Interview - Olivia Rutazibwa

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This interview is part of our Black History Month features. The interviews speak to the fundamental aims of Black History Month and discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for young scholars.

Dr. Olivia Umurerwa Rutazibwa (1979) is a Belgian/Rwandan political scientist and Senior Lecturer in European and International (Development) Studies at the University of Portsmouth in the UK. She researches ways to decolonise international solidarity through ideas of reparation and ethical retreat and recovering and reconnecting philosophies and practices of dignity and self-determination in the postcolony: autonomous recovery in Somaliland, Agaciro in Rwanda and Black Power in the US. She has published in various academic journals (Journal of Humanitarian Affairs, *Postcolonial Studies, Ethical Perspectives, Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding,* and *Journal of Contemporary European Studies),* is the co-editor of *The Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Politics* with Robbie Shilliam, and *Decolonization and Feminisms in Global Teaching and Learning* with Sara de Jong and Rosalba Icaza, and is Associate Editor of *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. She is the former Africa desk editor, journalist and columnist at the Brussels based quarterly MO* Magazine and the author of *The End of the White World. A Decolonial Manifesto* (in Dutch, EPO, 2020). In 2011 she delivered a TEDx talk titled: "Decolonizing Western Minds".

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I'm not a big fan of comparative superlatives, so I will answer this question more modestly and capture as if I were taking a Polaroid picture, the debates that speak to me in this instant. I study international solidarity. In its westernised version, i.e. the aid and development industry and the systems of thought that sustain it, I see a continuity with the civilising missions that were part and parcel of global extractive practices during formal colonial times. I'm therefore interested in how we, situated in a westernised episteme, can think about solidarity anti-colonially. That is the background against which I engage with the many exciting conversations in and around IR.

Firstly, I'm drawn to insights from outside IR and the interdisciplinary conversations that can be had – not for the sake of the disciplines or IR as such, but to enrich our understanding of the world "out there". As I have to deal with the bias of *presentism* in International Development Studies, I'm seduced – but not well-versed yet – by rigorous historical approaches in the study of anti-colonial solidarity. The scholarship and research ethos of Siba N. Grovogui inspires me in that respect. He shows that studying historical detail, the empirics of what actually happened really matters for anticolonial theorising. I find it exhilarating and even somewhat comforting to realise that a lifetime will not suffice to unearth all that there is to know. It is also where the communal and collectivity comes in: we do not have to do any of this by ourselves, whatever the neoliberal university would have us believe. I also find it deeply challenging though, as at times it seems faster and more efficient (and safer?) to make more general deconstructive comments about erasure, epistemicide and organised amnesia.

I'm also drawn to the works and collaborations of people like Alina Sajed and Timothy Seidel, Robbie Shilliam and Quỳnh N. Phạm or Shiera el Malik and Isaac Kamola that are digging up anti-colonial figures and moments and put them in conversation with contemporary IR. El Malik and Kamola's edited volume *African Anticolonial Archive* pulls us into an extremely timely methodological conversation about archiving and curating beyond/against the violent colonial logic of accumulation and ordering for the purpose of control.

Next to historical detail and archiving, I feel the need to engage more seriously with the political economy. I do this with a certain degree of trepidation as my economic imagination or thinking in 'numbers' has never been my forte. What I'm understanding more and more is that the representational aspect of coloniality, i.e. pointing at things that have been erased or marginalised in IR, is very limited if we do not engage with the material aspects too. While I learn how to read coloniality in political economy, I try to keep in mind that these are not zero-sum conversations, between gender, race or class, the material or the immaterial. The recent special issue *Raced Markets,* edited by Lisa Tilley and Robbie Shilliam is incredibly resourceful in this regard. They curate a conversation about neoliberalism, whiteness, race and racism, not as a story of prejudice or ignorance but as constitutive parts of our political economy, grounded in very specific histories and geographies.

