

After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging

Willie James Jennings

Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2020 (x + 165 pages, ISBN 978-0-8028-7844-1, \$19.99)

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Willie James Jennings' *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* is a genre-bending theology of pedagogy. Meditation and memoir, poetry and narrative—its multifarious forms unveil the confessions of a theological educator. The artform renders Jennings' critical lens all the more incisive, with critical race theory the ubiquitous subtext and (true to form) keen theological perceptions saturating every page.

If good teaching requires grappling with institutions' racial economies and laying bare the meaning of their secrets, then *After Whiteness* is indispensable for critical pedagogy. *After Whiteness* is both an indictment and an invitation, a commissioning of sorts. In its mode of indictment, the colonialist project of knowledge production is interrogated and charged with peddling plantation pedagogy, as Jennings calls it. Theological education, he explains, is an inheritor of the tragic history of Christianity and a crucial site for the soul-killing cultivation of whiteness and masculinity. Theological education operates inside the energy of colonial design and race logic, and therefore, must be redeemed, its future recalibrated. But we know redemption, Jennings declares, only in pieces. With his theology of pedagogy as resource, he commissions those in theological education to mobilize as secret agents for fragment work. Theological educators are summoned to shatter reigning regimes of the white aesthetic, break the pretense of self-sufficiency, critique the sanctification of mastery. The urgent task is formation—formation marked by eros, holy desire, the erotic soul longing for gatherings that break boundaries and cross borders. Contrary to the sacralization of isolating individualism and intellectual performativity, the cultivation of belonging, Jennings contends, is the goal of all education. Effective teaching requires attending, bestowing special care for the embodied experience of learning, embracing the realities of fatigue and fragility. Educators are called to convene and gather and make a home together—among the fragments.

After Whiteness will sit prominently on the bookshelf beside *Being Black, Teaching Black: Politics and Pedagogy in Religious Studies*, edited by Nancy Lynne Westfield (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008) and *The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher*, edited by L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2002). Yet Jennings' text belongs to a genre quite its own. Marked by thick description, gripping in its affective range—from fatigue and despair to joy and wonder—its intimacy gives the feeling of an offering, a treasured gift. Indeed, Jennings offers a wisdom-filled vocational vision that emerges from decades of living inside theological education, not in the posture of an omniscient master who hoards and polices knowledge as possession, as private property, but rather as one who gently directs attention to the joy of not knowing, the wonder in which all thinking and learning begin. The text itself is a practice in the art of attending: fearlessly honest, aesthetically alluring, theologically compelling. Those who work and live in theological education may come to wonder how we made do without it.