

International Relations As If People Matter

Jonneke Koomen¹

I taught a night class on transnational feminism a few years ago. Every week, I anticipated the seminar with a mix of excitement and anxiety. It was a difficult task to teach about connections between racism, colonialism and feminism, to recognize and name those dynamics in my own teaching and my classroom, and to find ways to learn with and from students, without exploiting their knowledge and experiences. The stakes felt high.

One week, I assigned stories by writers who turned to science fiction and Afrofuturism to imagine other worlds.² Two students in the seminar, Karla and Lizzi, wanted to do something more: We will write stories ourselves. We will write our own worlds, they told me.

I was very pleased. This is *studentdrivenpedagogy*. Karla added: You too, Koomen.

I had planned to read visionary fiction with my students, not *write* it. I went through an inventory of excuses in my mind: I have never written a story as an adult. I'm not sure I can imagine anything, anymore. I'm *really* busy. When Karla threw in a stern stare, I knew better than to voice my thoughts.

Karla and Lizzi gave us one week to write our visionary fiction. I spent a lot of that time searching for headspace, ideas, and courage. I walked around our small university, a leafy campus with red brick buildings. At that time, the phrase "The First University in the West" was still emblazoned on the University website, letterheads, and campus banners.

I tried to write about that slogan at first. The expansive "West" presumably is shorthand for the West Coast of the USA but worlds lie in the claim to be "first." It alludes to - but doesn't name - the University's origins as the Indian Manual Labor Training School in 1834.

¹ Jonneke learns about international political sociology, Pan-African studies, and gender studies with undergraduate students at a small university in Salem, Oregon, the land of the Kalapuya, who today are represented by the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde and the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians. She can be reached at jkoomen@willamette.edu and @jonneke on twitter. Jonneke writes: I would like to thank my students for their insight, solidarity and imagination. I send special thanks to Karla Gutierrez-Hernandez, Adrianna Nicolay, and Lizzi Silva Mendez, all the contributors of this volume and the ISA panel, as well as Yolanda Bouka, Isaac Kamola, and Shiera S. Malik. I am grateful to the *Journal of Narrative Politics* editors and reviewers Paulo Ravecca and Xymena Kurowska for their generous and generative review process.

² Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown, *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, Oakland, California: AK Press, 2015; Walidah Imarisha, "Rewriting the Future: How Science Fiction Can Re-Envision Justice," *Bitch Media*, February 11, 2015, www.bitchmedia.org/article/rewriting-the-future-prison-abolition-science-fiction.

But I had to nudge myself from writing about the University's violence to writing *visionary fiction*. Eventually, I settled on a question: What could the University be? I wrote about access, opportunity, and open admission. I wrote about abolishing debt, offering childcare, and lobbying the city for a bus service to campus. The buildings would be renamed after students. Maria and Gonzalo Theater. Olivia Hall.

After a few days, though, I started worrying I hadn't done what Karla and Lizzi had asked me to do. My *visionary fiction* didn't venture much beyond the slogan on my bright blue \$27 Bernie Sanders COLLEGE FOR ALL t-shirt. I had strayed to the easy stuff. I returned to the handout Karla and Lizzi provided, the Collective Visionary Fiction Writing Worksheet by Walidah Imarisha and Gabriel Teodros. "Fantastical fiction," the authors explained, "has an explicit intention for visioning beyond the current world, challenging mainstream power dynamics and ideals, and dreaming new just worlds."³ What could the University be? The worksheet authors offered prompts, including: "What is the setting that will allow your character to really address your issue? What is the foundation? What are the "rules" of this world you have created?"

What could the University be in a different kind of world? I tried hard to imagine the University repurposed for, by, and with a community beyond registered students, faculty, and administrators. Adrianna (Diné), water scholar and a student in the seminar, had told me about a Chinook concept, *Illahee*.⁴ It is a word that comes from and describes the valley where my university now sits. I think it means something like land, home, soil, community. I can't begin to fully understand the concept but I tried to sit with it to help me rethink the University. I tried to envision an inter-generational space; babies, youth, mid-life people like me, and elders using the buildings together. I tried to imagine a collective project freed from the interests of distant donors who act as trustees; a University by, for, about, and from this place. The worksheet pushed me to ask myself more questions like, how would we make decisions together? What conflicts would arise? How would these be addressed? My writing was still not visionary, and it was not exactly fiction. With the present conditions feeling so intractable and so limiting, what I tried to imagine was hazy, at best. Remembering Karla's pointed look, I wrote some ideas down anyway.

When we returned to the classroom the following week, Karla had abolished tables, or at least pushed them aside. Some people sat on the floor, some sat on chairs, many had come prepared

³ Walidah Imarisha and Gabriel Teodros, Collective Visionary Fiction Writing Worksheet, Creating Futures Rooted in Wonder Workshop, University of Hawai'i-Mānoa (2015). It is available at <https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/bitstream/10125/40635/CFRIW%20workshop%20handout%20Walidah%20Imarisha%20and%20Gabriel%20Teodros.pdf>

⁴ Adrianna Nicolay shared that Indigenous groups have used many words to describe the Willamette Valley and pointed me to Gray H. Whaley, an author who uses the Chinook word *Illahee*. Adrianna Nicolay and Olivia Orosco, "The Politics of Recognition," a handout prepared for the Transnational Feminism seminar, 18 November 2018 and Gray H. Whaley, *Oregon and the Collapse of Illahee: U.S. Empire and the Transformation of an Indigenous World, 1792-1859*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

with blankets and pillows. Someone (or someone's mum?) had made pozole. We gathered in a jagged circle slurping our soup. A student brought a mentee from the college access program and I think someone else invited a friend. We each had printouts or handwritten papers, our first attempts at visionary fiction. There was anticipation and tension in the room.

