

Fragments

It all begins with him.

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We were coming to the end of a search for a would-be faculty person for a junior position (that is, a position for someone just beginning their teaching career). The selection process came down to two candidates, both wonderfully qualified and talented: an African American woman and an Anglo-American man. Like so many educational institutions at this time in history, especially theological institutions, we were

committed to having a diverse faculty. (Beautiful words.)

So with at least one of these candidates, we had a possibility of enhancing the diversity of the faculty. As part of the selection process, a governing body of the faculty interviewed the candidates. As soon as the interview process was over for both candidates, I knew that the Anglo-American male candidate was getting this job.



*I love to tell the story,
Of unseen things above,*

*Of the words that cannot be spoken,
Of locating the real but unmentionable loves'*



On the day of his interview, I saw something coalesce in front of me that I had only seen in delicate vignettes until then. What did I see? The young scholar who got that job was a brilliant scholar, but what he performed in his interview was something else.

His was a beautiful presence that played off his appearance, his comportment, and his way of speaking. A tall, dark-haired, baritone-voiced, perfectly groomed bearded man dressed like a professor in the middle of a celebrated career, he spoke with confidence and polished ease. His answers to the questions posed to him exhibited nothing new or particularly insightful, but he answered every question to the letter, as though he knew what would be asked, and his answers exhibited, if not years of reflection, then certainly precise thinking. To think of him as a stereotype would be to completely miss where I am going here, because in point of fact he was not the point.

The point was my colleagues in the room doing the interviewing. They were all white men with the exception of me, another African American man, and one British woman. What I saw in their faces and what I heard in their voices and later in their assessment of him as a candidate was a stunning revelation of a singular truth.

They looked at him longingly and lovingly, admiring his poise, his confidence, seeing in him what they longed to be, and seeing what they thought we the faculty thought the goal of our shared project of formation ought to be. This is not my projection onto their projections. This is what was said as they assessed the candidates.

He captured love in two intertwining ways: by what he said and by the way he embodied his words.

He inhabited a field that studied ancient texts, texts deeply woven into Christians' life of faith. The field he inhabited, however, was and is at war. It is a western front with deep trenches

that span centuries and continents and that trap many institutions of higher learning between two warring sides.

On the one side were scholars deeply committed to the scientific study of ancient religious texts (scriptures)—their history, composition, transmission, translation, and interpretation. These scholars carried forward a struggle and a hard-won battle to wrest control of religious and sacred texts from the arbitrary—from people who used words designated as God’s word to execute their will to power, their desire for possession, and to gain mind-bending obedience from religious subjects. But like a reform movement turned cult, these scholars banished all who understood theological interpretations *as inherent to* the scientific study of these ancient texts.

On the other side were scholars deeply committed to the theological interpretation of texts, their histories of use by people of faith and their living dance with Christian doctrine. These scholars carried forward the struggle and a hard-won battle to enliven the preaching and teaching of Scripture in churches. They understood that there is no science of the text without holy performance of it in the lives of God-lovers, most centrally Christians. So for these scholars, any who refuse this faith-work, any who deny the responsibility to aid people into a healthy church-centered interpretation of the faith through their Scriptures, are simply obstacles to be overcome. The scholars who inhabit these trenches, however, move in close proximity to exactly the kinds of people that their friends-enemies in those other trenches find to be the problem: scriptural ideologues.

The lines of his disciplinary field were drawn in difficult places for this candidate, but he transgressed those lines beautifully. Here was a young man who showed that he knew the ancient texts (canonical, noncanonical, and ancillary) and how to engage in their scientific study, but who also showed a deep understanding and commitment to the Scriptures of the church that were for the church. He showed wonderful theological sensitivities and sensibilities—very rare for a modern-day textualist. This was the official reason he got the job, which is true.

But this was not the deepest reason he got the job. You see,

the African American woman also showed great skill in the scientific study of texts, and also had deep theological sensitivities and sensibilities. She transgressed those same lines, but she transgressed more. (I will return to her later.)

The white male candidate showed more than the black female candidate—more ability and more nuance. This was the official conclusion. But this was not actually the “more” he showed.

At one point in the interview, a colleague asked this candidate about his year and a half studying in a German university. The meaning of another secret was about to be revealed. “What did you learn?” the candidate was asked. This was a rhetorical question. The young man who went to Germany was already an accomplished student. He had already learned his craft. But in Germany he learned his form.

