

## SYMPOSIUM ON QUEERING INTERNATIONAL LAW

### DOING QUEER IN THE EVERYDAY OF ACADEMIA: REFLECTIONS ON QUEERING A CONFERENCE IN INTERNATIONAL LAW

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The pioneering 1990s movement in critical theory has generated path-breaking scholarship seeking to queer law. Efforts to queer international law have produced important research uncovering the role of international law as a performative discourse and as a transnational governance framework reproducing gendered and sexual hegemonies.<sup>2</sup> However, these efforts have done very little to destabilize the structures and workings of the very site where international law is theorized and taught: the university. Queering international law has mostly entailed looking at how the state, international organizations, international lawyers, scholars, and civil society produce or resist the heteronormative matrix, “that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized.”<sup>3</sup> But what about the role of the university and its everyday routines—themselves byproducts of the aforementioned matrix—in reproducing and/or resisting (gendered) hierarchies and exclusions? We have raised this question as young scholars involved in organizing a week-long event on queer methods in international legal scholarship. The present essay is a first attempt at grappling with what the queering of an academic conference in international law meant for us, and for the university itself. It echoes a recent trend in scholarship on queer pedagogies,<sup>4</sup> which, however, remain mostly silent on practices of scientific exchange. By reflecting on our efforts to queer a workshop in the field of international law, we also hope to inspire others to pursue their own queer processes of knowledge production.

#### *Dis-orientation and Re-orientation*

Our own introduction to queer theory in international law was at best a coveted encounter abroad and at worst a serendipitous and lonely discovery at home. As we reckoned with this shared fate, we decided to address it by organizing what we initially contemplated as a half-day workshop on queer methods in international law directed at students of the Graduate Institute of International Studies and Development in Geneva. Two years later, our original idea morphed into a week-long Virtual Queer Workshop comprising ten sub-events and bringing together

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was a collective endeavor and the listing of authors is done alphabetically rather than on the basis of contribution.

<sup>2</sup> [QUEERING INTERNATIONAL LAW: POSSIBILITIES, ALLIANCES, COMPLICITIES, RISKS](#) (Dianne Otto ed., 2018).

<sup>3</sup> JUDITH BUTLER, [GENDER TROUBLE: FEMINISM AND THE SUBVERSION OF IDENTITY](#) 151 (1990).

<sup>4</sup> [MAPPING QUEER SPACE\(S\) OF PRAXIS AND PEDAGOGY](#) (Elizabeth McNeil, James E. Wermers & Joshua O. Lunn eds., 1st ed. 2017); [QUEER PEDAGOGIES: THEORY, PRAXIS, POLITICS](#) (Cris Mayo & Nelson M. Rodriguez eds., 2019).

around one hundred scholars from different generations and various academic locations.<sup>5</sup> By building upon Davina Cooper's notion of "*everyday utopias*," understood as "networks and spaces that perform regular daily life, in the Global North, in a radically different fashion,"<sup>6</sup> we sought to create an academic encounter that fosters the queering of our discipline. Sara Ahmed's conceptualization of queer phenomenology similarly shaped our thinking. Through her insightful considerations on the orientations and disorientations that mark people's gendered, racialized, and class-based experiences of the social world,<sup>7</sup> we sought to queer international law academia by disorienting its gendered, racialized, and classist everyday practices. Drawing on Judith Butler's work,<sup>8</sup> our approach to queering a conference was an effort to create a "site of collective contestation" of the normal practices in legal academia. While this approach to queer theory shares affinities with other pluralizing and coalition-seeking critiques, we were particularly interested in queer theory's radical potential to destabilize the normal.

Inspired by Cooper's invitation to take note of everyday utopias as a relevant exercise for "the [ongoing] project . . . of forging a social justice politics of change,"<sup>9</sup> the following essay recounts our experience of applying these reflections to the organization of our Virtual Queer Workshop.

