

## Philosophy, Education, and After-the-Lynching Blues

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### INTRODUCTION

I am reminded of a line written by Sam Greenlee in his novel, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*. Greenlee writes, “A man could get to be a philosopher listening to the Blues.”<sup>1</sup> I think that there is some truth to that claim. As a young man, I grew up listening to Kay Williams on WDAS radio in Philadelphia. He introduced me to all forms of black music on his morning show. He loved the blues. Every morning I was treated to the sounds of B.B. King, Bobby “Blue” Bland, Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf, Tarheel Slim and Little Ann, Memphis Slim, KoKo Taylor, and a host of others blues and rhythm and blues greats. I can still remember his playing such blues songs as [“Long Distance Call” by Muddy Waters](#).<sup>2</sup>

You say you love me darlin’  
 Please, call me on the phone sometime  
 You say you love me darlin’  
 Please, call me on the phone sometime  
 When I hear your voice  
 Ease my worried mind

One of these days  
 I’m gonna show you how nice a man can be  
 One of these days  
 I’m gonna show you just how nice a man can be  
 I’m gonna buy you a brand, new Cadillac  
 If you only speak some good words about me

Hear my phone ringin’  
 Sound like a long distance call  
 Hear my phone keep ringin’  
 Sound like a long distance call  
 When I picked up my receiver  
 The party said another mule kickin’ in your stall

As much as I enjoyed the blues as a young person, like most of us, I had to grow into the blues. I remember when I was younger, my aunt Liz loved Ray Charles. She could listen to Ray Charles all day. I thought she was silly and the music was silly, until I got older and had my heart broken, and then Ray Charles’s songs did not seem so silly. Consider [Charles’s “A Fool for You”](#):<sup>3</sup>

I know you told me  
 Such a long time ago  
 That you didn’t want me  
 You didn’t love me no more

I want to know  
 Oh, what makes me be  
 Do you believe me, child?  
 I’m a fool for you  
 Oh no, I’m a fool for you

I know you told me  
 You didn't want me 'round  
 And I know  
 You got a man way 'cross town

So I know it's something  
 Oh, what makes me be  
 Do you believe me, child  
 I'm a fool for you  
 Oh, I'm a fool for you

Did you ever wake up in the morning  
 Oh, just about the break of day  
 Reach over and feel the pillow  
 Where your baby used to lay?

Then you put on your crying  
 Like you never cried before, oh Lord  
 Yeah, you'll even cry so loud  
 You'll give the blues to your neighbor next door

Ever since you were five years old, baby  
 I've been a fool for you, little girl  
 Way down in my soul  
 I'm a little fool for you

So I know it's something  
 Oh, Lord  
 Yeah, I'm a fool for you  
 I'm a fool for you

This song expresses personal disappointment, the type of disappointment that is traditionally associated with the blues. After listening to the blues for most of my life, I have come to appreciate Greenlee's insight: "A man could get to be a philosopher listening to the Blues." As a philosopher, my ruminations about the concept of disappointment made me think about the role of the blues in our understanding and appreciation of disappointment. This essay is about the concept of disappointment and the blues. I hope that this essay raises questions about how we teach and what we teach about the blues, United States history, and the social disappointment of being a black person in the United States.

I want us to hold in our memories Charles's lyrics from "A Fool for You":

I know you told me  
 Such a long time ago  
 That you didn't want me  
 You didn't love me no more

I want to know  
 Oh, what makes me be  
 Do you believe me, child?  
 I'm a fool for you  
 Oh no, I'm a fool for you

I will return to this song and the disappointment it expresses at the end of the essay.

In the *Cambridge Companion to Blues and Gospel Music*, David Evans writes,

Between 1890 and 1910 new sounds — melodic, instrumental, and verbal — began to penetrate the repertoire of African American music hitherto dominated by spirituals, functional songs of work and play, narrative folk ballads, banjo tunes, and fast-paced instrumental dance music. Drawing from all these older forms, as well as the simultaneously emerging ragtime and jazz, these sounds coalesced fully by the end of this period to the point where they could be recognized as a distinct genre of music called the blues. This new music conveyed a remarkable sense of immediacy, purporting to express the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the singer as well as the spontaneous inventions and variations of musicians at the moment of performance. Yet for all of its immediacy, blues as a whole had a power of endurance that would sustain it throughout the twentieth century and see it at the end of that century as a major form of popular music with worldwide appeal.<sup>4</sup>

I think that it is interesting that the blues developed in the late 1800s, and what I want to do in this essay is to situate the development of the blues in the context of what has been called the solving of “the Negro Problem.” I will situate the blues within this historical period and the disappointment that comes out of this period, a disappointment that I will call “social disappointment,” and end with a challenge to think about how social disappointment, the blues, and the history of the United States should impact our teaching and our teaching philosophy.

#### THE NEGRO PROBLEM

The phrase “the Negro problem,” according to James Hollandsworth,<sup>5</sup> first appeared in print in a book published in 1864 by Hollis Read, titled *The Negro Problem Solved, or, Africa as She Was, as She Is and as She Shall Be. Her Curse and Her Cure*.<sup>6</sup> Read argues that black people should be sent to Africa to solve the Negro problem in the United States. Hollandsworth notes, “As it turned out, his solution was wildly impracticable, and the ‘War Amendments’ to the Constitution (Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth), which enfranchised former slaves and ensured their rights as citizens, made the question of what to do with them moot during Reconstruction.”<sup>7</sup> It would have been politically and socially problematic to try to deport U.S. citizens to Africa, even citizens who were unwanted.

