



THIRD WORLD APPROACHES to INTERNATIONAL LAW *Review*

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#TheorizingWhileBlack: Symposium Introduction

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Sara Ali introduces #TheorizingWhileBlack symposium with contributions from Kamari Clarke, Rob Knox, Babatunde Fagbayibo and finally an interview with Siba Grovogui.

In June of last year, Wumi Asubiaro-Dada wrote a post on *Medium* entitled '[#TheorizingWhileBlack: Whitesplaining and its Enduring Tragedies for Contemporary Black Thought](#)'. Asubiaro-Dada begins with a form of empathic thought experiment, asking the reader to imagine a particular kind of experience – that of a black female academic. She compares this experience to that of a white male scholar, asking whether he would have a similar experience of having his scholarship and knowledge dismissed.

I must admit that despite being fully entrenched in, and (to my surprise) enjoying the rigor of graduate school, I never wanted to be an academic. To extend that honesty, I never envisioned returning to complete my undergraduate education let alone pursuing anything further in what I understood to be the ivory towers of academia. The academy, as I understood it, often separated itself from the material realities of living, while engaging in a top-down approach to knowledge production reminiscent of Aristotle's justification for the necessity of slavery. Aristotle, revered for his contributions to logic and politics among other things, believed that slavery was necessary for civic life as it allowed citizens to engage in contemplation. Was the academy merely an extension of Aristotelian logic or was it something more?

My re-entry into academia did not come with any high hopes. Imagine my surprise and confusion when I excelled. At the end of my undergraduate education, I had an opportunity to attend the World Bank and IMF Spring Meetings in Washington D.C. In the week that I spent there, I attended meetings that convinced me that the best interests of people like me – those who originate

in the global South – were being entrusted to people who knew nothing about us, and often seemed naïve, ignorant or negligent in their assessments of what it is that people in or from the global South needed. Upon returning, I sheepishly asked my partner what she thought about me applying to graduate school. Despite the eleventh-hour decision and knowledge that many of the deadlines had long passed, she just smiled and told me that she was wondering when I would decide to apply, and that we could figure things out afterwards. And the rest, as they say, is history. Or rather politics, as my chosen field is political science, and politics (or rather power) seems to infiltrate every aspect of our lives.

The impossibility of excelling academically was something that I had carried with me. It is something that my siblings and many of my peers have carried with them. When I was young, growing up in the United Arab Emirates, I was spit on or ignored in public – unsurprising in a part of the world where the word often used for a black person is **عبد** (slave). Although this can be perceived as an experience unique to the U.A.E., Canada's version of anti-blackness is just a more passive version of hostility that builds insecurity through gaslighting. In Canada, people were often pleasantly surprised by my ability to 'articulate' myself, as if my knowledge of the English language and my ethnically ambiguous accent were somehow unexpected. Yet, my white peers never garnered the same surprise despite being ethnically non-British. Nor did they receive the same level of interrogation about their origins – how I became Canadian has often been an intriguing line of inquiry. My blackness meant 'other' regardless of my cultural associations, my accent, my first language; and their whiteness meant 'same' regardless of their cultural associations, their accents and their first languages. I have been [regarded with suspicion when making purchases](#), and looked at with disgust for daring to eat pie (which I was told was the best pie in the area) in an establishment typically frequented by white people. And in academia – this ostensible space of truth, possibility, knowledge, critical engagement and sophistication – there are many instances of black students in their first year being told at the first sign of struggle that university is 'not for everyone'.

I start with these stories because it helps to illustrate why Asubiaro-Dada's '#TheorizingWhileBlack' resonated so deeply with me, and why the challenges of theorizing while black do not begin in the academy, and certainly do not end once black students become well-respected scholars in international law and elsewhere. While academic streams in Ontario high schools (where students can choose a stream based on their future aspirations of attending college or university) made sense in theory, in practice black and Indigenous students were encouraged to choose courses in streams for the non-university bound regardless of their demonstrated ability, effectively limiting their choices upon graduation. In a [2017 report](#) on the Toronto District School Board in Ontario, 53 percent of black students were streamed into academic programs compared to 80 percent of students from other racialized groups and 81 percent of white students. The response to Ontario's decision to end the streaming system last year had mixed reactions: anger and confusion for many of those whom it didn't impact and celebration for many of those whom it did.

When black students do make it to university, undergraduate students are encouraged to drop out of university at the first sign that they are experiencing challenges, whether or not these challenges are academic in nature. The message is clear: black students do not belong here – at least not as scholars. The existence of blackness in academia is often relegated to sites of research and exploration; as subjects to be studied. Their only expected contribution to knowledge production is that which is termed indigenous knowledge or subcultural: localized knowledge juxtaposed against global knowledge.

What does this have to do with #TheorizingWhileBlack and the field of International Law? I would say everything. The arena of international law is a great example of what Audre Lorde referred to as '[the master's house](#)' and what we consider to be the rules, norms and conventions of international law are '[the master's tools](#)'. Those tools are fortified by the examples Asubiaro-Dada relates in her piece: the 'dismissal of black thought as being driven by emotions rather than logic and the assumption that white theorizing and thought are inherently unbiased, unemotional and neutral'. But there has never been anything neutral about theorizing or academia. The questions we ask and the perspectives we take are inherently biased regardless of discipline. However, the myth of academic neutrality only extends to the perspectives of certain people while excluding others. Nowhere can this be seen more visibly than in the case of the black, female academic of Asubiaro-Dada's piece.

