

Interview – Samuel Ritholtz

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Samuel Ritholtz is retaining-fee lecturer at Somerville College and a doctoral candidate in the Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford, where they study queer and trans experiences of conflict, crisis, and displacement. Sam's broader research interests includes political violence, forced migration, gender, sexuality, and epistemology. Outside of academia, Sam has worked on human rights and gender issues for a range of institutions, including the United Nations' Executive Office of the Secretary General as well as human rights organizations in Washington DC and Buenos Aires. Sam's work has been featured in *Migration Studies*, *Politics & Gender*, *Slate*, the *New Humanitarian*, and *Newsweek* and the *Daily Beast's Women in the World Foundation*. Originally from New York, Sam has an MSc in Refugee and Forced Migration Studies from the University of Oxford and a BSc in International Agriculture and Rural Development from Cornell University.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

When I think of the most significant shifts in my thinking, and the scholars who facilitated that, I think of them in three categories: standpoint theorists, critical security scholars, and pluralistic scholars of political violence. I started my master's degree in Refugee and Forced Migration Studies and for my PhD I transitioned into a broader focus of Conflict Studies and Political Violence Studies. I had left America to start my master's right at the election of Donald Trump and I was trying to understand it. I reflected on four years prior when I lived in Washington D.C. and all the 'progress' that was happening, followed by this almost backlash response in the election of Trump, which made me reflect on whether that 'progress' narrative was really fair and who was excluded by it. When I came to the Refugee Studies Centre at Oxford, the questions that I started asking myself were, what are we missing in terms of scholarship? From ideas of progress and inclusion that prevailed during four years of Obama—which though not perfect definitely had this 'progress' narrative attached to it—to the election of Trump and its attendant backlash, what I saw was that there was vulnerability and suffering that were not being considered, in public policy or scholarly debates. So that prompted my first paper, originally my master's thesis, on queer epistemology and Refugee Studies.

I tried to understand if there were conceptions of displacement that are made visible or can only really be understood through the consideration of queer and trans experience. I built on the work of feminist standpoint theorists such as Sandra Harding, Nancy Hartsock, Patricia Hill Collins, and Iris Marion Young who were all trying to consider what difference means when it comes to the study of certain groups. They were the first group of scholars who greatly influenced me and helped me understand what situated knowledge means when it comes to the production of knowledge. When I was thinking through ideas of queer difference in the study of queer and trans people and enforced displacement, I relied heavily on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who I thought, in her work *The Epistemology of the Closet*, really got into what queer difference means and how it relates to other social collectives. Working through that and then expanding to study political violence led me to ask questions of queer experiences of crises, conflict, and displacement. I started thinking a lot about gaps. I was thinking through the idea of situated knowledge, and then about where we find absences in the record, and how we reconcile that absence. The scholar

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who was impactful for me in understanding that absence was Saidiya Hartman. Her piece, *Venus in Two Acts*, talks about the violence of the archive and what it means when queer histories are not being recorded so they cannot necessarily be exhumed. It gave me the capacity to think through absence and what it means when what you are looking for is not necessarily obvious.

Scholars have made the bridge between political violence and sexuality and gender studies in powerful and impressive ways. Laura J. Shepherd, Diana Taylor, and Kimberly Theidon all really reconciled how structures of gender and sexuality impact our understanding of conflict, displacement, and suffering in general. Scholars in Conflict Studies who left open the inclusion of new frameworks, new perspectives, and new ideas left an impression on me. Lee Ann Fujii, María Victoria Uribe Alarcón, and Elisabeth Jean Wood are probably the three scholars I take the most inspiration from in terms of understanding how social structures can be applied to our understanding of conflict and violence. Then there are scholars who take interdisciplinary, multi-methods approaches and show an intellectual openness to pluralistic approaches to the study of violence, such as Ana Arjona, Amelia Hoover Green, Francisco Gutiérrez-Sanín, Stathis Kalyvas, Dara Kay Cohen, and Abbey Steele. This group of scholars are leaving a sub-discipline open for scholars of all backgrounds in an exciting way as opposed to laying down a singular way of doing research.

Your work on queer kinship and the rights of refugee families challenges heteronormative assumptions implicit in refugee protection regimes in the West. How does queer and trans kinship challenge disciplinary IR and create transgressive intellectual possibilities?