Still, after the Civil War ended, the U.S. government had at least two major social problems: First, what should be the new relationship with the States that had been in rebellion?<sup>8</sup> Secondly, what should be done with the Negro? The federal government’s problem of its relationship with its Southern brothers was resolved with the Hayes-Tilden Compromise of 1877. The presidential election of 1876 gave Democratic candidate Samuel Tilden a popular-vote margin of 250,000 votes, and the preliminary Electoral College vote showed that Tilden would beat Hayes. However, the ballots of four states — Florida, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Oregon — were contested. At stake were twenty electoral votes. Tilden only needed one vote, while Hayes needed all twenty. Because of charges of voter fraud, South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana submitted two sets of election returns, each with different totals. The second set favored Hayes, and his aides met with moderate Southern Democrats in the congressional electoral commission, convincing them to block the official counting of the first set of votes, with a promise, among other things, to withdraw Union troops from Southern states, allowing Hayes to win. Hayes ordered federal troops out of Louisiana and South Carolina, effectively ending Reconstruction. This compromise

peacefully resolved some of the political tensions of the day between the North and South. In essence, the nation's Southern white brothers were welcomed back into the Union. This resolved the problem of national reunification, but it gave the fate of Southern black people back to their former oppressors. While the compromise resolved national political tensions, the relationship between black people and the reconstituted Union was much more contentious.

As it became clear that the North would win the Civil War, what to do with the Negro became a major concern. Historian Rayford Logan writes, "The problem of determining the place that Negroes should occupy in American life was the most difficult of the 'racist' problems that confronted the American government and white people after the Civil War."<sup>9</sup> The problem was intensified by the inclusion of black people as citizens and, thus, formally equal in social and political status to whites. The fact that black people were formally recognized as U.S. citizens did nothing to remove or undo the years of racial animus that had been used to justify the enslavement of black people. Indeed, at the end of the Civil War, a large segment of the white population nationwide believed in the natural inferiority of black people.<sup>10</sup> As such, black people, being inferior, neither deserved nor would ever merit citizenship. What should be done with this woeful group? This view of black people, as unfit to be citizens, shaped the Negro problem.

Many whites across the nation thought the answer was clear. Black people and whites, given their physical, emotional, and intellectual differences, with the edge going to whites, would never be able to live peacefully in the United States. In 1874, H.H. Goodloe wrote an article, "The Negro Problem," that was pessimistic about the future of race relations.<sup>11</sup> Hollandsworth notes,

According to Goodloe, the problem went beyond the usual struggle between labor and management; it encompassed the most basic feelings of revulsion and rejection. "That antagonism exists between the two races in their relations to each other, and in form and degree different and greater than that usually recognized as between capital and labor is so plainly observable," Goodloe wrote, "that we have only to open our eyes to existing and constantly recurring facts to be convinced of its truth."<sup>12</sup>

This assessment of race relations raises at least two questions: What was it about black people, particularly those who had been enslaved, that caused such racial animus, and what should be done with them if they could not be deported? The answers would set the framing of public policy for dealing with issues of race for decades to come.

First, what was it about black people that caused so much racial friction? Frederick Douglass noted a number of times before his death that there was no Negro problem. There was, indeed, a race problem. In 1871, he realized that without some form of affirmative action, qualified black people would not find employment. In 1888, he questioned the value of the Emancipation Proclamation. In 1890, he addressed the race problem and noted that it was not black people who were the problem, but white attitudes toward the rights of black citizens. In 1894, a year before his death, he again addresses the problem of black people being upright citizens when national, state, and local governments do nothing to protect the rights of black people. For Douglass, it was the attitudes of whites toward black people that caused the race

problem. He said whites had a negative attitude toward black people that permeated all racial interactions.

What is the origin of negative white attitudes toward black people, particularly those who were descendants of enslaved Africans? In 1909, Quincy Ewing wrote an article, “The Heart of the Race Problem,” to answer the question of what exactly the Negro problem is:

If we listen vainly for the heart-throb of the race problem in the Negro’s laziness, and criminality, and brutality, and ignorance, and inefficiency, do we detect it with clearness and certainty in the personal aversion felt by the white people for the black people, aversion which the white people can no more help feeling than the black people can help exciting? Is this the real trouble, the real burden, the real tragedy and sorrow of our white population in those sections of the country where the Negroes are many — that they are compelled to dwell, face-to-face, day by day, with an inferior, degraded population, repulsive to their finer sensibilities, obnoxious to them in countless ways inexplicable? Facts are far from furnishing an affirmative answer.<sup>13</sup>

Ewing argues that claims of laziness, criminality, brutality, ignorance, or inefficiency cannot be the cause of the Negro problem. He thinks these unsupported claims about black character cannot explain the attitudes of whites toward black people, that it goes much deeper into the white psyche. He writes — and some will find this disturbing:

So much for what the race problem is not. Let me without further delay state what it is. The foundation of it, true or false, is the white man’s conviction that the Negro as a race, and as an individual, is his inferior: not human in the sense that he is human, not entitled to the exercise of human rights in the sense that he is entitled to the exercise of them. The problem itself, the essence of it, the heart of it, is the white man’s determination to make good this conviction, coupled with constant anxiety lest, by some means, he should fail to make it good. The race problem, in other words, is not that the Negro is what he is in relation to the white man, the white man’s inferior; but this, rather: How to keep him what he is in relation to the white man; how to prevent his ever achieving or becoming that which would justify the belief on his part, or on the part of other people, that he and the white man stand on common human ground.<sup>14</sup>

Ewing continues that if one views race relations in the South through the inferiority lens, one will see that as long as black people do nothing to upset the white person’s sense of superiority, there is no Negro problem. For Ewing, whites, it appears, think that black people are not their social or political equals and want to keep the system structured to maintain that social and political distinction. Ewing concludes by noting:

In the meantime, nothing could be more unwarranted than to suppose that the race problem of one section of this country is peculiar to that section because its white inhabitants are themselves in some sense peculiar because they are peculiarly prejudiced, because they are peculiarly behind the hour which the high clock of civilization has struck. Remove the white inhabitants of the South, give their place to the white people of any other section of the United States, and, beyond a peradventure, the Southern race problem, as I have defined it, would continue to be — revealed, perhaps, in ways more perplexing, more intense and tragic.<sup>15</sup>

Whites across the United States believed in the inferiority of black people, and this belief was not limited to the American South. It was a national phenomenon. This claim that black people were viewed as inferior can be verified if you look at the legal and social practices that were enforced on black people before and after the Hayes-Tilden Compromise.