The history of international law is rife with examples of assumed white supremacy – the doctrine of discovery and the concept of terra nullius are a few examples where the presumption of racial superiority has factored into international legal customs that ratified colonialism and imperialism. These doctrines, including their dire legal, social and economic consequences, still operate within contemporary international law. The values entrenched in the foundations of international law have a distinctly Eurocentric flavor. The protection of human rights and promotion of democracy also seem to favor particular states and peoples over others, allowing some states the 'freedom' to suppress human rights while reprimanding others. The contemporary international legal landscape prefers to understand such dynamics as historical, from a more ignorant past. However, many states only recently emerged from the geographic realities of colonialism and there are still peoples who remain colonized – their geographies tied to a foreign power and their peoples subjects without full rights. It is these colonial powers that have created the world in their image and continue to dictate the terms of international law. How many years must pass before historical ignorance is no longer materially significant?

The continuation of Eurocentric hegemony in the international legal landscape (and in other academic disciplines) is facilitated by the gatekeeping practices in academia that often go unrecognized or unacknowledged through normalization. The experiences of those who are on the receiving end of these practices are often shamed, dismissed, ignored, unheard or invisible. They are the black high school student who is encouraged not to go to college, the undergraduate student who is persuaded that they don't belong, or the professor who has to choose between making noise or making tenure,

between speaking up or being shut out. There is a tightrope that must be walked, which is invisible to (and thus seen as imaginary by) those who need not walk it. For those that do, the sting and vicarious trauma brought about through non-conformance is a daily reminder of its existence and the necessity to perform a rendition of blackness which suits a European palate. Conformance, however, does not guarantee acceptance. Rather it allows for the continuation of practices that undermine black scholarship.

There is a particular theater in which we all perform, a hegemonic geography with its attendant culture; complete with norms, artifacts, language, inclusions and exclusions. It is easy to believe that this geography is a fixed, unchanging reality. However, geographies are not fixed and are instead influenced by, as much as they influence, those who inhabit them (see for example Katherine McKittrick's [Demonic Grounds](#)). This hegemonic geography requires a particular performance of whiteness that not only dismisses other forms of being as 'lesser' but constrains something as diverse as whiteness or blackness into monoliths. To be white is right, but at what cost? Despite the constructed hegemony of whiteness, white people exist not only as creators but also as performers in this production. They must live up to this idea of whiteness, just as others must aspire to it. However, whiteness as an idea is just like the hegemonic geography it dominates: it too is always changing and being influenced by, and influencing, the areas around it. #TheorizingWhileBlack entails thinking outside while operating within this hegemonic geography where some groups are oppressed and others elevated, where paternalism is the norm for some, and where the color of your skin determines the content of your character, your capacity, your innocence and your guilt. These geographies change and evolve as our presence influences and shapes them. #TheorizingWhileBlack to me means that, as we live, everything changes. And, as we theorize, the world shifts. It is evolution, rather than geography, that is a fixed reality.

I would like to thank the editorial team at TWAILR for their support without which this series would not have been possible and I am humbled to offer the introduction to this series not only because of the importance of the subject matter but because of the awe-some caliber of the contributed reflections and the scholars who penned them. Each reflection engages with the topic of #TheorizingWhileBlack in connected and nuanced ways.

Rob Knox grapples with the question of #TheorizingWhileBlack through a Marxist lens to engage with the concepts of power, erasure and knowledge production. Knox critiques the dichotomy of either using law or abandoning it altogether. He notes that the opposite of engagement is not critique but disengagement, to illustrate that the of criticism black thought and theorizing points to its relevance. Babatunde Fagbayibo asks the important question of whether contemporary international law has the capacity to 'advance ideas and strategies for Africa's human and material development' in the face of the erasure of black thought and posits a useful framework for future international legal scholarship. Kamari Clarke uses Michael Manley's metaphor of going up the down escalator to show how some states and peoples are privileged over others in the international sphere. Using three case

studies, Clarke delves into the complexity of victim identification in the face of 'macro-historical and geo-political forces that continue to benefit the global North at the expense of the South'. Finally, I interview Siba Grovogui who talks, among other things, about his new project on how human rights are conceptualized in Haiti. Grovogui highlights how an idea of what it means to be human undergirds our understanding of law and how such ideas are to be found in all cultures. In light of these insights, we discuss the difference between black theorizing and theorizing while black.

Together, these four reflections provide an understanding not only where we are in international law but where we were and where we can be if we are able to move past the ideological confines in which we find ourselves. These reflections show that through #TheorizingWhileBlack, black scholars are offered both the opportunity and challenge of imagining a world in which race as hierarchy is replaced by a holistic view of interconnected experiences that allows us to move beyond dichotomous thinking and historically defined identities.

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Sara graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Social Development Studies with a specialization in Social Policy and Social Action from the University of Waterloo and received her Master of Arts in Political Science with a specialization in African Studies from Carleton University. She is an interdisciplinary scholar who is interested in understanding the world to re-imagine it. Her areas of specialization explore issues concerning social inequality, transnational and diasporic identity formation, critical multiculturalism and human rights.