### *Our Everyday Utopia*

For us, queering the *everyday practices* of international lawyers—including scientific exchanges—meant imagining a utopian space where the process of knowledge production involves drawing on the differences and multiplicity of queer voices, approaches, and strategies in international law. More specifically, it involves "mess[ing] up the desexualized spaces of the academy, exud[ing] some rut, reimagin[ing] the publics from and for which academic intellectuals write, dress, and perform."<sup>10</sup> Yet, while envisioning our very own everyday utopia, our emphasis has been on praxis. This translation between ideas and practice has made our utopia no less utopian or experimental, but rather grounded in actions of the everyday. Cooper has termed this process the oscillation between imagination and actualization, which constitutes the conceptual backbone of utopian work.<sup>11</sup>

As the literature on queer academic practices is scant, we engaged in an iterative translation exercise, identifying seemingly mundane elements in everyday academic life that we tried to do differently. We did so, first and foremost, by involving the future "participants"—who are usually treated as partaking passively in academic convening—in the very process of imagining the workshop through the organization of two preparatory events. Through these events, we hoped to open up a safe space that fostered creativity, learning, and communal shaping of both the format and the content of our discussions in the final workshop. The preparatory workshops also drew attention to the energy and power that communal projects yield for constructing a different discipline of international law—one that moves away from the increasing individualization and isolation of researchers in neoliberal academic spaces.

<sup>5</sup> Our workshop, titled "International Law Dis/Oriented: Queer Legacies and Queer Futures" took place from September 27 to October 1, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> DAVINA COOPER, [EVERYDAY UTOPIAS: THE CONCEPTUAL LIFE OF PROMISING SPACES](#) (2014).

<sup>7</sup> SARA AHMED, [QUEER PHENOMENOLOGY: ORIENTATIONS, OBJECTS, OTHERS](#) 7 (2006).

<sup>8</sup> JUDITH BUTLER, [BODIES THAT MATTER: ON THE DISCURSIVE LIMITS OF SEX](#) 228 (1993).

<sup>9</sup> COOPER, *supra* note 6, at 227.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Warner, *Introduction*, in [FEAR OF A QUEER PLANET: QUEER POLITICS AND SOCIAL THEORY](#), xxvi (Michael Warner ed., 1993).

<sup>11</sup> COOPER, *supra* note 6, at 11.

*Care at the Core*

Analyzing the heteronormative matrix also involves deconstructing how we engage in relationships with other people and objects. The competitive environment of contemporary academia tends to value self-representation and performance rather than individual well-being and common knowledge production. On the other hand, care labor—which is disproportionately carried out by women and other marginalized groups—is devalued and often ignored. This unequal and unsustainable care economy was highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic: scholars are expected to leave their personal lives and care duties at the door, even when the lines between home and the work-space are continuously blurred through face-to-face and online realities.

For the purpose of realizing our very own everyday utopia, we actively considered how to prioritize *caring* for ourselves, *caring* for each other, and *caring* for our planet. This meant envisioning queering as an effort to reduce power hierarchies and allow a diverse set of persons to participate in our event by making care a substantive part of its organization. It prompted us to expressly communicate our willingness to consider and accommodate the personal schedules of the “participants,” balancing these with our wish to involve them in the organization of the workshop. We also discussed how to create the material conditions that would enable everyone’s participation both online and offline. Ideally, this would have included childcare options or allowances, as well as making sure that sessions were not held early in the morning or late in the evening. Given the scheduling challenges this latter element involved, our efforts could only be imperfectly implemented.

Yet, in our view, a queer approach to academic conferencing also requires addressing a deeper need to “feel at home.”<sup>12</sup> Academic spaces are by nature exclusionary as access to them is conditioned by certain types of status, resources, or language abilities. Moreover, canonical ways of producing knowledge contribute to the dismissal of “home” or mundane activities as not worthy of intellectual inquiry. Beyond these initial structural hurdles, the very experience of being read as “different” or “queer” within academic spaces highlights the existence of various processes of “othering” and exoticization in academia.

While we learned that queering was essential to create more comfortable and safer spaces so participants could “feel at home,” we were also aware that “too much queering” could generate feelings of uneasiness for some of those participating in an academic conference. As queer theorists have pointed out, (gendered) norms and conventions can be restraints, as they lead to the exclusion of people who may not or cannot correspond to these normative standards.<sup>13</sup> Yet, to those who have learned to comply with these norms and conventions, they provide reassurance in the form of a (gendered) script to perform the expected. Our efforts to queer academic conventions were intended to create *dis/orientation* and to *disrupt* our feelings of normality and scriptedness in order to open up spaces where the utopian could become possible. However, we needed to do so while being mindful of the inclusions and exclusions created in our academic home-making, as performing “outside the box” can entail considerable additional workload.

To be sure, queer literature has an ambivalent relationship with the concept of “home.” Indeed, for queer individuals, home can be a space of both safety, where one can be oneself through safe transgression of gender and sexual norms, and of oppression, where these transgressions will be policed if not disciplined. Queer “relations of kinship arrive at boundaries that call into question the distinguishability of kinship from community,”<sup>14</sup> thereby producing alternatives to traditional heteronormative family homes. Thus, instead of thinking of our project as an effort to establish alternative homes, queering an academic conference may entail building an alternative commune,<sup>15</sup> based on relations of care, intimacy, and self-esteem.