Ladelle McWhorter discusses the origins of racism in the United States, particularly the move from race as lineage to race as biology. Wealthy planters realized they could exploit the physical differences between white and black laborers. Changes

in the treatment of white workers that benefited their whiteness increase the social distance between white and black workers. By the mid-1700s, laws and social practices had drawn a discordant line between black and white laborers through the use of biological race:

Colonial governments thus deliberately established morphological race as a civil concept that was contrary to tradition and legal precedent. Over the course of the eighteenth century, race, now a form of embodiment, became a form of subjectivity — of citizenship, of social status, and finally of personal identity. By Thomas Jefferson's day, race was no longer a matter of lineage or culture, but was first and foremost a matter of morphology — skin color, hair texture, facial structure, and so on — along with the internal physiology that was thought to accompany such variations, including increased or decreased capacity for rational thought. What had once been a political scheme had become, within sixty years, a kind of common sense. Law and policy in the new United States would thus be based on the assumption that racial subjectivity is real, that members of nonwhite races are incapable of exercising the responsibilities of full citizenship in a free republic, and that lifelong servitude is appropriate for some races and inappropriate for others.<sup>16</sup>

At the end of the Civil War, the perceptions that black people were racially “other” was a common-sense notion among many or most whites. All of these laws and social practices had as their aim to reinforce the view that black people were inferior to whites. Chief Justice Roger Taney was expressing in the *Dred Scott* decision what many whites believed: “We think they [people of African ancestry] are ... not included, and were not intended to be included, under the word ‘citizens’ in the Constitution, and can therefore claim none of the rights and privileges which that instrument provides for and secures to citizens of the United States.”<sup>17</sup>

The North's victory in the Civil War and the War Amendments can be seen as pushback on this position of the inferiority and social status of black people. However, the end of Reconstruction and the reunification of the country came with a vicious shift against the rights and protections of black Americans. While Logan calls the years between 1877 and 1921 the “nadir of race relations,” I would extend that period to 1954 at a minimum.<sup>18</sup> The period between 1877 and 1954 saw the full-court press against civil rights through a concerted effort to reinforce the inferior status of black people. Note that the nation became more racially segregated during this period after the Hayes-Tilden Compromise with the enforcement of Jim Crow Laws, government-sanctioned segregation, sundown towns, lack of political protection, and racial violence against blacks through lynching.<sup>19</sup> Not only was the legal and political system structured to reinforce the concept of inferiority in regard to black people, but a system of social etiquette also was formed. In both the North and South, social practices and customs were in place to foster the perception that black people were not on the same social and political levels as whites. In the North, black people were crowded into areas that became known as ghettos, and jobs and educational opportunities were limited. In the South, interpersonal interactions were circumscribed by race; with public water fountains segregated and labeled “Colored” and “White” being one clear example. The “Colored” fountains were always lower than the “White” fountains. As with slavery, there was a need to reinforce that black people were naturally inferior to justify harsh and racist treatment of them. To this end, as Juliann Sivulka notes, science took over:

Various “scientific” studies reinforced the image of African Americans as less than human. Evolutionary science fitted African-American bodies into new classifications of inferiority based on facial angles and physiognomic measurements. Most social scientists during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries believed African Americans to be inferior to white Americans; for some, measures of intelligence did not adequately describe the differences. Earlier psychological studies argued that African Americans had stronger emotions, greater volatility, and defective morals. Images of exaggerated racial differences circulated throughout American culture as emblems of this new “scientific” basis for perpetuating racist stereotypes intertwined.<sup>20</sup>

To reinforce the science, black people were portrayed in the movies<sup>21</sup> and on stage as buffoons, mammies, tragic mulattoes, bucks, and coons.<sup>22</sup> The news media, white academic institutions, and many white scholars made the inferiority of black people a major topic of study. All of the supposed evidence was meant to justify treating black people like second-class citizens. What should society do with this supposedly woeful group?

In the 1880s, while the race scientists and white social scientists debated what had become known as the Negro Problem, I contend that national, state, and local governments put a resolution of the Negro Problem into play. The best way to resolve the Negro Problem was to isolate the Negro. In the years between 1877 and 1954, national, local and state governments did everything possible to physically segregate the races. During this period, the nation saw, as noted earlier, the development of sundown towns and neighborhoods, restricted housing covenants, racial zoning and gerrymandering — all put in place to segregate black people from whites. By the time of the *Brown v. Board* decision in 1954, racial segregation was a de facto law of the land nationwide.

The isolation of black people took place by using the sciences — physical and social — to explain the biological and social differences between the races. One of the more pernicious means of isolating black people was to cast them as criminal by nature. Khalil Gibran Muhammad, at the beginning of his book, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, writes,

The link between race and crime is as enduring and influential in the twenty-first century as it has been in the past. Violent crime rates in the nation’s biggest cities are generally understood as a reflection of the presence and behavior of black men, women, and children who live there. The U.S. prison population is larger than at any time in the history of the penitentiary anywhere in the world. Nearly half of the more than two million Americans behind bars are African Americans, and an unprecedented number of black men likely will go to prison during the course of their lives. These grim statistics are well known and frequently cited by white and black Americans; indeed, for many, they define black humanity. In all manner of conversations about race — from debates about parenting to education to urban life — black crime statistics are ubiquitous. By the same token, white crime statistics are virtually invisible, except when used to dramatize the excessive criminality of African Americans. Although the statistical language of black criminality often means different things to different people, it is the glue that binds race to crime today, as in the past.<sup>23</sup>

Muhammad notes that racial crime statistics were used to justify public policies connected to the Negro Problem. To put it another way, between 1890 and 1940, how and why did racial crime statistics become what Ted Porter calls a “strategy of communication” — a subject of dialogue and debate — about blacks’ fitness for

modern life?"<sup>24</sup> Negative attributes ascribed to black people were needed to justify the racist treatment of black people.