What was interesting about my piece with Rebecca Buxton on queer kinship was that it was a logical extension of my queer epistemology piece, with an impactful addition from Rebecca of normative political philosophy. So much of our knowledge rests on assumptions of certain social structures. In “real” life examples, when we see a break in protection and the dissonance between protection and suffering, or protection and the lack of acknowledgement of people’s claims, it comes down to how we intellectualize and conceptualize these experiences. The idea for the queer kinship paper came to me during my master’s after I heard a news story of a group of trans women from Central America who applied as a group at the southern border in America, hoping to get group status determination. Usually, the global refugee regime only provides individual status determination except for biological families. When I learnt of that example, I started thinking that our conceptualization of a given phenomenon is not inclusive of queer and trans experiences.

The queer kinship piece is one of many pieces that could be written, and I hope are written, in which scholars take examples from queer communities, whether they are acts of resilience, acts of safety, or acts of resistance, to look at how queer people in the everyday are reconceptualizing global power structures around them. I think that applies to many topics of IR such as the work Cynthia Weber has done with Queer IR, Jamie J. Hagen with queering peace and security, and a lot of scholars who are “queering” certain sub-disciplines and considering how we can reconceptualize standard topics within the discipline. In addition to that, it is interesting to look at structures that are already existing within queer communities and applying them to already existing social-scientific disciplinary areas. This idea of queer and trans difference and thinking through the entire migration pathway of the displaced person interests me and is actually the basis for a book project that I am working on with Rebecca Buxton. My work builds on that of scholars who have been doing that for years such as Eithne Luibheid’s work on borders, sexuality and policing, Mengia Tschalear’s work on refugee status determination in Europe, Giuseppe Campuzano’s work on trans philosophy in Peru, as well as the work of Dean Spade and Carlos J. Zelada on queering the law and the many other scholars who are thinking through system failure for people of non-normative and non-hegemonic sexualities and gender identities. I think it is transgressive.

The more we open up the realm of queer possibility, the bigger impact it will have on disciplinary IR. It is critical for scholars to be doing this work, not to be discouraged from it, and find communities that foster it. A community is important when promoting this transgressive knowledge because many times disciplines can be disciplining and disciplinary and those that step outside the boundaries can quickly and subtly be pushed back within it. It is often not mal-intentioned, sometimes there are advisors trying to look out for the job prospects of their students, sometimes it is just people not understanding where you are coming from so they try to make it more intelligible. Focusing on

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intelligibility is really significant but I recommend finding people who foster this approach so you can bounce ideas off of them and rest assured that these inquiries are crucial and worthy of scholarly focus. Mirya Holman delightfully refers to this process as finding your ‘academic coven.’

In what ways is Queer IR, including queering refugee studies, a decolonial endeavour and an effort to decolonise IR?

I think all conversations of queering are in conversation with decoloniality, and intersectional dynamics of race, class, empire, migration status, gender, disability, and so forth. When we look at difference and non-hegemonic social identities what we are doing is beginning a conversation on power and structures of power. The question of how that relates to conversations on decoloniality is in the application of the researcher. For example, in my work on refugee studies when I was trying to think through ontological biases in the discipline, I was relying a lot on the work of B.S. Chimni, who is a decolonial scholar of refugee studies and challenges imperial and hegemonic norms within refugee studies or forced migration studies. I was inspired by that work to think through how ontological functions become self-evident facts and what is left on the cutting room floor when these facts are produced and who is ignored or maligned when these facts are produced.

When you look through structural questions of power, you are trying to decolonize any discipline by acknowledging and identifying where power rests in the discipline and trying to make it more inclusive by challenging those structures. It is the most subtle, most perceivably self-evident structures, which seem obvious and matter-of-fact, where the most work can be done. As an example, when I was starting with refugee studies, a question I got a lot was how important is this work because the global refugee regime already accepts LGBT individuals. There are a couple dozen states that accept asylum applicants based on their sexual orientation and gender identity. With the queer kinship paper, and the forthcoming queer epistemology paper, the idea was to say that the global refugee regime accepting people based on their sexual orientation and gender identity is not enough. To think through displacement and where and how certain structures fail these people, and if there are aspects of queer displacement that we do not conceive as displacement (because we do not see it yet) is important. Supporting queer and trans people in a new land means recognizing their community structures. Saying we accept queer and trans refugees as a self-evident fact of inclusion is not enough. In order to break down structures of exclusion we need to understand where those moments of exclusion are and thinking through those moments is a decolonial endeavor.

What is the impact of Covid-19 on variously marginalized trans and queer people situated in the contexts you have worked on?