Thirdly, I'm increasingly thinking about the disciplining nature of scholarly format and forms, and how they relate to our ability to truly do anticolonial work inside the academy. I find it increasingly difficult to formulate what I want to contribute academically in our well-known pre-set formats, i.e. 'problem' or puzzle and research question/literature review centred on what other approaches have missed, to then set up our own as superior/formulating a clear methodology applied to carefully (rather than randomly stumbled upon) empirical material/curated analysis and conclusion gesturing at further research. This format is not necessarily the fundamental problem. What is, is that we continue to treat it as the standard for projecting and understanding academic rigour. It is not that no one has ever challenged this. Post-structural and feminist methodologies have been doing this across disciplines for a while now. In IR and politics we have books and journals by people like Naeem Inayatullah and Elisabeth Dauphinee for example. They have successfully drawn our attention to and thus legitimised autobiographic, ethnographic and narrative approaches for our discipline. But when I look at the everyday in the academy – how we grade our students' essays and dissertations, how we advise them, how we peer review colleagues' works, craft our own writings or put together our undergraduate IR methods syllabi – I think we are not being courageous enough in genuinely redefining what academic rigour and form looks like. Works that have recently inspired me in that sense are Sven Lindqvist's *Exterminate all the Brutes,* Robbie Shilliam's *the Black Pacific* (I wrote about its significance for me for the *Disorder of Things*) or Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. The latter two have moreover helped me to engage Blackness in a way that fundamentally transcends identity politics, without disavowing the salience of this epistemic standpoint.

Next, I'm increasingly excited – and I try to call it excitement rather than shame – to finally engage with 'canonical' texts I missed out on during my mainstream IR education. I think of Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, or the scholarship of Cedric Robinson, C.L.R. James, and Stuart Hall. There are so many places, in my case studying IR and EU studies in continental Europe for example, where exposure to critical, anticolonial or postcolonial thought is close to nil or very marginal. I feel like it is important to say this out loud sometimes, because a lot of young researchers (or the established scholars we kindly invite to reschool themselves in feminist and decolonial scholarship for instance) might feel similarly embarrassed. It's not that long ago that I started diving into *Orientalism* by Edward Said, in audiobook format. I knew what the main tenants of it were, but I'd never actually read it fully. Through my audiobooks library I'm now able to engage with Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, *Teaching to Transgress* by Bell Hooks, Eduardo Galeano's *The Open Veins of Latin America* Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Zora Neale Hurston's *Barracoon*, W.E.B. Du Bois *The Souls of Black Folks*, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe as well as *Beyond Good and Evil* by Friedrich Nietzsche or Karl Marx' *The Communist Manifesto*. There are only so many hours in a day, and I have the constant feeling that there is so much to catch up with, so I'm very grateful for this 'on the move' alternative to engage with important works. Next on my canonical – how have I not read them earlier?! – list are Saidiya Hartman, Sylvia Wynter and V. Y. Mudimbe. I'm also grateful for social media, which makes reading suggestions and discussions decidedly less hierarchical and more accessible and generative. All in all, joyfully accepting that there is so much out there we don't know (yet) has had a liberating effect – most of the time.

Lastly, I also look forward to delving further into the institutional conversations people are having about our discipline or the university in general. Eli Meyerhoff just released a book, *Beyond Education*, that speaks to different ways of understanding education and studying. Isaac Kamola's recent book *Making the World Global. U.S. Universities and the Production of the Global Imaginary* joins this effort as did Bob Vitalis' book *White World Order, Black Power Politics* on the origins of IR. These works link racist ideas, coloniality, capitalism and the university over time and help

me to understand that it's not just about changing our research agendas, but that we also need to think about the institutional environments in which we are doing this. The conversations on the institutional invite me to engage with abolitionist thought. So far I have been mostly familiar with it outside the academy, e.g. thinking with Angela Davies and the countless activists worldwide about the prison-industrial-complex and the carceral system today or chattel slavery in the past. Whether we are striving for decolonisation of our field of study or the institutions in which we do this, I suspect that abolitionism helps us conceptualise the need and urgency to literally let go of certain practices and systems and think anew. I didn't use the language of abolitionism but I think I was trying to express exactly this when calling for the end of International Development Studies in a talk I gave at the University of Sussex titled 'On Babies and Bathwater'.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I'm second generation Rwandan, born in Belgium where I grew up in a white Flemish family. My worldview was very much informed by ideas of more or less implicit Western (moral) superiority, and its overall good intentions internationally. I'm not sure how consciously I was thinking all of this, but I was fully on board with the idea of Africa as a place in need of saving and our (western) institutions having the solutions.

The seeds of doubt were planted when, as a teenager, I witnessed the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda from afar in Belgium. The way my Rwandan family and friends were living it clashed so fundamentally with how it was depicted and perceived in the media and in class at home. I witnessed pain, trauma and total sense of doom on the one hand, versus thinly veiled indifference on the other. In that other world, the genocide was treated as little more than another instance of people somewhere in Africa killing each other. In hindsight, I think that witnessing this contrast inspired me to study IR and politics; I couldn't understand how we had these supposedly superior human rights systems, but when people were being slaughtered *en masse* we didn't just do nothing, we chose to actively leave them to die.