“My seminars in Germany were ‘no holds barred,’ vigorous debates about the highest technicalities and most important ideas of my field,” he said. (*“No holds barred” is an interesting phrase. It describes a match in which wrestlers fight each other using any and every “hold,” even those that could kill, paralyze, or maim their opponent.*) “I really saw what rigorous thinking looks like. It was wonderful.” My colleagues burst out in approving laughter, except for me and the other African American man. We knew what this meant.

His formation was complete. He had put together some of the fragments out of which the scholarly form would appear—knowledge of various texts, 1.5 years of study in Germany, knowledge of German language, theology, biblical languages, seminars, blue suit, brown wingtip shoes, slow speech, legs crossed, quiet confident comportment. This US-born and -raised scholar even spoke in the interview and during his public lecture with a slight German accent.



*He showed himself to be a knower
aiming at mastery,
a mind striving for possession,*

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and a body in control.

He showed himself to be a brilliant performer of white self-sufficient masculinity.



The black woman was told thanks but no thanks. Like the guy, she showed something more in her interview, but something not wanted. She wanted to talk about *herself* as integral to her work as a textualist, specifically about the racial condition of the West and how ancient texts and modern interpretations play in and against that condition. Right in front of our eyes at that interview she was making her life a bridge, a safe way across the battle lines of her field and into a new land that included the concerns of those warring sides. She too was putting together the fragments out of which the scholarly form would appear, knowledge of various texts, knowledge of German and French, biblical languages, knowledge of theology, and seminars.



*They both were working with fragments,
but her fragment work flowed around her body
illuminating her field and who she was as a scholar working in it.
His fragment work coalesced around his body
concealing him inside white self-sufficient masculinist form
through which he was imagined as
one with his field,
homoousios,
of the same substance as his discipline.*



Report Summary: The committee, after careful deliberations and vigorous, honest debate, could see the body of candidate B (for black woman)—but not as a bridge to anything important. But

it did see the body of candidate A (the self-sufficient young man) as exactly the body it wanted to be and wanted every student in the school to resemble, intellectually speaking. *How else are we speaking?*

. . .



I felt the anger, the old anger that had been with me from the beginning. What beginning? I don't know when it started. It has always seemed to have been with me, formed at the site of my blackness. And I felt the struggle, the old struggle to keep the anger from touching hatred. My faith—no, Jesus himself—was the wall that kept the anger safe from hatred. Anger yes, hatred no, because if anger touched hatred, I would be poisoned by death himself and become trapped in an addiction that few have been able to escape.



In truth, I too loved this young male candidate at the moment of his performance. I loved him in the precise sense that Pecola loved whiteness in Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*.² I loved his finish, and I longed to be finished as well—polished like a new car with a powerful engine, one that would be carefully caressed and collectible. I loved how he could gather the love of my colleagues through his performance, and I wanted to gather that same love in a performance like his. There with my colleagues I was caught up in the purest form of intellectual eroticism I had ever experienced. But this was a tragic eroticism. I loved German, loved reading German philosophers and theologians, and loved the sound of the language, though I was never good at it. Like many of my American colleagues, I always looked *longingly* at anyone who had mastered German and Germany, becoming one with the intellectuals there, conversant with their moods and intellectual senses.

There was a sickness present at the moment of that interview. For this was profoundly distorted love. Distorted not in love for

German or German thinkers, but something bound up inside that love. I had learned to love an intellectual form that performed white masculinist self-sufficiency, a way of being in the world that aspires to exhibit possession, mastery, and control of knowledge first, and of one's self second, and if possible of one's world. This was a performance and a destiny in plain sight.



A German university showed my now new colleague the way.

Germany wanted to be a colonial power. For a long time it watched as Britain and France expanded their Lebensraum, their living spaces and their lifeworlds, to the far corners of the world, claiming lands and peoples as their possessions. What also emerged from Britain's and France's colonial holdings was knowledge. This was a strange sort of knowledge, rooted in people and things, stolen, broken into little pieces, mangled, displaced from space and time, and made silent while experts explained to the world what these colonial objects were and what they meant for the world. This was knowledge (fragments) that could build global authority, form worlds, and give imperial voice. Germany wanted voice too. So it sought early to master the fragments.³



It has taken me a long time to name this problem because it hides itself so well inside of Christianity, having had a life prior to the emergence of the faith. It grew beautifully and powerfully inside of colonialism and colonial Christianity, took hold inside the educational foundations of the modern West, and now constantly flashes across the cognitive landscape of the educated imagination. The formation of the self-sufficient man has always been the greatest temptation for Christian formation because Christian formation has always been so close to it. It smells like us, sounds like us, draws on our own erotic urges, and moves in the world like we Christians often want to move in the world. It

models what we want but not who we are. This chapter aims to begin moving our educational imagination away from that self-sufficient man by focusing on the fragments—the things that constitute the ground of educational work.

