

Love, Jazz, and a Sense of the Holy: Conceptualizing the Teacher in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Two years ago Hilary Davis and Maxine Greene brought our attention to the art of Toni Morrison through a conversation on her novel *Jazz*.¹ Implicit in their decision to organize and host that alternative session was an assertion that Morrison's art is worthy of the attention of philosophers of education. I wish to expand that assertion here by claiming Morrison as a public intellectual with important insight into the nature, means, and ends of education. She is, I will argue, not only an important literary artist, but a philosopher of education whose work constitutes a critical intervention in certain powerful educational discourses. Her novel *Beloved* suggests alternatives to concepts, such as "teacher," which I will explore in this essay.²

In choosing a novel as a source for philosophical insight into education I am deliberately situating this inquiry within an approach to educational philosophy exemplified in the work of Jane Roland Martin and Susan Laird, among others.³ However, my choice to engage a novel by an African-American woman, given the necessarily limited and limiting perspective of my own subject position, risks repeating the distortions of racist and sexist discourses which have been deployed in the past to silence and speak for women and peoples of color.⁴ I undertake what is necessarily a politically and ethically delicate inquiry in part on Morrison's assurance that one of the characteristics of "black" literature (not necessarily that written by or about African-Americans) is its openness to the participation of the reader.⁵ I undertake it in response to Kal Alston's challenge to philosophers of education to "see the connection of your struggle to the success of mine" and Mae Gwendoyne Henderson's assertion that one objective of African-American women writers is "to see the other, but also to see what the other cannot see, and to use this insight to enrich our own and the other's understanding."⁶ I undertake it, in effect, in the belief that Morrison's novel enriches our understanding of what it might mean to be a teacher.

My approach to this inquiry, then, is premised on what I take to be an invitation to participate, in a spirit of responsibility and humility, in a philosophical dialogue with this text by an African-American woman in order to explore what it has to say about education. I will begin this exploration by analyzing Morrison's portraits of three teachers in *Beloved* — Schoolteacher, Lady Jones, and Baby Suggs — and marking where and how these portraits raise questions about certain philosophical discourses that have been influential in our conceptualization of teaching. I will conclude the essay with a rough sketch of an important alternative conception of teaching implicit in *Beloved*, an alternative governed by an ethic of love, enacted in a practice of teaching as jazz performance, and given moral purpose by a sense of the holy.

CONCEPTIONS OF THE TEACHER IN *BELOVED*

Morrison's fiction displays a consistent concern with formal education and its effects on African-Americans. This subtext in her work examines the effects of white normative aesthetic values on African-Americans, as well as the alienation of African-American characters whose aspirations for acceptance and success are pursued via a white dominated university education in the manner of W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of the "talented tenth."⁷ The presence of this subtext in her work has occasioned scholarly inquiry into what Morrison's fiction has to say about education. Susan Edgerton, for instance, has explored what and how *Beloved* teaches its readers, while others have examined what they see as cultural stereotypes of education and teachers reflected in Morrison's work.⁸ Cynthia Edelberg has suggested that this subtext in her work constitutes a rejection of formal education, while Susan Searls has asserted that Morrison's fiction has "much to teach educators and cultural workers about the deeply political nature of the work they do" and that it offers a critique of and "counter pedagogy" to "those rules, practices, and pedagogies that reinforce the culture of domination."⁹

Though a number of scholars have explored the relevance of her art to education, few, if any, have looked specifically at the insights the novel *Beloved* offers into how we conceptualize and how we might re-conceptualize teaching. But surely a novelist who places such a creative emphasis on names and naming and then names the central villain in this novel "Schoolteacher" is saying something about education and teachers and how we conceive them. And surely a novel that purports to be about "the process by which we construct and deconstruct reality in order to be able to function in it," and then portrays at least two other key figures who are either explicitly or implicitly teachers teaching others how to function in a reality marred by racist oppression and tragedy, is worth analyzing for what it has to say about teachers.¹⁰

SCHOOLTEACHER

One obvious example of a teacher in *Beloved* is the character Schoolteacher. Possessed of "book learning" and "pretty manners" and described as gentle "in some ways," Schoolteacher is an emotionless, puritanical, slave master who consciously deploys education as a tool to shape those he teaches to his own ends (*BL*, 38). In doing so, his "instruction" reveals the centrality of an ethic of power in the pseudo-scientific approach to education he embodies and the capitalistic commodity culture it serves, as well as the violence implicit in that ethic. He represents a common conceptualization of the *teacher* that does more than, as Morrison has said, "reflect the scholarly way in which racism was pursued in both theology and biology in the Darwinian theory of evolution."¹¹ Morrison's portrait of this teacher highlights the negative possibilities in the particularly influential conceptualizations of teaching found in Plato, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and in more contemporary formulations of education as a science in which teachers function as technicians.

