bienvenido Duarte offered significant logistic support. This volume of papers is dedicated to the living spirits of music makers Ornette Coleman and B.B. King, both of whom passed away in 2015.