

Editorial #29: Category Is... Respectability Politics?

Isabel Lischewski

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As a [recovering](#) theater kid now cast in the part of Early Career Scholar teaching international law, there is something about the lecture stand that is comfortably and painfully familiar. Perhaps that special blend of adrenaline, imposter syndrome, and gratified need for attention is a common ingredient to all stage roles. Yet I feel that there is something deeper to that familiarity. The theater stage has always served as a setting of permissible deviance due to the agreed-upon precondition that what is happening on there is not real – just like academic freedom is granted liberally where it is unlikely to interfere with “the real world”. Finding one’s footing on the academic stage is, in my experience, characterized both by improvisational self-discovery and rigid method acting. In classic theater, after deviance has been performed, all is well that ends well, i.e., with the return to order, symbolized by either marriage or punishment. Similarly, legal academia encourages experimentation and self-expression within certain strict confinements and the goal of respectability always on the horizon.

Respectability politics is a term developed in critical discussions around narrative strategies of [Black](#) activism but nowadays also widely used in [queer contexts](#), especially with regard to the turn to marriage equality as the be-all-end-all of queer liberation. Respectability politics sequesters performance of deviance to certain permissible settings for safe consumption by the mainstream while centering the quest towards hegemonic society’s acceptance on that society’s terms. In doing so, respectability politics practices the self-devaluation of deviant experience and knowledge. What is more, it burdens marginalized folks with the expectation of impeccability – because their performance of normalcy will always be judged more harshly than that of actors straight from central casting.

And what could be more emblematic of the queer theater kid’s need to outperform and gain recognition as well as acceptance than not just wanting to become a lawyer, but a law professor at that? There is some tentative evidence that queer people are disproportionately [drawn](#) to academia. I even have a pet theory that there is something inherently queer about gravitating towards international law specifically: it is *just* respectable enough but offers sufficient vagueness, sufficient *weirdness* that we can drape our own in until it comes off as eccentric, but no longer deviant.

In fact, the said pet theory of mine used to include the idea that law generally, and international law specifically, is drag for gays who suck at make-up. However, I have since come to realize how deeply unfair this is to drag. Even if the art of drag was not currently being [criminalized](#) ([again](#)) in certain US states, it could, even in the age of its RuPaulization, as such certainly not be accused of following respectability politics. I would even go as far as saying that as queers in legal academia, we could do well in taking certain notes from drag.

I have [read](#) the notion of [camp](#) being described as “a way of resolving the question of what to do with the iconic”, and I find this inspirational when trying to figure out how to perform the role of early career international lawyer in the academic industrial complex. Sometimes, we need just enough [realness](#) to [pass](#) in situations where one’s professional future may depend on those who cannot be trusted to understand an atypical performance. This realness, however, is manufactured and does not actually put the performer on the side of those for whose convenience it is performed. Rather, the performance of it is subversive in itself, and it is acted out with a knowing wink of solidarity to those recognizing sameness. And, as all drag, it is built on fundamental irreverence for the thing it seemingly seeks to imitate.

As a white, cis-enough, able-bodied person precariously but privilegedly employed in a Global North institution, I feel an increased duty to let that irreverence shine through where I can safely do so, and to question whether a pierced septum and a gay haircut are enough to that end. Still, natural stage fright is heightened by the knowledge that the access to this stage is gatekept by hetero- and cisnormativity. Even musing about these things on the internet for future hiring committees to google seems a risky step out of the chorus line. Yet I find coming out in this way, time and again, necessary. And fortunately, others have done so before. International law specifically has [proven](#) to lend itself wonderfully to all kinds of [queering](#), of re-coding the masters’ [tools](#). This blog strives to be a [home](#) to [queer authors](#) and [topics](#) during all [twelve](#) months of the year.

Queer ballroom culture, created and led specifically by Black and brown people, many of which were trans or otherwise gender non-conforming and marginalized in many other ways, has built community, re-wired [language](#), and continues to exert tremendous influence on mainstream [culture](#). Its goal was never assimilation but survival, and at its best, it is still a powerful expression of a refusal to play by the rules. In a similar way, those of us called to academia as that other kind of stage – and especially those of us whose identities allow easier access to it – would do well to remain wary of a pull towards respectability. After all, our [silence](#) will not protect us, much less those who cannot yet safely enter the spotlight. The value of irreverence translates to any setting that would ask of us to tone down our deviance and be respectable. So does the idea of solidarity and community, especially in times of increased attacks against our most vulnerable siblings.

Doing international law with Pride starts with the knowledge that we were never meant to make it this far, and yet we did.

The rest is drag.