The consequence of Schoolteacher's instruction is the perpetuation and refinement of a status quo in which he and others of his class possess and exercise power. In order to accomplish this his teaching naturalizes existing inequities in the

distribution of social power by teaching his pupil-nephews to claim and assert power via the dehumanization and reification of his pupil-slaves. They become collections of “human” and “animal” characteristics that can be tabulated, quantified, and thus objectively and scientifically classified within the animal kingdom and justifying their treatment as such. But such an objective requires a very different curriculum for his pupil-slaves.

He teaches them, through the selective use of punishment, that “definitions belong to the definers” and that they were “something less than a chicken sitting on a tub in the sun” (*BL*, 190,72). In this way they fulfill the role assigned to them, the role that makes Schoolteacher’s pedagogy possible.

Schoolteacher accomplishes these aims via instructional strategies rooted in a foundational epistemology that objectifies inequities in social power. Though much of what Schoolteacher “knows” no doubt comes from his “book learning,” he is constantly engaged in the production and dissemination of new knowledge to his students. He does this via techniques reminiscent of the modern social scientist: careful observation, accurate measurement, and “objective” interrogation of subjects. Data gathered in these ways are carefully recorded and used to confirm or refute theories about the subjects under study. Thus Schoolteacher acquires “objective” knowledge that corresponds with reality and confirms his thesis that slaves are animals while refuting his predecessor’s theory that they were men. He then passes this knowledge on to his pupil-nephews through lectures during which his students dutifully take notes. His pupil-slaves are conditioned through “corrections” — a negative form of behavior modification — to confirm their role in Schoolteacher’s ontology.

Schoolteacher’s clear negative representation of a form of positivist social science pursued within education raises questions about widely held notions of a science of education in which teachers function as technicians by revealing the danger of dehumanizing physical and psychological violence implicit in it.¹² Yet the portrait of Schoolteacher challenges other paradigmatic conceptions of teaching as well. For instance, his interrogation of the slave Sixo in order to prove that Sixo “knows” what Schoolteacher already “knows” — that the slave has stolen the shoat he is eating — is reminiscent of Socrates’ demonstration in the *Meno* that a slave-boy already knew geometry.¹³ Furthermore, Schoolteacher’s instruction of his nephews through both direct instruction and their direct experience through meaningful work in the rural setting of Sweet Home is reminiscent of Rousseau’s *Emile*, in that both depend upon the exploitation of others to whom education and power are denied: Sophie and Sethe.¹⁴ Taken together, these echoes of influential texts in the philosophical canon on education suggests a critique of these paradigmatic conceptions of teaching as rooted in an ethic of power which perpetrates violence on some in order to teach others. Morrison’s characterization of Schoolteacher is, in effect, a negative foil to the alternative ideal implicit in *Beloved*.

LADY JONES

Morrison’s characterization of Lady Jones, however, is quite different, for she represents a popular ideal of the teacher rather than the destructive possibilities

inherent in one conception of that role. An educated woman of mixed race, Lady Jones teaches children the rudiments of reading, writing, and arithmetic in the parlor of her home, dubbed a “house-school” by Morrison to reflect the lack of formal schooling for black children. Though marginalized in important ways by her education and mixed race, Lady Jones represents a sympathetic, composite portrait of the rural, small town schoolteacher as the respected pillar of the community who, with a firm hand and genuine affection, helps children develop into solid members of their community.

Lady Jones’s role in the life of her community requires a certain amount of courage, for she does “what white folks thought unnecessary if not illegal” (*BL*, 102). She teaches the “unpicked” black children of Cincinnati to read, write, and do basic arithmetic (*BL*, 247). Thus she teaches her charges the basic skills necessary to perhaps improve their lot in life. She also fosters a shared sense of moral values rooted in the Christian Bible, which she uses simultaneously as a reading primer, an introduction to the aesthetic pleasures of poetry, and a source of moral guidance. The overarching aim of Lady Jones’s curriculum in reading, writing, arithmetic, and morality is the successful assimilation of her pupils into the African-American community of Cincinnati as decent, hard-working, up-standing members of society. Her pivotal role in re-assimilating Denver into the community after her long years of exile, along with her mother, at 124 Bluestone Road is the most explicit demonstration of her function as a teacher in her community.