All of this negative propaganda was done to vilify black people. The constant barrage of negative statistics and news stories had the impact of socially isolating black people from whites. In turn, whites did everything in their power to avoid contact with black people whenever possible. Housing, jobs, schools, graveyards, and churches were segregated to further isolate black people. The principal catalyst was the belief in the inferiority of black people and the reinforcement of that belief. Thus, the nation's goal was to protect whites from contamination by black people, who were being marked as racially "other." Mary Poole, in her book, *The Segregated Origins of Social Security: African Americans and the Welfare State*, explains how the language of the times represented the manner in which the socially contingent phenomenon of racial stratification had taken hold in the minds of Americans, both black and white.

As is still true in the United States, the language of race made real — natural — what had been invented; "white" and "Negro" were understood to refer to two essentially different types of humans, and as those words were spoken, they created the reality to which they referred. The language of race is problematic, always, because it embodies and therefore reproduces inequality. In the 1930s, "white" was used universally to describe the majority of U.S. citizens. "White" was not strictly a racial category, like "Anglo-Saxon" or "Caucasian"; it specifically identified Americans of European descent who claimed to have no African heritage. The one-drop rule did not apply to other races. A white person could have a Cherokee or Mexican great-grandmother without losing whiteness, but even the most remote ancestral ties to the African continent would disqualify an individual from being classified as "white." Even more than "Negro," "white" was used, as it had been for centuries, to create a false homogeneity out of a diversity of origins and cultures for no other purpose than to artificially enhance the value of certain people and property. In America, people of African descent have continuously struggled to define themselves with a word because words, like "colored" and "Negro," come to absorb the racist stereotypes of a time and place and must be replaced with others. But "white" has never needed to be replaced because the word continues to confer privilege on those it defines.<sup>25</sup>

While most Americans think about the role of whiteness in the South, the North was not without its problems. Sylvia Hood Washington, in her fascinating study of environmental racism in Chicago from 1865 to 1954, examines the manner in which black people were marginalized as "other":

The twentieth century's Jim Crow laws, restrictive covenants, racial zoning ordinances, and immigration restriction policies are examples of this type of construction and environmental discipline. These groups identified as "others" were, and still are, forced to live in geographical spaces (communities) within the society that are or are becoming environmentally compromised because of their "otherness." Their communities become dumping grounds where waste and toxic material are disproportionately located; apparently, they are the proper place for everything deemed to be undesirable (people and waste). These communities become the ultimate sink for the larger body politic. Historically, "normal and healthy" people did not choose to live in the geographical locations of the leper colony. They sought to maximize the distance between themselves and the lepers. Similarly, leper colonies were not given the same care and maintenance provided to non-leper colonies. I believe this phenomenon holds true for both social and political lepers; an environmental history of these groups will validate that assumption.<sup>26</sup>

It is clear that during this period, the laws that were enacted helped create and reinforce the concept of race, particularly an inferior black race.<sup>27</sup> Social practices and

mores reflected and supported the position of the inferiority of black people. In the South, whites attempted to make the relationship between black and white people as close to that of slavery as it could be. All across the United States, rules of racial etiquette were created or recoded to segregate and isolate black people.

As bad as it was dealing with state and local racism, the Supreme Court, in its *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, made it national law that the races could and should be separated, that is, whites could discriminate against black people, and it was not a sign of racial inferiority. Lerone Bennett writes,

In the infamous case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Court said state laws requiring “separate but equal” accommodations for blacks were a “reasonable” use of state police powers, adding: “The object of the Fourteenth Amendment was undoubtedly to enforce the absolute equality of the two races before the law, but in the nature of things, it could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based on color, or to enforce social, as distinguished from political, equality, or a commingling of the two races upon terms unsatisfactory to either.”<sup>28</sup>

Whites took the decision in *Plessy* to heart, and, soon, separate spaces appeared all across the country. As Derrick Bell so poignantly points out,

Segregation laws were widespread in the dozen or so years before the *Plessy* decision. Now, with the Court’s implicit approval, the first decade of the twentieth century witnessed the enactment of a wide variety of segregation statutes. No detail seemed too small as laws required segregation at work, at play, and at home. Public schools were always separate and almost always vastly unequal. Public conveyances, eating and hotel facilities, bathrooms, water fountains, prisons, cemeteries, parks, and sporting and entertainment events were all covered. New Orleans even deemed it in its public interest to enact an ordinance separating Negro and white prostitutes.<sup>29</sup>

The United States had worked to resolve the Negro problem. It had segregated and isolated black people. By 1954, many whites and some black people thought the Negro problem had been resolved.<sup>30</sup> The reason why it was not a *fait accompli* was the dogged strength and determination of black people not to become the radically racial “other” in the land of their birth. Nonetheless, the state or the United States had nearly succeeded in isolating and segregating black people. It did, however, succeed in casting a spell of racial inferiority about the status of black people, who were descendants of American chattel slavery, across the United States.<sup>31</sup> One consequence of the resolution was the rise in the lynching of black citizens. Important for our discussion is Derrick Bell’s comments on the decision in *Plessy* and lynching: “In 1896, the year in which the Supreme Court rejected in *Plessy v. Ferguson* Homer Plessy’s argument that segregation stamped the colored race with a badge of inferiority, seventy-seven Negroes were lynched.”<sup>32</sup>

#### LYNCHING AND THE NEGRO PROBLEM

According to *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, the verb “to lynch” means “to put to death (as by hanging) by mob action without legal sanction.” The historian Frank Shay wrote in 1969 that at one point, lynching was “as American as apple pie.” Many lynchings occurred in public, in front of crowds that gathered to watch. Writer Ralph Ellison once described a lynching as “a ritual drama that was usually enacted ... in an atmosphere of high excitement.”<sup>33</sup> When asked to present at the 2015 Philosophy of Education Society conference, my first thought was about the

blues and lynching. I wanted to know what happened after the lynching. My reading of *Buried in the Bitter Waters* sparked my interest in the period between 1877 and 1954. I became obsessed with wanting to know what happened after the lynching. I knew that there were anti-lynching movements and I knew of the great work by Memphian Ida B. Wells on lynching. What happened to the families of the lynched? How did the lynching affect the wives, daughters, and sons of the lynched victim if he were male? The song, "[Supertime,](#)" sung by Ethel Waters<sup>34</sup> captures the effect that lynching had on the black family and raises questions about the impact of lynching on social psyche of black Americans.