<sup>12</sup> AHMED, *supra* note 7.

<sup>13</sup> GLORIA ANZALDÚA, *BORDERLANDS: LA FRONTERA: THE NEW MESTIZA* 19–20 (1987).

<sup>14</sup> JUDITH BUTLER, *UNDOING GENDER* 127 (2004).

<sup>15</sup> The idea of “commune” was raised by Dianne Otto during our first preparatory event on March 3, 2021.

*World-(re-)making*

Building an alternative academic commune through queering academe's "normal" required some world-(re-)making. However, we knew that queering could also signify our own aspiration to *pluralize* the normal, that is: (re-)crafting the ordinary so that it accommodates more plural realities and existences.<sup>16</sup> To address this complex duality of deconstructing and pluralizing "the normal," we first needed to sort out our own "normality." Which settings did we want to dismantle, uphold, or build from scratch?

This normality-sorting exercise happened during the first of our preparatory events, when we asked the participants to share their dystopic or utopian experiences with academic conferences. In these events, we discussed how academic conferences commonly have configurations that promote a division between the presenter and the audience, fostering an adversary logic of academic exchange. To distance our project from normal modes of competitiveness and antagonism in academic debates, we sought to focus on having conversations with each other and finding pleasure in academic convening. For our cohort, this generally meant having more simple settings for conferences, such as sitting in a circle in order to reduce the physical distance between the speaker and the audience, or having a quiet (virtual or in-person) coffee place to unwind from the formal program activities. It also meant destabilizing academic/non-academic borders, opening up room for activities whereby participants could share plural types of experience and knowledge, such as art pieces, performances, and manifestos.

Based on these preparatory discussions, we structured our Virtual Queer Workshop as a conversation. We asked each workshop participant to respond to the same broad question on queer methodologies and to come up with a specific question for another participant. While this mode of conversation wove a thread connecting the different workshop segments, it was not a "*straightening device*"<sup>17</sup> ordering and homogenizing our discussions. Instead, it functioned as a methodological tool that brought diverse epistemological and analytical approaches in conversation with each other.

Our second preparatory event prompted us to conceive of our workshop as part of a continuous and non-linear journey with different stops and stations. The metaphor of "stations" allowed us to imagine the workshop not as comprising disconnected "panels" but instead as offering a meeting space for "travelers" (instead of speakers) of different orientations and locations, thus drawing attention to diverse ways of constructing knowledge and "doing queer" in international law. Such reflection also called attention to the issues of methodological (im)mobility, language, as well as the potential and limitations of the theories and methods that comprise the usual "toolkit" of legal academics.

Our world of academic exchange was also significantly remade through the use of Gather.Town as an alternative to conventional online conference platforms. Influenced by Lugones's work on world traveling, playfulness, and feminist exchange,<sup>18</sup> we intended to create a playful virtual ecosystem of interconnected journeys. Gather.Town helped us to construct this playfulness in our queer academic conference, by providing us a virtual reality in the form of a Botanical Garden where the avatars of the workshop's "travelers" met among extraordinary plants and traveled to their different stations through portals scattered around the space. Moreover, the mix-and-match possibilities of creating your own avatar allowed for playful renditions of gender beyond (our) material realities. In our virtual space, you could have the look you dared to imagine, and pronouns were never a given.

<sup>16</sup> Heather Love, *Doing Being Deviant: Deviance Studies, Description, and the Queer Ordinary*, 26 DIFFERENCES 74 (2015).

<sup>17</sup> AHMED, *supra* note 7, at 92.

<sup>18</sup> Maria Lugones, *Playfulness, "World"-Travelling, and Loving Perception*, 2 HYPATIA 3 (1987).

*“A Third University Is Possible”*<sup>19</sup>

While trying to imagine a different future for international law conferences, we have also come to terms with material structures more powerful than our eagerness to queer international law and its academic norms. For instance, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the carbon footprint of academic travel, and the lack of financial resources to fully fund participants from the Global South in a way that could compensate for the unequal global distribution of wealth, prevented us from conducting the workshop in-person. That said, while utopias are not without friction, conflicts, and waste,<sup>20</sup> they “also capture a sense of hope and potential, in that they anticipate something more, something beyond and other to what they can currently realize.”<sup>21</sup> Our workshop is thus the outcome of our efforts to do the “doable and viable given the conditions of the present.”<sup>22</sup> It reflects our embeddedness in the discipline’s hegemonic codes and structural limitations, while also signaling our confidence and hope for more egalitarian and innovative knowledge production processes outside the conventional parameters of international law.