Eventually I embarked on doctoral research into the 'when', 'how' and 'why' of EU ethical foreign policy in Africa. I launched into a mapping exercise on which basis I could prove and explain the inconsistencies and propose more ethical policy alternatives. My mainstream education in Belgium and doctoral studies at the European University Institute in Florence had not really exposed me to postcolonial, post-structural or feminist critiques. A few years into my research, after giving a presentation, someone – I don't remember her name, but I should thank her – pointed me to Rita Abrahamsen's *Disciplining Democracy* as a work that would help me with what I was trying to articulate. In the end, my PhD journey, littered with failings and successes, took me twelve years. About nine years in, I finally accepted what I'd been feeling all along: that I wasn't asking the right questions or using the adequate methods for the puzzle I truly wanted to investigate. At the centre of my initial question was still the assumption that Western presence is always the desired option.

I started questioning whether the west should be present in the first place, rather than assuming a countable and mappable pattern to Western hypocrisy and inconsistency. I shifted from SPSS to text analysis of the various Africa-EU policy documents. I went on to do open ended interview field work in Somaliland as it was one of the few places on the continent where, for a short period in time, the international community was relatively absent in peacebuilding and state-building. It moreover seemed that Somaliland was one of the more stable regions in the area.

My doctoral adventure, in part informed by my constantly shifting positionality, made me realise that international (i.e. Westernised) absence, be it physical, epistemological or financial, is severely understudied. Eventually, the work that really helped me finish my dissertation in the end was Meera Sabaratnam's 2011 article on decolonisation as a research strategy. When I first met her she spoke to me of Robbie Shilliam's work. So, by the time I came to the UK I landed in a community of people who were already engaged in post- and decolonial questions. I was to find out that they had managed to carve out zones within the existing IR institutions where these issues were cultivated and celebrated. Eventually, what impacted me most was how these practices of institution building around an anticolonial ethos – for example the Colonial Postcolonial Decolonial (CPD) Working Group of the British International Studies Association (BISA) or the Global Development Section (GDS) of the International Studies Association (ISA) – come

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with a politics of community and care that I can only hope to cultivate and pay forward in my own practices. All in all, what has shaped and shifted my understanding of the world has been a combination of the personal and/in community alongside my exposures to varied scholarly approaches. Today, decoloniality and Black (feminist) thought, help me – in a non-zero-sum way – make most sense of the world.

What is the importance of Black History Month and what does it represent to you?

I would say that it's both a month of mourning and celebration. It's a mourning in the sense that we remember the erasures and how they impact the quality and possibility of life for peoples of African descent worldwide and across time in the past four centuries; how silencing is linked to premature death. I also mourn it because we shouldn't need a specific month to remember the contribution of people of African descent to world history. At the same time, if Black History Month reminds some of us to ask ourselves 'where the Black people are' when putting together our syllabus, then that's at least something. Ultimately, for me, it's not about inclusion or recognising our humanity or accomplishments, a month would never suffice anyway; it's about training ourselves to remember that erasing peoples' contributions makes it easier to not mourn their death, so in that sense it's about life and death. Because it's then about life, I can see Black History Month as a celebration. Against the backdrop of epistemicide and genocide, Black History Month is a reminder for us to celebrate our full being as peoples amongst the other sentient beings; to celebrate our more-than-survival, how we have continued to share and be in spite of (the afterlives) of trauma – I find joy in that.

You've discussed the importance of diversifying knowledge production and argue that that "de-silencing", "de-mythologising" and "de-colonising" are integral to achieving this. How does the silencing of people, ideas and knowledge manifest itself in IR?

Firstly, I want to say something about the term "diversifying". We increasingly hear about IR wanting to pluralise, diversify and internationalise. Come to think of it, this is a remarkable desire for a discipline that is supposedly all about the study of the international. In a generous reading, I take it as a sign that the mainstream is finally ready to stop ignoring IR's fundamental Whiteness and Eurocentrism. At the same time I observe how, in these conversations, diversity is often mistakenly understood as the goal. Instead it's the tool and minimal rather than a sufficient condition to cultivate radically different knowledges. Systematically pooling from the insights of one tiny part of humanity or the world produces knowledge making at the service of the colonial status quo. Instead, the goal should be anticoloniality not diversity or pluralism. This is where I point at desilencing as a decolonial research strategy against the 'myths-presented-as-universal-truths' in our study of the international.