How did lynching impact the self-understanding of black males when black women were lynched? What did it mean to be a man when your wife or daughter could be lynched with no reprisal? How did black people respond to lynching in, poems, plays, and songs?

There are lynching poems. For example, "The Lynching" by Claude McKay:

His Spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven.  
 His father, by the cruelest way of pain,  
 Had bidden him to his bosom once again;  
 The awful sin remained still unforgiven.  
 All night a bright and solitary star  
 (Perchance the one that ever guided him,  
 Yet gave him up at last to Fate's wild whim)  
 Hung pitifully o'er the swinging char.  
 Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to view  
 The ghastly body swaying in the sun  
 The women thronged to look, but never a one  
 Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue;  
 And little lads, lynchers that were to be,  
 Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee.<sup>35</sup>

There is "LYNCHING" by Thomas Moore:

Have you ever heard of lynching in the great United States?  
 'Tis an awful, awful story that the Negro man relates,  
 How the mobs the laws have trampled, both the human and divine,  
 In their killing helpless people as their cruel hearts incline.  
 Not the heathen! 'Tis the Christian with the Bible in his hand,  
 Stands for pain and death to tyrannize the weaklings of the land;  
 Not the red man nor the Spaniard kills the blacks of Uncle Sam,  
 'Tis the white man of the nation who will lunch the sons of Ham.  
 To a limb upon the highway does a Negro's body hang,  
 Riddled with a hundred bullets from the bloody, thirsty gang;  
 Law and order thus defying, and there's none to say them nay.  
 "Thus," they say, to keep their power, "Negroes must be kept at bay."  
 How his back is lacerated! how the scene is painted red,  
 By the blood of one poor Negro till he numbers with the dead!  
 Listen to the cry of anguish from a soul that God has made,  
 But it fails to reach the pity of the demons in the raid.  
 To a tree we find the Negro and to him a chain beside,  
 There a horse to it is fastened and the whip to him applied.  
 Thus he pulls the victim's body till it meets a dying fate,  
 And to history is given a new scandal to relate.

Limb from limb he's torn asunder! See the savage lynchers grin!  
 Then the flesh is cut in pieces and the souvenirs begin;  
 Each must have the piece allotted for the friends at home to see,  
*Relatives will cluster round him, laughing, dancing, filled with glee.*

To a stake they bind the Negro, pile the trash around him high,  
 Make the fire about his body; it is thus that he must die.  
 Burn him slowly, hear the lynchers: "That's the part we most enjoy!  
 Tell it out in all the nation how we killed a Negro boy!"

Savage mob a Negro's chasing, and to catch him must not fail;  
 If it does, another's taken, there to force from him the tale  
 Where the fleeing man is hiding; if the facts he cannot raise,  
 Though his innocence protesting, for the same by death he pays.

"'Tis a Negro's blood we're craving; such will have at any cost;  
 We must lynch the one in keeping, for the other one is lost!"  
 This they say, and when they're questioned answer like this is the why,  
 "To the race at large a warning here a Negro man shall die!"

O, how brave the Southern white man when, a hundred men to one,  
 Lynch a lone, defenceless Negro, when each lyncher has a gun.  
 If at midnight or the noonday, the result is all the same,  
 Law is powerless to hinder, and the nation shares the blame.

Lynchers go into the Senate and their savagery uphold,  
 How they shoot and butcher Negroes is the story that is told.  
 Guns and ropes they have in plenty, and, if necessary, will  
 Use them on an office holder, such a Negro they must kill.

How they clamor for the Philippines and Cubans far away,  
 While a worse thing is transpiring in this country every day.  
 In the eyes of such law-breakers lives a beam of greatest size,  
 That will hinder all the pulling of the mote from others' eyes.

Are the candidates for lynching always found among the men?  
 No, the fiends of human torture lynch a woman now and then.  
 Yea, the Spanish Inquisition insignificant will pale,  
 When compared with such atrocities that in the South prevail!

'Tis a blot on Christian manhood time, itself, cannot erase;  
 Human blood upon the conscience centuries cannot efface.  
 Simply to suspect a Negro is sufficient for the band,  
 He must die without a hearing, in a boasted gospel land.

*Sowing antedates the reaping, and the nation should beware,  
 That the sowers to the wind will reap the whirlwind everywhere.  
 Hark the cry! the blood of Negroes cries for vengeance from the dust!  
 How I tremble for the nation when I think that God is just!*<sup>36</sup>

There are short stories about lynching, such as Ralph Ellison's "A Party Down at the Square."<sup>37</sup> This is a heart-wrenching short story. John Steinbeck also wrote about a lynching in *Of Mice and Men*, when his character George kills the mentally challenged Lennie rather than let him be caught and tortured by a lynch mob. Scout Finch, the young heroine of Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*, talks an angry mob out of lynching Tom Robinson, a black man accused of raping a white woman.

There were plays about lynching. The work of Koritha Mitchell is fascinating. Her study, *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance,*

*and Citizenship, 1890–1930* is a tour de force. Here, I must cite a lengthy passage from her work:

Studying the period, I have constantly wondered: How did blacks survive this era? How did they think of themselves at a time when public discourse cast them as brutes who deserved to be butchered? How did they maintain a dignified sense of self when photographs of mutilated lynch victims entered their homes along with the news? When the mob was a palpable threat to their own bodies, families, and communities, how did they manage “to keep on keeping on”? And how did they continue to believe in their status as U.S. citizens?