Edward Schillebeeckx, the Belgian Roman Catholic theologian (1914–2009), in a little-known essay entitled “Secular Criticism of Christian Obedience and the Christian Reaction to That Criticism,” inadvertently outlined briefly but powerfully the dilemma of Christianity’s relation to the legacy of the self-sufficient man.⁴ He noted that Christianity formed in the shadow of a Hellenistic and, later, Roman vision of humanity’s inherent grandeur, with which it would be at odds from its beginnings until now. That vision of humanity’s grandeur presented human nobility, its greatness of soul, and its magnanimity to be seen precisely in its self-sufficiency. The self-sufficient man was one who was self-directed, not given to extremes of desire or anger. Focused and clear, he would be independent of others, especially in times in which singularity of purpose, moral vision, or goal demanded one stand against all others. The magnanimous man is centrally characterized by honest assessment of his abilities. He never ever denies his own strength, never pretends to be less than he actually is. He recognizes his own power and uses it wisely.

Schillebeeckx noted that there was already an idea of humility within this frame, and it was not one to be admired. Humility denied human grandeur, undermined the formation of self-sufficiency, and of magnanimous men, and constantly spoke the code of slavery and enslavement. Christianity’s troubled task was to show its appeal, given its reputation of being against the formation of self-sufficiency and for promoting what to Greeks and Romans and many others was a repugnant humility. After all, the God of the Christians was a crucified slave who cried and prayed to God for help, not a self-sufficient man. It was a faith that reached toward an obedience that bordered on docility and certainly not the clear singularity and power of magnanimity.

Reconciling the magnanimous man and the Christian man, reconciling inherent human grandeur and godly humility, was a

dilemma for Christianity. Schillebeeckx suggested that Thomas Aquinas offered the most compelling option for reconciliation. For Thomas, there is no competition between man's grandeur and the humility he must have in relation to God. Man knows that he has a grandeur, a power, a strength that is his own, that makes his actions genuinely his own, and his creations authentically his by his own hands. But he also knows that in humility all that he has is a gift from God. False humility for Thomas would be to deny these gifts by denying the inherent self-sufficiency of man.⁵ This would be sin, but it would also be sin not to live in humility and thanksgiving to God for those same gifts.

To Schillebeeckx, Aquinas had gifted the world with a way to reconcile the Christian faith's and the ancient regime's ways of grasping together the self-sufficient man. Schillebeeckx then noted in this same essay that visions of a self-sufficient man moved forward in European modernity unimpeded by Christianity and carried forward the ancient animosities against the faith. Yet here is where Schillebeeckx did not see what he was actually registering in early European modernity. European Christian settlers to the new worlds of Africa, the Americas, and other soon-to-be-colonized lands, from the fifteenth century forward, were already reconciling the ancient regime and the modern world, already weaving together a pre-Christian and a Christian vision of the self-sufficient man and lodging that weaved vision definitively in its educational visions in the new worlds.

Aspiration is a key engine in intellectual formation.

A vision of the self-sufficient man—one who is self-directed, never apologizing for his strength or ability or knowledge, one who recognizes his own power and uses it wisely, one bound in courage, moral vision, singularity of purpose and not given to extremes of desire or anger—is a compellingly attractive goal for education and moral formation. The power of this vision is that it binds a man to a task, a job, a vocation, or a philosophy that ironically takes the focus off the man, thereby drawing him to a work and a world greater than himself but inextricable from him and his power.

Such formation was absolutely crucial in a (new) world where women and men believed they had been granted by God enormous control over vast areas of land and vast numbers of people, over resources and riches, and been granted the power to kill and enslave countless numbers of people through weapons far more advanced than those wielded by native inhabitants. Such formation was also crucial for reforming native inhabitants away from what this self-sufficient white man perceived as their infantile and hopelessly tribal ways of life that undermined their sense of intellectual independence and individualism.⁶

White self-sufficient masculinity is the quintessential image of an educated person, an image deeply embedded in the collective psyche of Western education and theological education, flexible enough to capture and persuade any and all persons so formed to yield to it. It floats through our curricular imaginations, our pedagogical practice, and the ecologies of our academic institutions. It conceals from us where our true work in education begins—that is, in working in the fragments.