The methods Lady Jones uses to achieve these aims are quite ordinary. Like Schoolteacher, she delivers information orally to her students, who dutifully write it down on their slates. She also teaches them songs to spell and count by. And her use of the Christian Bible as a reading and moral education text has a long historical precedent.¹⁵ But, since her aims are not confined to the inculcation of academic content, her methods are correspondingly broader. In her broader curriculum for enculturation, for instance, she deploys what Martin has called the “reproductive processes,” including the organization, preparation, and delivery of food that serves not only to keep Denver and Sethe alive, but serves as a mechanism for reintegrating them into the community as well.¹⁶

Unlike her characterization of Schoolteacher, Morrison’s characterization of Lady Jones is not so much a critique of the conception of teaching embodied in Lady Jones but rather a celebration of it. She represents an ideal of the teacher rooted in the thought of pioneers of women’s education such as Catharine Beecher and Anna Julia Cooper.¹⁷ Ultimately, however, Lady Jones and the concept of teaching she embodies are inadequate to the most basic needs of her community. This common sense, pragmatic conception of *teacher* is unequipped to offer her community an existential response to their experience of evil. Her teaching cannot help them overcome the tragedy in their lives. Her education and rather conventional Christianity alienate her from the cultural resources of her community that nourish survival and prevent her recognition of the one teacher-character in Morrison’s novel who does teach a response to the tragic that enables others to survive it: Baby Suggs. To Lady Jones, Baby Suggs is “Denver’s ignorant grandmother... a woods preacher who mended shoes” (*BL*, 247). To the rest of the community, however, she

is “the mountain to their sky”; she is Baby Suggs, “holy.” This Baby Suggs, described by one critic as the “most memorable minor character since one of Faulkner’s,” represents a third conception of the teacher in *Beloved*, a conception that not only represents an implicit ideal in the novel itself, but which offers insight into a possible alternative conception of teaching for contemporary education as well.¹⁸

BABY SUGGS, HOLY

Baby Suggs is a teacher in a more ancient or perhaps archetypal sense of that word. She is the matriarch, the storyteller, the priestess, the tribal elder who, through her stories, helps her people learn who they are and who they might be. Redeemed from bondage by the labor of her son, after slavery had “busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb, and tongue,” she makes a living with her heart, “which she put to work at once...giving advice, passing messages, healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing, and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone” (*BL*, 87, 137). In the process, her house at 124 Bluestone Road becomes a community center, in effect a house-school where former slaves learn to survive their unspeakable pasts and live their freedom.

The aims of Baby Suggs’s teaching are most clearly articulated in her sermon in the Clearing where she calls her audience to love themselves and to recognize that “the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine” (*BL*, 88). The cathartic opening ritual of laughter, dancing, and tears constitutes an embodied teaching of the relationship between shared feeling and community. Her pupils learn in their bodies rather than just their minds that community is forged and sustained in shared emotional experience, and that it is only in community and through community that survival is possible. The sermon that follows establishes the importance of self-love as a fundamental prerequisite to the capacity to love others and thereby sustain the sense of community that enables survival of tragedy, the overarching aim of Baby Suggs’s teaching. Thus the key to survival, and the heart of Baby Suggs’s teaching, is an ethic of love.

Unlike Schoolteacher and Lady Jones, both of whom require at some level conformity to ideals defined by existing conventions, Baby Suggs’s teaching orients her “pupils” toward a radically open ethical ideal of love. Thus Baby Suggs places an ethic of love at the center of teaching, defining injustice as its antithesis. From this her instructional objectives follow: to forge a sense of identity — self love — and a sense of relatedness — love of others — from which spiritual resources are drawn that enable individual human beings to confront, resist, and survive both natural and man-made tragedy.

But Baby Suggs’s ethic of love is not confined to self and community; it is radically open. For in her sermon, in which she exhorts her listeners to love their flesh, she dances “with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say” (*BL*, 89). The object of her command to love is clear in the verbal portion of her sermon: “This is flesh I’m talking about here...you got to love it” (*BL*, 88). In her dance, however, which is clearly a continuation of her lesson, the object of the love she commands is left deliberately and radically open. The dance becomes a variable to which any

individual in her audience may attach meaning, but which is not confined to that meaning. In this way it becomes an imperative: Love! Love large! This is the only response to evil.