What we are seeing when talking about these experiences is that it is really easy to have two initially flawed assessments. First is identifying people’s vulnerability based on their sexual orientation and gender identity and applying a monolithic lens to look at structures of exclusion. The second thing is assuming a singular definition of loaded terms like vulnerability, suffering, or resilience with little consideration of difference. When we look at queer and trans communities globally, and there is a report by OutRight Action International who have done amazing work on this, we see certain patterns that can easily be understood as similar. Within queer and trans communities across the world, and the report speaks to this, there has been a really rapid transition to food insecurity. At the same time, there is obvious scapegoating or exclusion, such as the public humiliation of queer people in certain parts of the world if they were caught breaking curfew, or the gay clubs in South Korea termed as super spreader events. These events really bring to light how during crisis a politics of difference often means scapegoating difference. It is important to recognize that we all have multiple identities which intersect and then impact our experiences of crises. In a conversation I had with Jean Freedberg of Human Rights Campaign, she made a lot of these connections for me: many queer and trans people are likely to be in service industries, which were some of the most impacted by lockdown measures. Further, many are likely to be informally employed— and informal economies were not able to receive support from the government, despite being severely impacted by lockdown measures. Those are really important lenses to think through broader structures of exclusion. When we look at more specific cases, we see intersections where crisis compounds.

My work with Graeme Reid of Human Rights Watch considered the cases of South Africa and Ghana during the

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pandemic and explored the different experiences of LGBT communities in these two countries. We saw that in Ghana queer women were doubly maligned because they were already experiencing financial and social precarity for rejecting traditional expectations of their gender in Ghanaian society, and they were informally employed. From their exclusion owing to their identities as women, and their sexual identities as lesbian and bisexual women, there was a compounding of crises when they were trying to access resources. They could not rely on the state and they could not rely on their communities. The challenges they faced from food to housing insecurity and a lack of employment, were very similar to what we saw in South Africa.

What was different in the South African context was that the state was providing a lot of aid to people in the informal economy but they were not giving aid to migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers—there was xenophobia and exclusion of people with different immigration statuses. Even though the South African government was providing aid to different communities, those who were not considered part of the South African polity or political community were excluded.

I think it is also important to think through structures of queer and trans marginalization during crises. We see this in the expectation of family in the Philippines. The government was giving aid to individual family units, and queer and trans families were not considered families and had to rely on their biological families for aid. In Sri Lanka, all the aid was organized through a municipal process that required registering with the police. Given the criminality of same-sex relations in Sri Lanka, as well as overall police persecution of queer and trans people, many queer and trans people did not want to register with the police and hence became ineligible for aid. These structures of exclusion exist in a lot of different contexts and it is important to identify them in crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and think through how structures of exclusion are compounded. Social structures that become the bedrock for the implementation of aid are also structures that can expand and compound exclusion.

How do you think marginalization of queer and trans people and class-based resistance during the Covid-19 pandemic can be explored to broaden the horizons of Queer IR?

Class-based considerations and those based on sexuality and gender challenge public narratives and conceptualizations of the world as we understand it. Reports such as the one brought out by OutRight Action International on food insecurity can impact the discipline by challenging where we focus our attention and what counts as discrimination, prejudice, and exclusion. Let us take for example refugee studies where there is a great focus on legal recognition and legal processes. The global refugee regime is a legal regime, refugee status determination is a legal process, and rights-based movements often have a very legal focus, so a lot of research on queer and trans refugees focus on claims they make before states and recognition of rights before law. Class-based analyses coming out of the pandemic show that structures of exclusion impact people not just in terms of legal recognition but in every aspect of their lives. By adopting perspectives from a position of class and the phenomenology of queerness and transness we can understand where our attention and understanding are lacking. This perspective mandates a disciplinary and epistemological shift by interrogating where exclusion and discrimination happen, beyond legal regimes. Brandon Andrew Robinson's work on LGBT youth experiencing homelessness in the United States in a fascinating way looks at the intersections of hyper-policing and socio-economic, political, and legal exclusion of these communities. We are moving towards new approach to studies in Queer IR that go beyond political and legal regimes.

Beyond IR, there is a lot of political potential to foster that solidarity. In the UK as an example, there is a really interesting perspective of class-based struggles identifying and working with the LGBT rights movement which, I think, has been very effective. We are seeing broader connections that will move into the academic space. Matt Brim calls it "low class problems of high class queer theory" and talks about the privilege that queer theory has nowadays. I hope the pandemic is opening up these questions of class within queer theory in academic communities and continues to broaden class-based analyses within queer Studies.