The fragment means many things. There are three kinds of fragments that we work with in the academy. They must never be confused, but neither should they ever be imagined as separate. These fragments together create the lens through which to see our work of formation.

There is the fragment formed by faith itself. This is the first fragment. We have the words of Jesus, the words of the prophets, the stories of Israel, the lives of so many who have called themselves Christian through the centuries—their thoughts in texts, reports and secondhand reports, deliberations, confessions, decisions, meditations, interpretations—*everything is in slices and slivers, pieces and shards*. We have no whole here—no whole picture of ancient Israel, or the prophets, or their families, or Jesus, or his family, or early, middle, or late Christians, or the entirety of their thinking, no full uncovering of their desires, angers, frustrations, hopes, and dreams. No complete picture of any theologian, or heretic, or faithful or unfaithful priest, monk, nun, missionary, mystic. All of it is merely fragments, large and small.

Every teacher knows this. Build a syllabus, year after year,

and you will sense this. Teach a class, counsel a student, present a point, resist an idea, applaud an insight, and all of this will be revealed.

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I was invited to consult with a school about curricular matters. The conversation with the faculty turned toward the teaching of church history, and there and then I found myself in the midst of another war. On one side were historians trained in the history of ideas, the development of doctrine, and the relentless analysis of subtle shifts in ideas through the centuries of Christians thinking about their faith. These historians wanted the new curriculum to double down on precisely this kind of historical work—careful consideration of the subtle but crucial shifts in doctrinal thinking that led to the development of orthodoxy and healthy theological thinking. *Build the orthodox mind and thereby build a theologically responsible mind, piece by piece.*

On the other side were historians trained in social history, the history of sexuality and gender, and the history of cultural practices. These historians had no patience with the old ways—with doctrinal developments that ignored the gendered lives, social and cultural contexts, and sociopolitical practices of the ancients. These historians wanted the new curriculum to let in the fresh air of new approaches to thinking ancient Christians in their contexts, allowing us to measure the meanings and constructions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. *Build the critical mind and thereby build a theologically responsible mind, piece by piece.*

The conversation became heated. Curricular conversations normally do. Both sets of historians wanted to cultivate a theologically responsible mind, but lurking behind those words was the image of the educated man. I was not interested in that image, only the fragments. These dear colleagues lost sight of the profound intellectual work at the heart of theological formation, that of working together in the fragments.

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The point I am pressing toward here is not that all knowledge is fragmentary, partial, and incomplete, and that therefore we need to operate with a chastened agnosticism toward what we know. Nor am I saying that all knowledge is endless fabrication, endless construction, and that our focus should be on the ethics of its creation and deployment. Fragment in this first sense is a reality of being creatures who can only apprehend with our senses—in bites, in touches, in smells, in sounds, and in focused but shifting sight. We live in the reality of these pieces where the world is always too much for us to hold all at once. We creatures live in pieces, and we come to know our redemption in pieces.

Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass.
 Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to
 heaven,
 and blessed and broke the loaves,
 and gave them to the disciples,
 and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

(Matt. 14:19)

God works with these fragments, moving in the spaces between them to form communion with us. The fragments facilitate communion. Too much theological education, however, takes the fragments of faith, aligns them with colonialist aspiration, and invites us to compositions that drain life.



You sought me out, came to my office saying the usual words for a bright student: "I think I would like to do doctoral work." "Why?" I asked. You gave the usual answers. "I like to study." "I like the model of the pastor-scholar." "I would like to be a professor." "I would like to keep my hands in the academy." I felt like Samuel looking at another Saul. So I closed my eyes with my eyes wide open and I listened and smiled. I was waiting for a truth that would join us. I was not waiting for great grades, high test scores, classes with my colleagues here or at your undergraduate institution, scholarly pedigree, language study, international experience, strong recommendations.

I was waiting for this: "I have these questions that refuse to let me go—questions about life and death, urgent questions about the why of a world gone mad and of a faith toying with that madness. I am looking for the place (the discipline) that best houses my questions, the place where I can struggle with them in the intensity of a serious sweat, and then I want to teach in the urgency of those questions." Then I would say to you, "Welcome, my friend, to a truth inexhaustible and a calling clearly identifiable."