I contend that lynching plays served as mechanisms through which African Americans survived the height of mob violence — and its photographic representation — still believing in their right to full citizenship. By definition, lynching plays address mob violence, but as this study reveals, the genre’s foundational scripts do not represent, or even describe, the brutalized black body. As theater historians Kathy Perkins and Judith Stephens assert in their anthology of representative scripts, “A lynching drama is a play in which the threat or occurrence of a lynching, past or present, has major impact on the dramatic action.” Though American writers had always addressed racial violence, the mode developed, Perkins and Stephens maintain, “when playwrights moved beyond brief references and focused on a specific lynching incident.” Four remarkable women laid the foundation for lynching drama: Angelina Weld Grimke, who penned *Rachel* in 1914; Alice Dunbar Nelson, who wrote *Mine Eyes Have Seen* in 1918; Mary Burrill, who published *Aftermath* in 1919; and Georgia Douglas Johnson, who was the most prolific, with *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925), *Blue Blood* (1926), *Safe* (1929), and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (c. 1930). In this study, I examine these plays, as well as another by a black woman and two by black men: Myrtle Smith Livingston’s *For Unborn Children* (1926), G. D. Lipscomb’s *Frances* (1925), and Joseph Mitchell’s *Son-Boy* (1928).<sup>38</sup>

I would recommend this book without reservation because it touches on so many aspects of the lynching drama in the United States. I also find an article entitled “A Lynching Memorial Unveiled in Duluth,” written December 5, 2003, in the *New York Times* worth noting:

Nations deal with nightmares the same way people do — by trying to forget them. Among the nightmares that had faded from public memory in the United States until recently, none are more ghastly than the campaign of racial terror that gripped this country from the 1880’s to the 1930’s, when thousands of black Americans were hanged, mutilated, burned alive or dragged to death while huge crowds looked on.

Sometimes called “lynching bees” or “Negro barbecues,” these events were cast as macabre carnivals, which drew crowds with children and picnic baskets from miles around. The victims’ bodies were sometimes photographed for postcards, which were used as instruments of terror until mailing such postcards was barred in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Lynching was not always just random violence. It was sometimes semiofficial violence, directed by whites who feared business competition from emerging black entrepreneurs and who hated the crusading newspapers of the Negro press, which began pressing aggressively for full citizenship for black people around World War I.

Americans who know of the violence of this period at all tend to believe that it was confined to the segregationist South. But the fact that lynchings took place in many parts of the country was underscored recently in the northern Minnesota city of Duluth when the city unveiled a moving memorial commemorating the deaths of Elmer Jackson, Elias Clayton and Isaac McGhie, three young black men who were lynched in Duluth in 1920 while a mob of 10,000 looked on.

The dedication drew thousands of people from all over the area. The emotional high point came with a speech by Warren Read, a fourth-grade teacher from Kingston, Wash., who had learned while researching his family that his great-grandfather had helped lead the mob that stormed the local jail and took the three men, who were circus workers, from their cells. His voice choking with emotion, he apologized to the victims and their families.

The memorial in Duluth is part of a national journey that began in the 1990's, when scholars and museums began to pull back the covers on a shameful and horrific period. After nearly a half-century of turning away, the country now seems more ready to look its nightmare squarely in the eye.<sup>39</sup>

Here, I would like to ask the readers if they think that the country is ready to look at the nightmare squarely in the face given the murders of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Rekia Boyd, Jonathan A. Ferrell, and others.

#### BACK TO THE BLUES

Adam Gussow, in his work, *Seems like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition*, writes,

Lynching is commonly viewed by blues scholars as merely one egregious link in a chain of violent disciplines inflicted by white southerners on black southerners during the post-Reconstruction period (1890–1920) when blues music was first emerging as a recognizable cultural form. The other disciplines, intended to produce docile black male laboring bodies, remain notorious to this day: capricious and draconian vagrancy laws, peonage laws that reconstituted slavery in the form of debt-servitude, a convict lease system in which shackled men were worked to death for profit, prison farms in which murderous beatings were the norm.<sup>40</sup>

Those who are interested should read Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* for a disturbing examination of the similarities between black life in the obvious Jim Crow era and our postracial America. Needless to say, this history of racist treatment, and to many the current racism in this society, has caused black citizens to be disappointed with their status as United States citizens.

#### SOCIAL DISAPPOINTMENT AND THE NEGRO PROBLEM

The concept of disappointment has received little philosophical treatment.<sup>41</sup> This neglect may be due to the fact that disappointment is ubiquitous. Disappointments can be minor, or they can be major. Most people have experienced disappointment in their lives. Disappointment occurs generally when someone fails to satisfy the hopes, desires, or expectations of another. Disappointment also occurs when someone frustrates or thwarts the hopes, desires, or expectations of another. Disappointments can come from many sources. We can be disappointed by our own failings, others' failings, or when events do not turn out the way we expected. Is disappointment an emotion or a disposition? It is a cognitive attitude with an emotional component. To say "I am disappointed" is to say "I expected and wanted  $\alpha$ , and  $\alpha$  did not happen, and not because something,  $\beta$ , which is better than  $\alpha$ , happened instead."<sup>42</sup> Of course, many different emotions and dispositions may be associated with disappointments by different individuals. What is interesting is how we deal with the experience of disappointment. Think of disappointment as a function,  $D$ , that ranges over various entities. Thus, there is an  $x$  such that  $D(x)$ . What are the possible values of  $x$ , that is, who can be disappointed? A person, of course, but not just individuals: stockholders, a board of directors, the Senate, and so on. Of course, not all disappointments are equal. Disappointment presupposes some expectations. For example, if I fail to win a lottery that I didn't expect to win, I cannot sensibly be said to be disappointed. Some disappointments are minor, while others can be life changing. Our responses to experiences of disappointment vary according to the social context in which the person finds himself or herself and to the level of expectation of outcome. The social

understanding that one brings to the events can also have an impact on the response to the experience of disappointment.<sup>43</sup>

We encounter many examples of disappointment in our personal lives. However, I want to consider the experience of disappointment in the more specific context of the lives of blacks in the United States. I am not concerned with the day-to-day experiences of disappointment, but with the experience of disappointment that comes from the failure of the government to satisfy the political expectations of the majority of blacks.<sup>44</sup> I call this type of disappointment “social disappointment.” I take social disappointment to be the failure of the government to do its duty to protect the social and political rights of a group of citizens and the experience of disappointment that follows. Social disappointment comes about when the expectations that the government will protect a group of citizens have not been realized. This has been the experience of African Americans, and hence, they experience social disappointment.