When it comes to silencing, it would be helpful if we were to stop thinking about it as an issue of the underrepresentation of certain voices. Instead we are dealing with an overrepresentation of a tiny (white male) minority. This is about more than semantics. It's a reformulation that shifts the power dynamic over what needs radical change. The most powerful are invited to cede space rather than stay at the helm, drawing in minorities in a magnanimous move of inclusion – at their discretion of course.

Similarly to what I was saying about Black History Month, it's not about identity politics or merely claiming a seat at the table – meaning just bringing the women and Black/brown/queer/… people in – it's about questioning the (lack of sufficient) seats and even the table itself. It's about working through the implications of taking these voices seriously as sources of theory and why they had to be excluded in the first place. Done properly, "desilencing" blows up the main tenants of our disciplines, bringing us back to the "myths". Let me illustrate this with an example:

About a decade ago, I walked into an ISA panel where both Bob Vitalis and Errol Henderson were presenting papers. I remember sitting there wide eyed because I realised it was the first time that I heard anybody speak about racism in IR (I of course knew about racism as I lived it daily, but never encountered it as a legitimate analytical tool in the study of the international). Vitalis and Henderson, and others with them, have helped me understand that once you bring in race and racism as more than an asterisk or a footnote, it blows up the main tenants of our disciplines. Errol Henderson brought this home for me with his work on the Democratic Peace Theory. He shows that once we as theorists stop erasing peoples of African descent from the US polity, we cannot but denaturalise the idea that the US

was a democracy before the 1960s. Similarly, Bob Vitalis' book is another good example of the radical potential of "desilencing" that transcends identity politics in IR; as a white American man, he sets out to revisit the history of our discipline without participating in the almost automatic erasure of peoples of African descent. What happens then is that racism and empire – du Bois' problem of the "colour line" – undeniably appear as central themes and constitutive features of IR. That's why I'm trying think about decolonisation as a simultaneous engagement with "de-mythologising", "de-silencing" and "anticolonial de-colonising"; it helps us think not only about the systemic blind spots and lies, not only about who is not around the table or does not have the microphone of expertise, but also why that matters. As such, decolonisation doesn't only change the content but also the *purpose* of the conversation.

How can western researchers undertake decolonial research without inflicting epistemic violence and silencing the protagonist?

We should be humble enough to fail, and not look for a prefab uniform decolonial toolkit to replace the one we have at the moment. I see a lot of anxiety around changing our ways in the absence of assurances that the alternative will be perfect or better. In reality, that anxiety has more to do with a potential loss of power; I believe that's where the normative of the 'decolonial project' comes in. We can be mindful of inflicting epistemic violence by being clear about the normative project we're committing to – a structural dislocation of power. As individual researchers we can then judge any decisions we make against that goal.

The concept of pluriversality and rejecting the zero-sum-game logic of colonial science help us to push back against the desire for the uniform toolkit and the infliction of epistemic violence. For those of us in a more dominant positionality, it also means having the courage to consider retreat, there where our scholarly engagement cannot but be a form of extraction. For example, I'm of Rwandan decent and that's how I was exposed to and became interested in the relationship between Europe and the African continent. Compared to most of my white western colleagues, I have particular access and exposure to Rwanda. At the same time, I do not speak Kinyarwanda (some of them might), I never lived there and as I said, I had a deeply White and western upbringing. When I decided to focus my research on *agaciro* – a philosophy and public policy of dignity and value in Rwanda – I decided, for all the reasons listed above, not to make it into a case study about Rwanda, or become a 'Rwanda expert' (how one does that without knowing the country's language is beyond me. And even then). Instead I chose to study agaciro as a place of theorising, to reconceptualise western understandings of solidarity anticolonially. The simple truth is that my country, Rwanda, is full of colleagues that are a million times better placed to study agaciro as a study of Rwandan society. All the while, I'm conscious that I'm still extracting knowledge; it's therefore important to continuously circle back to the *why* question of one's research project. If we have little apart from "likely to attract publication interest", we need to be okay with being called inflictors of epistemic violence.

What can a decolonial approach offer to the study of humanitarianism?