There is another fragment formed of colonial power. This is the second fragment. So many people of color understand this fragment. It is life formed in fragment, in memory of loss and in loss of memory where worlds were shattered into pieces: land and animals taken; practice and rituals, dance and songs, ancient word and inherited dream, thoughts and prayers existing only in slice and sliver, piece and shard. *Many of us work in fragments*, trying to tie together, hold together, the witness of our peoples. Weaving the sounds, songs, and stories that are only fleeting echoes of what was. Call it a cultural fragment if you wish. It is serious business—precious saving work—trying to find it, unearth it, and hold it close.

I knew an African ethnomusicologist who told me he could identify and match most of the rhythms of African American music with their originating homes among various peoples on the African continent. The same might be said of dance, or song, or oral, musical, or written phrasing. Then there is the bricolage formed of suffering, the baroque of mixture where displaced and disrobed diasporic cultures bound together their fragments with one another or with the colonial masters and created things to hold things, formed things to say things, wove together things to overcome things.

Slices and shards nonetheless.

Many people come to theological education looking for help with the fragment, hoping that those who teach about their faith can help them reassemble what was shattered, help them gather together what remains. Unfortunately, too many of us who teach and administrate have no idea of this crucial and complex work of reassembling fragments.

The institution I served as academic dean exists not far from at least two different Native American peoples, both of whom had very large and vibrant Christian communities, but at no time during my many years at that institution were we able to attract Native American students in anything but the tiniest of numbers. I had a meeting with a Native American alum and a Native American student about how we might bring in more students from their community. They both gave me a look that carried both sadness and a sense of ridiculousness. "There is no help for us here," the student said in reply to me. The alum not only agreed but added more sober words still: "The work we need to do cannot be done here."

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I remember Maria, raised conservative Baptist in Jamaica, in a Christian world where everything African was seen as primitive, backward, and anti-Christian, but she knew better. She had degrees in cultural anthropology, and she wanted her faith to speak to the beauty and majesty of her African past and African diaspora present. So she found her way to divinity school in hope of help and support in finding a Christian voice that remembered the African. But now she was at my office door telling me she was leaving school. Four semesters done, with only two to go in a master of divinity program, she had had enough. Maria had been told by her professors that (a) she had a naïve monolithic vision of Africa that failed to take seriously its complexities and differences, and that (b) "retrieving an African heritage" was not a matter to be dealt with in a divinity school. "You should return to your own community to do that work," they said to her.

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I felt the anger, the old anger that had been with me from the beginning. What beginning? I don't know when it started. It seemed always to have been

with me, formed at the site of my blackness. And I felt the struggle, the old struggle to keep the anger from touching hatred. My faith—no, Jesus himself—was the wall that kept the anger safe from hatred. Anger yes, hatred no, because if anger touched hatred, I would be poisoned by death himself and become trapped in an addiction that few have been able to escape.



My colleagues did not understand what Maria was asking. She carried no romanticism about Africa or Africans, and she thought that this divinity school community of Christians was her community. She wanted the fragments of faith to be joined to the other fragments, the remaining pieces of her peoples. She wanted faculty and students to join her and guide her in reclaiming and retrieving what had been broken into pieces and scattered to the wind—the sounds, sensibilities, wisdom, knowledge, and life strategies of multiple peoples made black by a colonialist brush. But no one understood this as theological work to be done. One colleague even said to me, “Well, she should’ve gone to an HBCU (historically black college or university) seminary or divinity school. Where they do that kind of work.” This colleague understood neither HBCU schools nor our own work.

This fragment work is a deeply Christian calling, born of the tragic history of Christians who came not to learn anything from indigenous peoples but only to instruct them, and to exorcise and eradicate anything and everything that seemed strange and therefore anti-Christian. We Christians created a problem that we are obligated to address. The theological sensibilities of too many peoples made Christian under these destructive conditions continue this destruction by perpetuating fear and disgust for their own people’s practices and turning away critical, always critical, of them as they look and listen to those voices most similar and familiar to their own. Not everything can or should be made Christian, but too many peoples never got the chance to do that discerning work before everything was shattered into pieces.

Some have always worked to turn these fragments against the faith in hopes of finding what was lost and securing a vision of a world fortified against the formation of a Christian and freed from its derogatory logics and suspicious gazes. These fragment workers believed against Christianity, not within it.