I hope that my discussion of the Negro problem and lynching has put the concept of social disappointment and the black American experience into perspective. What makes this moment so abominable is that when black citizens should have been experiencing the blessings of their new citizenship, the nation turned away from granting political rights and social recognition to its black citizens.<sup>45</sup> There were many people, like Frederick Douglass, both black and white, who thought the blessings of liberty would be bestowed on these new black citizens.<sup>46</sup> This was a country conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men were created equal.<sup>47</sup> The country had just fought a civil war to save the Union and free the slaves. As citizens, blacks had the right to feel and expect that they would be treated as equal members of this nation. The blessings of full citizenship were not the order of the day. Instead, the nation became more racially segregated during this period: Jim Crow Laws,<sup>48</sup> governmental sanction segregation,<sup>49</sup> sundown towns,<sup>50</sup> lack of political protection, and, of course, racial violence against blacks in the form of lynching.<sup>51</sup> However, as noted, these violent acts were not just limited to Southern states or to the period between 1877 and 1901.<sup>52</sup> The expectation of fair and just treatment for blacks was not met, and Douglass and others were deeply disappointed. Blacks, as citizens, expected to receive the full status and privileges white citizens received. The social and political climate was anything but welcoming to America’s new citizens. There were failed expectations, and it is no wonder that blacks suffer from social disappointment.

In this regard, the social disappointment of blacks is a socially contingent phenomenon. As philosopher Rita Nolan notes, “It is unproblematic that some things are socially contingent phenomena: They would not exist or would not be the kinds of things that they are, but for the fact that there are certain types of interpersonal relations.”<sup>53</sup> The de facto and de jure racist laws and racist social practices form an important part of the interpersonal and interracial relations in the United States. The enforcement of racist laws and the support of racist practices by the government can be seen as flashpoints for frustration and disappointment. In part, the social disappointment of black Americans is caused by the knowledge that those people charged

with protecting black people are often the perpetrators of crimes against blacks, particularly black youths. In addition, blacks can see the government protecting the citizenship rights of whites with its full force.<sup>54</sup> The government always worked to protect white lives and property when the rights of blacks are involved.<sup>55</sup> Knowing that your government has no respect or regard for you, as a citizen, is disappointing. We must remember that liberal ideology has at its core an essential principle of respect for the individual. When a state, one that espouses basic respect for the individual, fails to protect and respect individuals because of their membership in a racial group, the state is failing to live up to its political responsibilities. The failure of the state to ensure the full force of citizenship rights and privileges to black Americans has impacted on the interpersonal relationship between the races in the United States. The memories and actions of these interpersonal racial relations help form both the manner in which blacks identify what it means to be a U.S. citizen and how whites perceive blacks. The members of the state, whose expectations of fair and equal treatment are not met, suffer social disappointment. This gives social disappointment cognitive and emotive components.

The history of race relations in the United States has not been a happy story. Paradoxically, blacks are often asked or forced to take an ahistorical view of race relations in the United States, that is, to act as if the history never occurred or that it does not matter to their current lot. This view often means that we should be colorblind with regard to race. This view is taken to mean that race should not be a consideration in one's deliberations. This claim, of course, needs clarification, but I will not address that in this essay. I will simply note that some versions of colorblindness require that we be, as noted, ahistorical.

However, if we take an ahistorical view of American history, we must disregard the lack of regard for black rights in the United States.<sup>56</sup> We must disregard the knowledge that during the aforementioned nadir period, white social scientists, political scientists, philosophers,<sup>57</sup> sociologists, and anthropologists<sup>58</sup> were doing everything academically possible to establish that black people were a criminally disposed and culturally deprived group.<sup>59</sup> We must disregard the manner in which the federal, state, and local governments failed to do what was necessary to protect the lives of its black citizens.<sup>60</sup> We must disregard the fact that the U.S. Senate, in 2005, passed a resolution for the purpose of apologizing to the victims of lynchings and to the descendants of those victims for the failure of the Senate to enact antilynching legislation. From the Congressional Record, June 13, 2005:

Year after year, the Federal Government and State and local governments failed to respond effectively to the danger. The perpetrators had little reason to fear that they would be prosecuted or convicted. In some cases, scheduled lynchings were announced in newspapers beforehand, demonstrating the unwillingness of local law enforcement to intervene. Photos of lynchings show onlookers grinning at the camera. The failure of local authorities to prevent these atrocities dehumanized, demoralized, and terrorized black Americans. When the 370,000 African-American soldiers who served in World War I returned home, many believed that they had earned the equality they had previously been denied. Their hopes soon turned to frustration, as the discrimination of the pre-war years was renewed and reinvigorated. Even newly discharged soldiers were lynched, still wearing their uniforms. Lynching was more than

isolated acts of brutality. It was vigilante mob murder that became systemic, ritualized and condoned by a racist society. It became a cruel weapon of white supremacy which took the lives of many African Americans and terrorized whole communities. Along with Jim Crow laws, segregated schools and dismal lack of property rights, lynching was used as an organized weapon of oppression that denied the fundamental rights of tens of millions of African Americans. As W.E.B. DuBois stated, the things that “the white South feared more than Negro dishonesty, ignorance and incompetency, [were] Negro honesty, knowledge, and efficiency.” Lynching was part of an organized attempt to oppress African-American communities and exclude them from the American dream.<sup>61</sup>

Social disappointment can run both ways. The Senate realized that it had failed in its duty to protect black U.S. citizens. The failure of the U.S. government to protect the lives and rights of blacks sanctioned the continued use of violence to keep black people in their place. These acts of violence were often carried out by law enforcement agencies, or these agencies allowed the violence to take place without any interference. In the United States, “to lynch” meant “to put to death (as by hanging) by mob action with legal sanction.” Knowing that your government is one of the chief oppressors causes social disappointment.