A decolonial approach creates openings to ask different questions by de-naturalising the assumptions at the heart of the field, such as a western presence being salient. Additionally, a lot of our humanitarian thinking is shaped by biases of presentism (or organised amnesia) and technocracy, as if the crux of its problems would be of an implementational, technical or procedural nature in the present. A decolonial approach also allows us to tell broader yet grounded stories, reconnecting bits of the larger picture that are systematically treated as separate or unrelated. The work of Gurminder Bhambra on connected sociologies/histories and the "modernity/coloniality" conceptual intervention of decolonial thinkers like Aníbal Quijano have helped me to conceptualise this systematic fragmentation of reality.

With regard to humanitarianism and development studies in general, this manifests itself in what I call the disavowal of the firefighter/arsonist (or pyromaniac) conundrum at the heart of how we teach and study how to "do good" in the world. While we're trying to figure out how to be more efficient firefighters (humanitarianism, aid and development), we relentlessly eclipse the fact that our systems – through us and through those that came before us – have also been those igniting the fires. So, the decolonial contribution here is a constant reminder that we do not just need to mitigate the fire, but simultaneously think about how we're going to stop lighting it, again and again.

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Given that decoloniality is very much about life and death, it introduces a sense of urgency that is not just about the humanitarian crisis at hand, but an understanding that there is urgency to historicise things. We might think that humanitarian crises are too urgent for there to be time to historicise and talk about what happened in the past. An anticolonial approach helps us to see a sense of urgency in telling the larger story, especially for those of us who are engaging with humanitarianism from the comfort of the ivory tower. By historicising the issues at hand, a world of radically different engagements, including policy solutions, opens up. To me, that is the contribution of decoloniality to humanitarianism.

You've looked into the limited success of western ethical foreign policy in sub-Saharan Africa, using the EU as a specific case study. What are the major limitations of Western ethical foreign policy?

For the longest time I had difficulty putting my finger on the problem. During my PhD I spent some time at the European Commission as an intern. I was sure that inside its walls I would be able to locate where it all went wrong, where the hypocrisy and inconsistencies resided. Instead, I mostly found myself surrounded by hardworking well-intentioned people, which made me realise that we need other lenses and concepts to observe the problematics. What I eventually understood from working at the European Commission was that people take for granted the idea that more European involvement, in whatever shape or form, is a good thing.

So, today I would frame it as a lie sustained by organised amnesia. The lie of disavowed coloniality and desires of Whiteness/white supremacy at the heart of Europe's relations with Africa over the long durée. Clive Gabay's recent book *Imagining Africa* doesn't focus on the EU specifically but has been extremely helpful for me to name and understand in detail Europe's/the West's relations with Africa as one informed by the toxicity of Whiteness. Pointing at the ideology of Whiteness is not about a blame game or setting some records straight, it's about understanding the power that the lie of *White Innocence*, as coined by Gloria Wekker, generates and what allows western actors like the EU to do while using the language of ethical foreign policy. This is why detailed historicising and grounding is really important. We can unpick how it came to be, how it's not unavoidable, and imagine the path to take to undo it and make different choices.

One experience that made me really understand this was when I went to Rwanda in 2004 just after the presidential elections. I found myself at an EU-expats garden party in Kigali, where an Italian EU parliamentarian from the electoral observation team explained how the elections had not been 'free and fair' because there had been soldiers with Kalashnikovs in front of the polling station – 'A clear sign of voters intimidation!'. I remember thinking that if I went to the polling station in Italy or Belgium and there were people with Kalashnikovs I would indeed feel intimidated. Yet while it was my very first time in Rwanda and I had only been there a few days, even I understood that holding up the Kalashnikov = intimidation equation as a universal truth was nonsensical. In my aunt's street where I was staying, most houses had guards armed with Kalashnikovs, leisurely hanging around, with kids playing in the streets around them. Listening to the EU parliamentarian, the deep-seated arrogance at the heart of Europe's engagement with Africa became clear to me; as did the fact that it doesn't require evil or ill-intended people. It speaks to – to use an insight by Enrique Dussel, that came to me through the work of Sabelo Ndlovu Gatsheni – a protracted "will-to-power" over a "will-to-life". Fighting the former at the service of the latter is what the decolonial project is about, ultimately.