I have watched many a student become converted to this quest *while in the midst of their theological education*, becoming secret agents for the fragment, looking and hoping for ways to put together *an alternative* to a Christian world or an *alternative* Christian world to the Christian one that they had inherited. This is the perennial struggle at the site of this fragment work.



I sought you out, asked you to come to my office immediately after class, after your presentation. I heard, I saw, I bore witness to a truth: you are called to teach. You were not sure about this, not convinced this was your thing, an outfit in your size. But I know the sound of a teacher, one who speaks a word for the weary. You see, a teacher sees to the heart of the matter and pulls things through to other things and then more things, connecting what others do not even see as connected—suffering to hope to structures to desire to agents to joy, and all to God in the depths, always in the depths. You need to know that this is rare. In my entire career I have only sought out three people, four at most, to say what I am compelled to say to you: teach! Maybe you would have come to your calling without this moment of intervention, but I could not take the chance that you would go another way, away from the students being prepared for you. Others walk the path, but you must run, because the hour is urgent and your voice is needed.



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I remember Harold, a tall and elegant black man, chosen early to inherit his father's ecclesial throne. He was a churchman to his bones, but now, in his final semester, something had been

unleashed. He sought an African throne in an African American home for a Christianity that needed to be rebaptized. He gave my colleagues hell. In every course and in every class, he decreed his blackness. He would read only black authors, engage in only Afrocentric conversations, demand that a rationale be given for why yet more white voices were the central bearers of wisdom.

He prophesied to me: My church will rewrite both worship and ritual to capture the beauty of the African. We will meditate on the words of wisdom from the diaspora. We will articulate a faith that speaks redemption to the black body.

I appreciated everything Harold wanted to do, and as I listened I longed for a school that would have invited this fragment work from the beginning, but to a different end.

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Harold wanted what Maria wanted what my Native American student wanted what my Korean student wanted what my Ghanaian student was fighting for what my student from Peru wanted what my Maori student believed she was achieving what my South African (Khoisan) student wanted—to join the cultural fragments to the fragments of their faith in new and life-giving ways. Yet I wanted for them all a greater hope than only restoring a sense of indigenous worlds now in pieces. I wanted a drawing of those pieces together, a throwing of them into the air, an allowing of the Spirit of the living God to take those pieces and fit them together in new and life-giving ways that would be familiar, singing familiar songs, remembering peoples and lands, struggles and hopes, but also new, with new songs, new futures that would mark a path toward what Christianity could be at the site of fragments. The work of joining fragments aligned with the work of loving and learning together: this was the fragment work I wanted to see.

This is not the only sense of this second fragment. It is not only life formed in fragment but also life formed as fragment, that is, life formed in reduction. The colonial operation that shattered indigenous worlds into object, artifact, and archive also by

that same operation reduced people to racial objects, the fragment *sine qua non*.

Racial Fragment: Worlds have been enfolded like pieces of paper into smaller and smaller blocks, and peoples have been collapsed onto a racial body not made with their own hands. Hundreds and thousands of different peoples have been collapsed into blackness, or whiteness, or something in between those “nesses.” Identities have been formed fit for a new work and a new way of being: for possession, commodification, and evaluation. What does it mean to have one’s body reduced to a racial body, reduced to a fragment? We work against this fragment, having been forced to live as it and in it. Whiteness is fragment life, too, but it hides it well. Racial existence is fragment life, and these fragments are easily weaponized and mobilized to destroy life and conceal options for living.

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I need to return to Harold, for this black man who would be Afro-church king also made life difficult for his student colleagues. Harold administered racial tests to everyone. He tested how other black students would preach, talk, walk, sing, pray, dress, and play. He commented on what food they would and would not eat, what music they listened to, what hymns and gospel songs they knew and did not know, what preachers, teachers, evangelists, prophets, bishops, singers, groups they had learned about and from, and most devastatingly, he judged who was fit to carry forward the legacies of blackness, of African-ness, of diaspora hope.

Nobody paid attention to Harold on the surface of things, but everyone did in the quiet of the doubts that always permeate seminary or divinity school life. I wanted Harold to live a different kind of fragment life, one that would resist the reduction, war against the test, and allow himself to be unfolded, opened out to a blackness that cannot collapse but that flows like water into everything and everyone without fear and fear’s unruly child, the need to control.