#### TEACHING THE BLUES

George Lipsitz discusses what he calls the “white spatial imaginary,”<sup>62</sup> that social space whites have carved out for themselves in the United States that relegates all other people to the category of other. He writes, “Today’s segregated schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces produce white people who know very little about Blacks and even less about themselves. They certainly know next to nothing about the actual history of the civil rights movement or the beliefs of Dr. King.”<sup>63</sup> I would add that they know nothing about the history that gave rise to the blues. The blues in this regard is separated from it social, political, and intellectual history. James Cone writes interestingly about the blues and spirituals, that

despite the fact that the blues and the spirituals partake of the same black experience, there are important differences between them. The spirituals are slave songs, and they deal with historical realities that are pre-Civil War. They were created and sung by the group. The blues, while having some pre-Civil War roots, are essentially post-Civil War in consciousness. They reflect experiences that issued from Emancipation, the Reconstruction Period, and segregation laws.<sup>64</sup>

Again, the blues develop out of a period of social disappointment and reflects how a people adjusted to this disappointment as individuals. Cone again:

“The blues was conceived,” writes LeRoi Jones, “by freedmen and ex-slaves — if not as a result of a personal or intellectual experience, at least as an emotional confirmation of, and reaction to, the way in which most Negroes were still forced to exist in the United States.” Also, in contrast to the group singing of the spirituals, the blues are intensely personal and individualistic.<sup>65</sup>

The blues are personal, yet rooted in a collective experience. Some scholars on the blues claim that the blues white people sing are different from the blues of black people. Whites sing country and western music and black people sing the blues. I had a student in my aesthetics class write a paper on the question of whether the Beatles appreciate the blues. His answer was yes, but that they did not play the blues because, and this is telling. They respected the lives and meaning of blues musicians and how the blues were connected to the history of race and racism in the United States.

## CONCLUSION

It is out of this history we get the blues. It is the sound of a people that have been profoundly disappointed. It is the sound of a people maintaining their sense of humanity in a society that had worked hard to make them an “other” in the land of their birth. The social identity of black people in the United States is intimately connected to the liberal understanding of respect for the individual. The failure of the nation to protect black people collectively and individually has worked to foster a sense of what it means to be black in America. Black Americans are indeed blues people. I would contend that in 2015, black people still have to collectively feel disappointment that the police can murder black men and women at any given moment, for no apparent reason, and that social disappointment continues.

In sum, as I previewed the papers to be presented at this conference (and now published in this book), I was happy to see how many papers had the term “blues” in the title. For example,

- “Blues and the Pedagogical Subject”
- “Indeterminateness and ‘Going Beyond’: Education, Dewey and the Blues”
- “The Arrhythmic Blues: The Rhythm of Learning and How Humanity’s Natural Propensity for Arrhythmia May Doom Civilization”
- “Demoralization and Teaching: Lessons from the Blues”
- “Dewey and Coltrane: A Study on Rhythm and Growth”
- “The Rhythm and Blues of Indebted Life: Notes on Schools and the Formation of the Indebted Man”
- “The Metaphysical Blues and the Juke Joint of Ideas”
- “Empathy Blues at the Colonial Difference: Underrepresented Undergraduate Women in STEM”

I am interested to see how the history of the blues people is used in these essays and whether the blues will be used to further some other intellectual or social agenda. We scholars and philosophers of education must take the lead in developing a theory of education that is insightful, educational, and rooted in the historical reality of our times. How do you understand the place of the blues in the history of the United States? I want to return to Gussow’s citing of an interview with Clarence Williams,

a jazz pianist and songwriter who penned many down-home blues and novelty songs for Bessie Smith, attributed his creativity in at least one case to a mood brought on by disciplinary encirclement, a sense of imminent victimization at the hands of white men: “Why, I’d never have written blues if I had been white. You don’t study to write the blues, you *feel* them. It’s the mood you’re in — sometimes it’s a rainy day ... just like the time I lay for hours in a swamp in Louisiana. Spanish moss dripping everywhere.... White men were looking for me with guns — I wasn’t scared, just sorry I didn’t have a gun. I began to hum a tune — a little sighing kinda tune — you know like this... “Jes as blue as a tree — an old willow tree — nobody ’round here, jes nobody but me.”<sup>66</sup>

Would there have been any blues or the blues that we have come to know and love if the United States had attempted to answer the Negro problem differently? This question is the question I want would like you to keep in mind as your read the

essays in this book. How we answer the question gives us a way to understand the value of the blues in the United States and its relationship to black people and what Ray Charles meant when he sang:

I know you told me  
Such a long time ago  
That you didn't want me  
You didn't love me no more

I want to know  
Oh, what makes me be  
Do you believe me, child?  
I'm a fool for you  
Oh no, I'm a fool for you

A man could get to be a philosopher listening to the blues.

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66. Gussow, *Seems like Murder Here*, 23.

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This essay is dedicated to my wife, Renee, and her favorite blues tune sung by Esther Phillips, "Aged and Mellow Blues," which has the great line, "I like my men like I like my whisky / Mmm, aged and mellow. I want to thank the Philosophy of Education Society, Eduardo Duarte, Bob Floden, and the members of the committee that extended the invitation for me to be the opening speaker at this renowned conference. I also want to acknowledge Bob's wife, Gloria, and my wife Renee, whom I want to thank for getting up early to come and hear me deliver this paper at the conference. Finally, I want to thank Audrey Thompson for her blues-inspired comments.