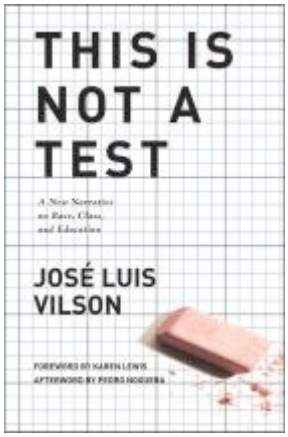

This Is Not a Test: A New Narrative on Race, Class, and Education

Vilson, Jose Luis
Haymarket Books, 2014

Book Review

Tags: class | higher education | race

Reviewed by: Charles Ray, *New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary*
Date Reviewed: April 8, 2015

At first blush, Jose Luis Vilson's book does not seem to fit well in a discussion of theological graduate education. After all, he is a middle school math teacher in New York City, concerned with the Common Core State Standard and bulletin boards (112-14). As the subtitle suggests, the book is narrative, a conglomeration of stories divided into three parts and chapters with titles that evoke emotion but do not lend themselves to a chronological flow or pattern. Given Vilson's predilection for poetry and music, this is both understandable and welcome. The stories within each part jump around chronologically, but the three parts seem to revolve around Vilson' own educational journey, his journey as an educator, and his journey as an educational activist. What comes through in each section is Vilson's passion for education done well and his story-telling skills, both of which make the book a compelling read.

As a sixty-something-year-old white guy who grew up in the South, our narratives, while similar at points, diverge greatly. Vilson's stories of the tensions in his Dominican-Haitian upbringing, his frustration on what to do with the rat in the bathtub, and his encounter with a racist English teacher in high school fill in gaps in my own story. But he also challenges my story and makes me uncomfortable. I was bothered when he called George Zimmerman a child murderer (149), not because I thought Zimmerman was innocent but because I do not usually think of seventeen-year-olds as children. I do not enjoy being made to feel uncomfortable, but I need to be challenged. Other references to New York City politics, secondary school board issues, and rap music sent me to Google and to Vilson's blogs and speeches.

Yet many of the secondary-education issues Vilson raises resonate in graduate theological education as well. How do we assess student achievement? In the midst of our clamor for accountability, how do we keep our focus on students? What is the role of technology in the

Published by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion
301 West Wabash Ave, Crawfordsville, IN 47933
(765) 361-6047 (800) 655-7177 fax (765) 361-6051
Fully Funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and Located at Wabash College

classroom? Does teacher presence really matter?

The most compelling issues raised in the book are highlighted in the subtitle: race, class, and education. In a field where old white guys dominate (graduate theological education), how do we open and maintain a dialogue on the issues of race and class? Do we wait for people of color to broach the subject, or as Vilson's white friend Chris suggests, do we who are white speak up so people of color do not have to (148)? The answer is obvious.

The book incorporates several events in Vilson's life that are preserved digitally. I suggest reading "How to Drop the Mic" (157-168) and then watching Vilson's speech at the Save Our Schools March, or reading the following chapter on teacher voice and then watching Vilson's TED talk (both can be accessed at https://thejosevilson.com/).

Vilson's parting words challenge me: "If you *can't* teach, then do. Something else is preferable. But if you can't do, then don't. As a teacher, I'm in charge of believing you can – so do. If you plan to do, then do this. Go hard or go home" (215).

https://wabashcenter.wabash.edu/resources/book_reviews/this-is-not-a-test-a-new-narrative-on-race-class-and-education/

Published by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion
301 West Wabash Ave, Crawfordsville, IN 47933
(765) 361-6047 (800) 655-7177 fax (765) 361-6051
Fully Funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and Located at Wabash College