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There is a third fragment born of the work of reduction. This is the commodity fragment. This is the fragment formed by the colonialists who came to the new worlds and in an act of creation as powerful as God's turned the whole world into commodities—not actual commodities but commodities in potential—a whole world that could be possessed, because everything could be stolen. And much of it was stolen. This fragmentation gave birth to a new focus—to see the planet as both knowable and saleable at the same time. The history of modern colonialism made knowing a thing and owning a thing two sides of the same coin, and examining a thing and producing a thing two sides of a related coin. This fragment work has yielded tremendous knowledge of a vast number of *things*, but it has also formed isolating life through isolating ways of looking at life. Western education is education in this fragment, and we who inhabit the world of theological education broker in it as well.



*To know a thing is
 to possess a thing
 (They took our land, our bodies, our stories, our rituals, our tools)
 is to sell a thing
 (our dance, our music, our sweat, our passion, our hopes, our dreams)
 is to have the power
 (our birds, our horses, our plant mothers and tree fathers, our loud
 streams and quiet rivers)
 to discard
 a thing
 (our blood, our cells, our brains, our skulls, our teeth, our shit)
 and then find
 a thing
 (our anger, our courage, our creative resistance, our allegiance, our
 loyalty)
 and resell
 that thing or*

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(our sight, our sound, our fear, our faith)
give that thing
away or have that
thing stolen
(it was stolen from the beginning)
that was not a thing to begin with
but was
my life.



Education is always education in commodities. This is now inescapable. The lives of peoples have been shattered into pieces and have been shaped for intellectual exchange. We must work against its deepest effects, to turn us into intellectual merchants untouched by the fragments we touch. We teachers can easily become fragment workers who deepen in students the possessive logic that governs Western life: *to know a thing is to possess a thing.*

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I remember Della and Ana Paula. Della was a white woman and Ana Paula a Latina. Della found her way to divinity school after a few years of working in a pharmaceutical lab. She had big dreams but a very quiet voice, almost imperceptible. Her years in school learning biology and botany and her time in the lab had not exposed her to the fine joy of extended writing or even reading for that matter. Ana Paula's journey was different. Born in Mexico, she had worked in the corporate accounting world in banking for a few years, but now sensed a call to ministry, and was terribly unsure of herself in the divinity school space. She moved through the hallways with tentative feet as though each step touched broken glass. Della and Ana Paula were in my office because they had plagiarized from a common source, a student paper passed around in the underground market of the divinity

school. There was no need to deny it. They both knew it. But I knew why they used this source, even though using it had unintended consequences.

Plagiarism haunts the academy, and especially the theological academy, as an offense within an offense, a taking within a taking. There has always been an irony to the offense (the crime) of plagiarism within the world of the reductive and commodified fragment. Plagiarism is the act of taking the ideas, words, and voice of another without clear and precise acknowledgment that they are the source. But what does it mean to take the ideas, words, and voice of another in a world and in educational systems that were formed by theft and shaped by a taking that continues to this very moment? Schools in so many parts of the world exist on stolen lands, taken from indigenous peoples who each day see the land no closer to their hands. Plants and animals, objects and archives exist in the storage facilities of schools, having been obtained without any rituals of request, no promises of care and return, and no consequences to turning them into waste once they prove useless. Every day, peoples of the black diaspora hear and see their ideas, images, creativity, gestures, stories, styles, moods, music—its phrasing, its rhythms, its chord changes—their dance, their fighting and loving stances copied and copied again, turned into money, but not in their hands. But no one who does this is brought to an academic dean for adjudication. I got the secondary stuff, the theft inside the theft.

So I said to Della and Ana Paula, “The goal of these exercises in writing is to help you find your own voice as you interact with the voices of the writers you are reading.” They had not located their own voices. Both were looking for words to hide their words, looking for a voice on the page to make their voice acceptable.

. . .

We *should* take plagiarism seriously, not first because it is theft, but because it is a painful absence of voice alongside other voices. But finding and strengthening voices involve more than

learning how to negotiate commodity fragments that present ideas first as possession, words first as property, and voice as that which you can only gain once you own the words and ideas. The work of formation begins with linking together fragments of faith to cultural fragments and both to hopes of resisting the reductive fragmentation of life codified through our educational processes, a fragmentation that aims at reproducing the singular truth of the commodity fragment: to know a thing is to possess a thing.

If we teach fragments and teach against fragments, what does that mean for those who imagine themselves teaching within traditions?