Baby Suggs accomplishes these teaching aims through three interrelated prophetic strategies: narrative, a participatory aesthetic, and an approach to preaching as *poiesis*.¹⁹ Baby Suggs's narrative teaching is most clearly seen in her relationship with Denver. Her stories for Denver and Sethe create a coherent past in order to preserve the present and the possibility of a future. "She told me all my Daddy's things," Denver says. "She told me my things too" (*BL*, 209). These stories are what enable Denver to finally overcome her fear to leave home and re-enter the community, thus insuring her own and Sethe's survival. Baby Suggs's words to Denver as she stands on the porch trying to muster the courage to face the evil that exists "out there" have the air of a teacher gently reminding a student of a lesson she has already been taught:

"You mean I never told you about Carolina? About your daddy? You don't remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother's feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can't walk down the steps? My Jesus my."

But you said there was no defense.

"There ain't."

Then what do I do?

"Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on" (*BL*, 244).

Baby Suggs's use of narrative constitutes an act of creative imagination, a dialogue between historical events and present need that constructs a coherent past which enables her "students" to survive natural and man-made tragedy.

In her use of song and dance to "say the rest of what her heart had to say," Baby Suggs deploys a participatory aesthetic which simultaneously teaches and enacts the explicit and implicit commands of her sermon — love yourself and love others — by engaging her audience in a form of expression that is at once individual and collective. Thus, rather than imparting knowledge that is already known by the teacher, Baby Suggs's participatory aesthetic gives her pupils the freedom and responsibility to participate in constructing the practical meaning of her exhortation to love large. At the same time, however, the meaning of her participatory aesthetic is radically open, thus emphasizing the contingency of any individually or communally constructed practical response to her love ethic.

Baby Suggs's preaching constitutes a form of *poiesis*, a creative calling-into-existence of that which did not exist before. This power of the "call" is integral to her character: "she didn't deliver sermons or preach — insisting she was too ignorant for that — she *called* and the hearing heard" (*BL*, 177). She calls into existence in her Clearing sermon self love, self worth, and community, the existential armor that makes survival possible. She is called to her task by that love and calls it into existence in the lives of others, not as mere sentiment or passion or individual desire, but as an act of will by which community is sustained and survival made possible.

Thus Baby Suggs's embodiment of the concept of a teacher exhibits several distinguishing characteristics. It eschews methodolatry, for instance. And it rejects

any foundational epistemology which attempts to pre-define what ought to be known. Rather, it emphasizes the construction of knowledge in community as necessary for the survival of both the individual and the community. It is, in short, improvisational. Yet at the same time Baby Suggs's teaching is fiercely disciplined, rendered purposeful by the underlying ethic of love. Baby Suggs's teaching is analogous to a kind of jazz performance. She is, in the words of Cornel West a jazz freedom fighter, "fluid and flexible and protean and open to a variety of different sources and perspectives" as she "both constitute[s] a usable past, and project[s] a future."²⁰

The simultaneously disciplined yet radically open character of Baby Suggs's teaching is a response to an awareness she both possesses and calls out in others, an awareness which is revealed in the "small caress" that is attached to her name: the word "holy." According to the theologian Rudolf Otto, the concept of holiness originally referred to the "numinous," a term he uses to describe the non-rational or supra-rational in objects of thought that cannot be contained in the conceptual formulations of reason.²¹ Though it has come to mean absolute good or absolute moral will, this is but a "schematization" of the numinous, an attempt through reason to comprehend the experience of the numinous by describing it conceptually in terms of the already known. According to Otto, we experience the holy as our sense of "mysterium tremendum," our sense of awe, and wonder, and mystery that is often awakened in our experiences of nature and other human beings, and which somehow exceeds our power to name it, to comprehend it in language. Baby Sugg's embodiment of the concept of teaching takes its form and direction from this sense of the holy. For, unlike Schoolteacher or Lady Jones, she eschews fixed methods or defined ends as schematizations that cannot adequately contain the wonder and awe and mystery embodied in her people: such schema are idols unworthy of the mysterium tremendum present in her "pupils." She recognizes the holy in her pupils. And love is the only adequate response to this recognition. Thus the fundamentally poetic and improvisational nature of Baby Suggs's teaching.

The conceptualization of teaching embodied in the character of Baby Suggs is therefore defined by three coordinates. It is vitally aware of the reality of tragedy and the need to respond to it in a way that enables individuals and communities to survive. It is governed by an ethic of love that disciplines the improvisation of meaning making and thus provides a moral framework. And it responds to and takes its moral orientation from a sense of the holy as a perpetual awareness of the "overplus" of meaning expressed in but not contained by either our rational or poetic schematizations of the good, an awareness which elicits a sense of the awe and mystery and wonder embodied in other beings and the world they inhabit, and calls forth a response that is love.