What are you currently working on?

My paper on queer epistemology will hopefully come out as part of a special issue led by Mengia Tschalaer, Bridget

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Anderson, and Fadi Saleh. I just participated in a host of events at the Barnard Digital Humanities Center for this special issue on queer migration, marginal mobilities, and liberalism. I am excited for this piece to come out and for this dialogue with a group of scholars working on these areas.

My broader dissertation looks at the dynamics of violence against LGBT communities during the Colombian internal armed conflict, which relates to the broader question of violence against social difference or as Iris Marion Young would call it ‘the politics of difference’, during war. I explore that by looking at the role of cruelty, marginality, and spectacles in acts of violence during civil war against certain communities. Is there a unique element of violence against LGBT communities during civil war? I argue yes and that armed actors target LGBT people during attempts to transform the social environments of a contested territory for both ideological and strategic reasons. Violence against social minorities facilitates this transformation through what I refer to as ‘the social process of abjection’, or the production of a stigma that comes from being the target of violence— especially excessive, or extra-lethal, violence. There are inherent social dynamics beyond LGBT communities that we do not understand yet as social marginality in conflict remains underexplored. I am actually planning to expand my doctoral research on the Colombian conflict to look at these “cleansing campaigns” that targeted LGBT people, as well as many other socially marginalized groups including people who were experiencing homelessness, considered drug dependent, or forced into prostitution.

I also noticed in my research on Colombia that people were talking about sexual violence and violence against LGBT people interchangeably and assuming a correlation between sexual violence and homophobic violence or violence against LGBT communities. Even though they are both very much part of gender-based violences and made possible the acknowledgement that LGBT people during conflict are more likely to experience sexual violence than other forms of violence this overlap was not perfect and I did not find this obvious correlation in my research. I have a piece forthcoming which looks at the relationship between sexual violence and violence against LGBT communities during the Colombian civil war as a way to understand the different nuances of gender-based violence during war. There is amazing research that has already been done on how gender-based violence during war produces social order or becomes a form of social control. My piece tries to add more nuance to how forms of gendered violence produce or become the technology of social control during war. Exploring the difference between sexual violence and violence against LGBT people could be interesting in terms of variation and to understand patterns as well as the process through which sexual violence and homophobic violence produce social control.

Lastly, I have a few exciting collaborations forthcoming at the intersection of queer conflict and peace studies. Jamie J Hagen, Melanie Judge, Fernando Serrano-Amaya and I are currently co-editing a special issue on queer peacebuilding for the *Revista de Estudios Sociales* at the Universidad de los Andes. We are still accepting abstracts and draft papers in English, Portuguese, and Spanish. I am also co-editing with Jamie J Hagen and Andrew Delatolla an edited volume entitled *Queer Conflict Research*, which will hopefully serve as a useful resource for scholars interested in Queer IR.

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

The first thing would be to find your community. For many scholars doing Queer IR, they are probably one of the few in the department doing Queer IR. Other departments at the university will have queer scholars, so if there is a queer studies network, do join it and sync up with people doing work in other disciplines. I find that a lot of the theory travels across disciplines. Within your department, find champions – even if they are not scholars of Queer IR but are willing to recognize the importance of your work and be a sounding board—my supervisors Alexander Betts and Masooda Bano were huge allies of my research even though it wasn’t their expertise. Their support has been vital in getting my research off the ground and they also instilled in me the lesson that if you want your insights to have an impact on the broader discipline, it is important that scholars who do not have your background can understand it.

Develop your ideas with other Queer IR scholars to think about your contributions to the discipline. It is important to find a community, which could also be an inter-university community. There are networks such as E-IR which works to foster this, so definitely connect with that, and with academic communities and people who are open to Queer IR, pitch your work to them, and find out what parts of it are landing and which are not. There is a high barrier to entry if

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people are not used to these discussions. It is almost like trying to learn two languages. It is important to hone your craft and insights with people in the community who know the scholarship really well, but it is also significant to step out of that community and learn to speak in a more accessible language to scholars who do not have this background but are willing to engage in it and learn from it. The really exciting thing about Queer IR is that it can have broader impacts in the discipline beyond the study of people with non-hegemonic gender and sexual identities. My advice would be to think through the role of community, gain access to multiple communities, and learn what to take from each community.