It is a pedagogical and theological mistake to imagine tradition prior to the fragment.

We who teach and learn in theological education settings, should we envision ourselves as teaching in and toward a tradition, whether Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant (Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, etc.), or liberal or conservative? This question has been with us for a few decades now, ever since the emergence of Alasdair MacIntyre's moral philosophy and its travels deep into theological and religious studies.⁷ Unfortunately, the use of tradition in theological education has most often been to promote white self-sufficient masculinity in search of a coherence that would make us safe from seeing our fragment work and conceal what the fragment aims toward: communion, the working and weaving together of fragments in the forming of life together.

. . .

I remember Mark and Bobby. Mark was from Indiana, raised on a farm, a beautiful thing, and Bobby was from DC, raised in a sequestered and very white suburb. They were both wonderful guys. Each young white man was serious about his Christianity and serious about (as they both told me) "racial reconciliation." I really liked these young men, each aiming his life at ministry. Mark was raised Methodist and Bobby Southern Baptist, but both were

tired of tired Christianity, one that lacked clear commitment to the traditions of the church, robust theological thinking, and a form of ministry that actually formed seriously reflective Christians. So they sought a tradition that made sense, because their churches of origin no longer held hope for them.

I watched as they tried on several. Like guys trying on jeans at an Old Navy store, they explored several denominations present on the divinity school menu. Mark finally settled on Episcopalian and Bobby on Eastern Orthodox. They both came to me to rework their programs to fit their new formation in collaboration with their new denominational requirements. In their final semester, I again had them in a course. But now they were different.

Bobby constantly quoted early church writers like they were Scripture and spoke of the demise of the theological foundations of Western civilization due to liberalism. Mark agreed mostly with Bobby but saw the church "in the West" as ineffective because it lacked a robust liturgical awareness that could permeate daily life. They both still wanted to engage in the work of "racial reconciliation," but now they understood that the liberalism infecting the church had to be dealt with before any substantial reconciliation work could be done.

I was glad they had found new ecclesial and theological homes that seem more hospitable to their hopes. But they had also found something else. They were now traditioned men. Now they looked at many of their student colleagues as nice people who lacked a clear sense of being in a tradition. Now they also listened to their divinity school colleagues differently, through a filter: Did their colleagues speak from within an ecclesial tradition or from within the broader Christian tradition, or did they speak from within the chaos of liberalism and its damaging lack of tradition? Did they understand who they were as bearers of a tradition or were they afloat in a sea of emotivism and fragmented ideas?⁸

. . .

These wonderful guys could no longer see themselves in a shared project of life with the other students. Their vision of communion was now denominationally bound and executed through a constrained intellectual vision that turned everyone into possessors of a tradition, aiming at its mastery, and looking for some signatures of control in a chaotic world. Yes, Mark and Bobby were happier now. They had found rest in a place greater than themselves that delivered on a promise of coherence in life and thought that they imagined was the purpose of their formation in theological education. They each believed (as they said to me) that “ministry was not about them but about being the witness to a tradition, a higher calling than the individual, and bound to live a life turned toward a long obedience.”

They had become him.

It could be that forming people in ecclesial traditions and the Christian tradition more broadly is the best way to imagine theological education, but until we wrestle with the man lurking inside a tradition, performing himself in the quest for a maturity that has been presented to theological education and all Western education as the goal of its formation, we will lock students in a formation that will take much more than it will give and that will deny us all the gift of working with the fragments. As we turn to our next chapter, I want to press more deeply into a formation work that begins to turn away from this self-sufficient white man and sees the swirling fragments. This new formation aims at designs that work with the fragments, turning them all toward an elusive goal—life in a place of communion.

AFTER WHITENESS

An Education in Belonging

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WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

4035 Park East Court SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

www.eerdmans.com

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Published 2020

Printed in the United States of America

26 25 24 23 22 21 20 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

ISBN 978-0-8028-7844-1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Jennings, Willie James, 1961– author.

Title: After whiteness : an education in belonging / Willie James Jennings.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020. | Series: Theological education between the times | Includes bibliographical references. | Summary: "A multi-modal reflection on the way theological education can foster pluralistic community and resist Western ideals of individualism, masculinity, and whiteness"—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020020639 | ISBN 9780802878441 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Theology—Study and teaching.

Classification: LCC BV4020 .J46 2020 | DDC 230.071/1—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020020639>