CONCLUSION

What might such a conception of *teacher* mean for flesh and blood teachers in ordinary American schools where less idealized versions of Lady Jones or more benign embodiments of Schoolteacher are much closer to the norm? Could it be possible to graft the concrete, practical concerns of teachers like Lady Jones and

even Schoolteacher with basic content and conscious methods of conveying that content onto the fundamentally spiritual, moral model embodied in Baby Suggs? Or is the conception of *teacher* represented by Baby Suggs impossible or perhaps undesirable in schools as they are currently conceived? Such questions can only be raised — certainly not addressed — within the confines of an essay as brief as this one. However, given the reality of tragedy in the lives of so many children, the marginalization of love in our conceptions of education, and the often-decried spiritual vacuousness of an idolatrous commodity culture, this conception of the ideal teacher in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* may offer valuable insight into more meaningful alternatives to our present understanding of that role.

1. Hilary Davis and Maxine Greene, "Politics, Aesthetics, and the Imagination: A Conversation about Toni Morrison's *Jazz*," Philosophy of Education Society annual meeting, Vancouver, B.C., 10-14 April 1997.

2. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987). This book will be cited as *BL* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. Jane Roland Martin, *Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of the Educated Woman* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), 180. See also Susan Laird, "The Ideal of the Educated Teacher: 'Reclaiming a Conversation' with Louisa May Alcott," *Curriculum Inquiry* 21, no. 3 (1991).

4. See for instance, Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979) or Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

5. Morrison says "the language has to be quiet, it has to engage your participation...It's not just telling the story; it's about involving the reader...My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it...Then we...come together to make this book, to feel this experience," in Claudia Tate, "Conversation with Toni Morrison," *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York: Continuum, 1983), 125. On Morrison's definition of "black" literature see Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and J.A. Appiah, *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (New York: Amistad, 1993), 418.

6. Kal Alston, "Race Consciousness and the Philosophy of Education," *Philosophy of Education 1995*, ed. Alven Nieman (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1996), 149-56. Mae Gwendoyne Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman's Literary Tradition," in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* (New York: Meridian, 1990), 116-44.

7. See in particular Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Plume, 1970); Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Signet, 1977); and Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (New York: Plume, 1982). While this subtext is most explicit in these novels, it is present as well in Toni Morrison, *Sula, Jazz, and Paradise*. On Du Bois's idea of the "talented tenth" see W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," in *The Future of the Race*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West (New York: Vintage, 1996), 133-58.

8. Susan Huddleston Edgerton, "Toni Morrison Teaching the Interminable," in *Race, Identity, and Representation in Education*, ed. Cameron McCarthy and Warren Crichlow (New York: Routledge, 1993), 220-35; John Howard Hedman, "Images of Higher Education in the Novels of the 1980s," Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1993; and Joan F. Peterson, "The Portrayal of the Schoolteacher in American Literature based upon Colonial Types, 1794-1987," Ph.D. diss., University of San Francisco, 1994.

9. Cynthia Dubin Edelberg, "Morrison's Voices: Formal Education, the Work Ethic, and the Bible," *American Literature* 58 (1986): 217-37 and Susan Searls, "Race, Schooling, and Double-Consciousness: The Politics of Pedagogy in Toni Morrison's Fiction," *The Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies* 18, no. 2 (1996): 193-94.

10. Morrison quoted in Elsie B. Washington, "A Conversation with Toni Morrison," *Essence* 18 (October 1987): 58.

11. Quoted in Jan Furman, *Toni Morrison's Fiction* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 70.

12. See, for instance, B.F. Skinner, *The Technology of Teaching* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968). Though Skinner did not advocate the sort of violence Schoolteacher deploys, Morrison's character dramatizes the potential for violence in a conception of teaching as a technology.
13. Plato, "Meno," in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 7 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952).
14. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979).
15. See James E. Wood, "Religion and Education in American Church-State Relations," in *Religion, the State, and Education*, ed. James E. Wood, Jr. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 1984).
16. Jane Roland Martin, *Changing the Educational Landscape: Philosophy, Women, and Curriculum* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 7-8, 113-15.
17. See Catharine Beecher, "Essay on the Education of Female Teachers," in *Classics in the Education of Girls and Women*, ed. Shirley Nelson Kersey (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1981) and Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
18. Roger Sale, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," in *Toni Morrison: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1990).
19. My use of this term is based on that of Jim Garrison, *Dewey and Eros: Wisdom and Desire in the Art of Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).
20. Cornel West, *Prophetic Reflections: Notes on Race, Class and Power in America, Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism, Vol. II* (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 1993), 242.
21. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).