Yet, if queer signifies the resistance to exclusionary norms, how can one actually stand in opposition to these norms from within the place where these norms are reproduced? And beyond, can one actually queer *the* University? <sup>23</sup> These questions are linked to those raised by decolonial scholars concerning the decolonization of knowledge production and institutions. And as long as academic norms are still discursively and materially shaped by the preservation of “settler modes” of governance and appropriation, answers will be far from satisfying. Aside from the dominance of Western epistemologies and pedagogies in higher education, the University has been concretely built on dispossessed Indigenous lands and based on resources acquired through colonial exploitation. <sup>24</sup> It has been further strengthened by its financial ties with the military, real estate, and agribusiness complexes.<sup>25</sup> Thus, as long as the University does not engage in rematriating<sup>26</sup> Indigenous land and resources, as well as in interrupting the cycle of land, capital, and debt accumulation, coloniality will remain its constitutive paradigm—and a necessary object of queer critiques and pedagogy.<sup>27</sup>

While these observations foreground the colonial and neoliberal nature of the academic-industrial complex, decolonial desires still manage to emerge in its midst. Such contingent—but powerful—yearnings for change are explored in the essay of queer decolonial scholar la paperson, “A Third University Is Possible.” In this essay, they explore three types of University complexes and the agents that destabilize their exclusionary structures and politics. As they put it, “First worlding universities are machinery commissioned to actualize imperialist dreams of a settled world [mostly through the hard sciences and business degrees]. Second worlding universities desire to humanize the world [mainly through liberal arts and the humanities], which is a more genteel way to colonize a world that is so much more than human. A third worlding university is a decolonizing university.”<sup>28</sup> In la paperson’s explanation, the Third University only exists through the decolonial efforts of “scyborgs”: agents

<sup>19</sup> LA PAPERSON, [A THIRD UNIVERSITY IS POSSIBLE](#) (2017).

<sup>20</sup> H.G. Wells (2015 [1905]), as cited in [COOPER](#), *supra* note 6, at 7.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 4.

<sup>22</sup> Cooper, *supra* note 6, at 4.

<sup>23</sup> “University” with a capital letter refers to an industrial complex and oppressive matrix whilst “university” refers to the institution.

<sup>24</sup> [LA PAPERSON](#), *supra* note 19, at 54–63.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> Feminist and queer Indigenous studies mostly use the notion of “rematriation” instead of “repatriation,” which is patriarchal by essence. *See* RAUNA KUOKKANEN, [RESTRUCTURING RELATIONS: INDIGENOUS SELF-DETERMINATION, GOVERNANCE, AND GENDER](#) 122 (2019).

<sup>27</sup> Eve Tuck & K. Wayne Yang, [Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor](#), 1 *DECOLONIZATION: INDIGENITY, EDUC. & SOC’Y* 1–40, 3 (2012).

<sup>28</sup> [LA PAPERSON](#), *supra* note 19, at 13, 69–77.

who, while embedded within the First and/or the Second universities, put forward ways of producing and sharing knowledge that are inspired by autonomous epistemologies of Indigenous cosmology, wisdom, and sovereignty.<sup>29</sup> Scyborgs use “colonial technologies” for “decolonizing purposes,”<sup>30</sup> thus being disloyal to the colonial machinery of the First and Second University while inescapably remaining a byproduct of them.<sup>31</sup>

La paperson’s thesis makes us wonder whether we were such scyborgs when we tried to “queer” our academic convening. Was our workshop a project of creating a Third University while resisting from within the Second University that is the Graduate Institute? Tempting as it is to answer in the affirmative, la paperson reminds us that “utopias” are not free from colonial pitfalls.<sup>32</sup> That said, we hope that our very own everyday utopia of queering an international law conference leads to more radical projects of queering the current academic setting, in a scyborg-inspired desire to, one day, make the Third University a tangible possibility.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 44. La paperson calls this autonomous placeholder of sovereign epistemologies the “fourth world.”

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 12.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 60–61.

<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the Second University *is* a colonial “pedagogical utopia”: it strives through liberal expansion, aiming at including everybody by accumulating fees, debt, and land. *Id.* at 51.