To sum up, I think there are endless issues with western/European ethical foreign policy. One way to engage with these beyond the technocratic and presentist bias is to place it in continuity with the missionaries during colonial times. They too were shrouded in a framework of good intentions and benevolence. Once we zoom out, though, we see that they were operating in and for a system of extraction that needed to be maintained. I'm not sure how far we've moved on from that today; it's a discomforting and rather bleak outlook on those relations, especially if you're in the business of teaching International Development. That's why I'm trying to come up with ways to radically re-think solidarity, because you can't just say "it's all horrible" and leave it at that. Solidarity does exist, but it may look like something completely different. In the end, in spite of the discomfort, I have come to experience the decolonial approach to International Development as life giving, because the Whiteness of what we have to deal with now is next to deadly, so profoundly dehumanising and degrading for the majority of life on this planet.

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You also explore the salience of alternative non-interventionist methods- or "ethical retreat". How effective are these methods, such as autonomous recovery, in comparison to direct Western intervention?

Rather than a method in policy terms, "ethical retreat" is first and foremost a conceptual and epistemological intervention to imagine solidarity radically differently from what we have now. It's difficult to start off this work empirically because of the simple fact that there are few (known) examples of humanitarian and other crises in which the West has not been present in one way or the other. That's why I went on to do fieldwork in Somaliland. Initially, I thought the penetration of the international (read: Westernised) community in the country would not be *that* big, because of its relative autonomous recovery (Somalilanders' refused UN intervention in the early 90s). Once there though, I don't think I'd ever seen that many road signs for international NGO's and other institutions per square meter than in the capital, Hargeisa. Yet, in spite of the externals pouring in after the 2000's, if I compare it to other places in Africa, there is still a qualitative difference in how they engage with them. I sense something similar in post-genocide Rwanda. Part of it comes from a people's bone-deep understanding that they do not need (Somalilanders opted for an in-country and locally led peace- and statebuilding process) nor can count on (Rwanda and the UN retreat on the first day of the genocide) the international community. In my work I'm trying to understand what taking this seriously means for solidarity from a Western positionality. This is how I ended up with the concept of "ethical retreat".

Ethical retreat doesn't mean that we stop caring. It points at a need for us to retract as the protagonists of any place on planet earth and then focus on the arsonist side of the story and think about where is it that we are actively contributing to peoples' life chances. That means that for our imagination we also need to: 1) re-localise western policy in terms of studying what we're doing at home that's harming the rest of the world – think for instance of something like intellectual property and patent laws and the Ebola epidemic; and 2) re-check our deeply racist imaginaries of the agency, ideas and philosophies of people in the places we're so interested in intervening in. This is why I'm drawn to the idea of *agaciro*, even if I may not ever be able to fully understand its precise meaning, even if I end up learning Kinyarwanda and spend more time in the country. Letting go of the pretense of expertise creates spaces for other ways of learning and engaging, ways that I believe are generative for anticolonial knowledge cultivation. To me, this is also ethical retreat.

What is the most important advice you would give to young scholars?

Make sure you do not believe in or are wedded to the system. I would not necessarily single out the young scholars in this, as it speaks to all of us in academia. Being in and not of the institution is what allows me to continue to do this work with a certain degree of joy. Even when we do very critical work or dissect all of its problems, at the end of the day we tend to believe the system's criteria in terms of "good" and "bad" research. When we write articles, make research design decisions, read or write rejection letters for article and book submissions, … there needs to be a logic to what we do or say that goes beyond the system in which we're doing it, and have our emotions and insecurities follow this insight. In the UK context we have the REF system for instance. I'm not against using it strategically, to keep our jobs for instance, but we shouldn't confuse it with a system that usefully assesses our capabilities and contributions to the field. I see too many of us literally being put down by the system in that way.

Today I can say that I am grateful for how long it took me to finish my PhD, and the other jobs I was forced/blessed to take on during that journey. The way success is measured in the neoliberal academy today (expedience), makes us forget that there are places outside the academy in which we can do the same work. So, my advice would be something along the lines of: trust that your failings are more than that, be comfortable with trying out things on the other side of the academic fence; and let us look for ways to create time and slow down.

Zooming in on IR, I would say that we can't work for the purpose of simply writing back to the discipline. In critical conversations, we sometimes hear people ask whether IR allows us to do X, Y or Z but to me that question doesn't make sense – it should be the other way around. We should be asking how IR allows us to understand the world, and if it's not good at doing that, then we change what IR is. IR is a fiction. We created it, so we can change it.

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