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Race as Subject and Racial Subjectivities

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Each night I watch *Jeopardy*. Occasionally I am thrilled when Tobago or Trinidad features in a clue. This thrill comes from knowing that the island where I grew up (area of 116 square miles) has found its way into the knowledge required of *Jeopardy* contestants. I take this small thrill, and I am painfully aware of how small it is, because for most of my life I have been told that the intellectual knowledge that matters consists of material outside of the confines of that small island space. I am not sure where these *Jeopardy* contestants would derive their knowledge of Tobago but I doubt that many acquired it in formal educational settings. Even if they did, I doubt that they would construct the basis of their knowledge from the perspective of small islands. This I know, knowledge about the existence of a small island called Tobago is not the same as deriving one's subjectivity from that space. I get that representation is a means of asserting one's presence in a world that overlooks you because of your race, gender, religion, and so on. But I am coming to recognize that representation that does not shift the focus of education keeps in place the structures that would erase one's subjectivity, particularly for those outside of the dominant culture.

The subjectivities embraced in the classroom matter just as much or even more than the subject matter of the classroom. Theological education derives much from European Enlightenment models of knowledge and the western canon. The canon contributed to race theories and practices that have characterized European ways of being in the world. While these models can and have made room for subjects other than Europeans, the subjectivity that matters is still European. This appears clearly in the standard way theological disciplines operate. Systematic theology begins with abstractions on the divine rather than dealing with the diversity and differentiations in human expressions. Biblical hermeneutics begins and ends with the text, with only a slight detour toward the context of the reader. Church History, or more recently History of Christianity, moves quickly to and settles in the European setting that establishes the norms of Christendom. Each of these disciplines begins with disembodied notions thereby overlooking bodies already discounted socially. This move enables European subjectivity to be foregrounded, and even more, presented as normative. Precisely, because it remains unnamed - blank, white - the canvass upon which theological knowledge gets written privileges the European way of being, requiring everything else to add splashes of color to liven up the picture. I am painfully aware that in my theological education I was trained to think, act, perform, and believe as a darker version of the European subject. In many ways becoming what Homi Bhabha perceptibly calls “quite not white.”



Photo Credit: John Barton

As a teacher in the theological classroom, I must push against this tendency. When my intellectual formation predisposes me to function in settings that are not “native” to me, I recognize that I am participating in unhelpful practices. For me, teaching becomes an engagement between my acquired intelligence and the pull of “home” that makes my work relevant, accessible, and affirming of the subjectivities that yearn to be taken seriously. I have found (mostly as a student but also as a teacher) that the space of the theological classroom requires people of color to undergo an ontological conversion in order to thrive. Like several of my peers I expand the range of the subject matter so that people can know more about other cultures. Yet something about this move seems insufficient to me because it merely shifts the white gaze onto colored bodies, a perspective from which others are viewed. I strive for teaching that repositions the subjectivity of learning as a means of effecting real change in the lives of learners, their communities, and our society.

A segment of black teens in the U.S. equates academic success with “acting white.” While I

instinctively push away from these sentiments, more and more I keep asking whether there may be some truth in this expression. Learning in the U.S. education system, at all levels, pays little attention to subjectivities other than white subjectivity. Therefore to be educated is to renounce your subjectivity for another. Perhaps this position exposes the sad truth that many black teens are simply refusing to learn not because they are unable to acquire knowledge but because they are unwilling to be subsumed by dominant European forms of knowledge that erases black subjectivity. All too often, theological education simply pours color into white spaces that will inherently remain white.

One of the dominant tag lines in the ongoing protests in Ferguson has been “black lives matter.” This phrase says that blackness phenomenologically and ontologically has worth. I am challenged to make this phrase ring true in my classrooms by underlining not only the subject matter but also the subjectivities of the classroom even if those bodies are all white. The value of this transformation lies not simply in knowing more but in shifting power and practices in classrooms and ultimately in communities.

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<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2021/07/race-as-subject-and-racial-subjectivities/>