

Michael Eric Dyson. *Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America*. New York: St. Martins Press, 2017. 240 pages. \$15.

Michael Eric Dyson is University Professor of Sociology at Georgetown University, author of more than a dozen books about race in the United States, one of the most visible black public intellectuals of the twenty-first century, and an ordained Baptist minister.

The book is organized like a worship service, with chapters titled “Call to Worship,” “Hymns of Praise,” “Invocation,” “Scripture Reading,” and so on through the ninth chapter “Closing Prayer.”

In “Call to Worship,” Dyson lays out the purpose for his lament, which is to call white America to “return to the moral and spiritual foundations of our country and grapple with the consequences of our original sin” (3). Admitting that the academic form left him frustrated, he opts for the language of a Baptist preacher and the form of a worship service. “I simply want to bear witness to the truth I see and the reality I know. And without white America wrestling with these truths and confronting these realities, we may not survive” (7).

Chapter 2 (Hymns of Praise) is introduced by a W.E.B. DuBois quote about the sorrow songs and speeds through a play-list of contemporary music featuring artists like N.W.A., KRS-One, The Fugees, Tupac Shakur, Jay Z, Beyoncé, and Kendrick Lamar. “These are our griots. These are their songs. These and a thousand others are the hymns that answer the reign of terror that consumes our days” (17). The book is dedicated to Beyoncé Knowles Carter, Solange Knowles, and Tina Knowles-Lawson. This chapter sets the form for the following chapters, which will be a homiletic combination of short examples, analogies, personal stories, history lessons, theological exhortation, and cultural references.

Chapter 4 (Scripture Reading) comes from the Book of Martin Luther King, Jr., 1968:3-8. In this brief chapter Dyson asserts that most white Americans have not really understood the full canon of King. “Beloved, you say you love King, or at least to admire him, but you really don’t know him, not the King who was too black and too radical for most America” (37).

Chapter 5, “Sermon” is the centerpiece of the book, comprising about 150 pages of the volume. It’s hard not to think of the divisions as occurring in two acts, with three scenes in each act. Act One, “Repenting of Whiteness,” includes “Inventing Whiteness,” “The Five Stages of White Grief,” and the “Plague of White Innocence.” These three sections will probably be the most demanding for white preachers, since they unmask the sins of unrepentant white privilege in all its manifestations. “I must say to you, my friends, that teaching in your schools has shown me that being white means never having to say you’re white. Whiteness long ago, at least in America, shed its ethnic skin and struck a universal pose” (65).

He makes the same claims we have seen in Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*, and Debby Irving’s *Waking Up White*, that even though race is a social construct, it’s one that wields the power of life and death. Narratives matter, Dyson preaches, whether it’s the invisible narrative of manifest destiny or the American mythology of exceptionalism. White supremacy and the construction of whiteness must be demythologized. Race, as a fabricated idea, can be dismantled, but not until we learn to see it. The section on “The Five Stages of White Grief” is almost worth the price of the book. Dyson names the powers and principalities in this section: ignorance, denial, appropriation, revisionism, and trivialization.

The second section or second act of the Sermon Chapter, “Being Black in America,” includes shorter divisions titled “Nigger,” “Our Own Worst Enemy,” and “Coptopia.” The themes are respectively about social erasure, internalized violence, and state-sponsored violence.

This part of the unmasking reveals what's at stake for black people when white people engage in various forms of denial and complicity.

Dyson's book is a gift to white preachers and white churches that should be on the front lines of the march for racial justice. When I first began reading it, I thought it should be adapted as a performance, something like *The Vagina Monologues*. It would also be a handy guide to organize a sermon series, preaching workshops, or adult church school classes. "Oh Lord, give us the courage to tell the truth to white folks who need it more than air itself" (33).

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