What now? I was not quite sure how to start class. No one was waiting for me, though. "Crumple your story into a little ball... Throw the ball in the circle," someone said. The unexpected chaos of wads of papers flying through the air broke the ice. Giddy, we caught the balls. We un-crumpled the stories. We read. We wrote words of encouragement in the margins. At our own pace, we re-crumpled the stories and threw them back into the circle. We refilled soggy paper soup bowls. The curly pages softened as we un-crumpled, re-read, re-noted, re-crumpled, and repeated. Gentle handwriting danced around black and white type. Sheets covered in soupy splats. Doodles in dog-eared corners.

At 10pm, our class was officially over. People trickled out of the room slowly and I heard distant sounds of chatting and laughing in the stairwell for a while. I took my time reading the remaining crumpled-ball-stories and saved them to return them to their authors. Someone, I think Adrianna, wrote in the margin notes of my crinkled paper: Rename buildings after actions, not people.

I attended an academic conference a few months later. A few days away from conflicts at the University about devastating cuts and reorgs. A few days away from my own existential angst about researching and teaching in that situation. But as I listened to researchers presenting their papers at the panels, I found myself worrying about the classes I cancelled back home and the explanations I had offered my students. Looking at the name tags and the institutional affiliations of my presenting colleagues, I wondered about their working conditions. What conflicts arise for them? Can they teach the courses their students need? Do they sit with anxiety over their seminars too? Riffing off the prompts from that worksheet Karla and Lizzi provided months earlier, my mind jumped around thinking of the various settings of our work. I wondered about the new parents who pump milk between conference sessions and little ones watched by friends and relatives in hotel rooms until the panel is over. Also: How do my colleagues find the time and the courage to write?

You can't really ask questions like this at most conference panels (someone might send you to a workshop on mentoring). So I pushed the questions aside and tried to focus on the things that were said, not the things that weren't. But I did look for clues in footnotes in the papers, small inflections in the authors' presentations, and brief elaborations in the Q and As. Later on, I thought, I would look to acknowledgment pages or methods chapters in dissertations, the ones that are often later cut by academic presses. It occurred to me that some of us share some of the most important stories

about ourselves and our work, the stories that are hardest to tell, in small fragments during the in-between-moments: the hallways, exasperated debriefs after panels, over coffee if we can find the time, in shared taxi rides to the airport, and group chats.

When the next call for papers came along, I wanted to hear more of these stories, stories about people and their work that can be difficult to convey in the form of conference panels and research papers. Stories of research and writing that aren't easily captured in scholarly discussions of "method." I was longing for conversations about ways to learn about international relations and the people we learn from, both within and beyond disciplinary spaces. Stories about how we navigate, compromise, and fall short in our work. The seemingly-mundane matters, the obstacles, anxieties and possibilities, and all the efforts to think and learn and teach and write a bit differently. Conversations as intellectual work, not *after* intellectual work.

Why a conference panel though? I once ran into Saara Särmä in a Convention Center bathroom in Baltimore. She handed me these little pre-printed notecards that said: "you are invited to a feminist panel at _____ in _____." Fill them in! Hand them out! Give them to *those ones* who never show up, she nudged. I think that was also the conference where she facilitated a collage workshop. I thought about spaces created by scholars like Saara and others. I also thought about that unexpectedly joyful classroom with the flying stories. In all those moments, there wasn't one expert or speaker; everyone was asked to offer something, and everyone took just a bit of risk. So, I tried to imagine a bit: How could we tell stories that connect the intellectual and the personal across generations, locations, and positions? What if we had a panel where we smuggled our loved ones into the conference (definitely not paying more registration fees)? Let's bring the kids, parents, and partners we usually leave at home or in the hotel room. We would have to find ways to share stories that our families wouldn't find boring (big task). Maybe we could push the panel table aside. Could there be food?

I didn't get much further, but I did send a draftydraft abstract to a dozen people who I have seen get creative in academic forms and spaces, often quietly, a little bit behind the scenes. People who find ways to make space for others. I asked if they might join a roundtable that I very grandly called International Relations As If People Matter. I wanted to hear more about their *how*. Perhaps, if they agreed, and if this panel was accepted, the scholars listed on the conference program might start us off, but the space would be open to all who turned up.

When I sent that email, I had a knot of worry in my stomach. The idea was a bit silly and romantic. It was certainly not new, or "innovative," or carefully grounded in academic literatures. And the grammar of the title was not quite right... somehow too accusatory but also too tentative and probably derivative. And, logistically, I had no idea how to "open up a space" in a panel scheduled for one hour and forty-five minutes with all those seats in rows. And a small gathering does nothing

to make the expensive English-language conference in the USA accessible to students and scholars around the world. And I worried that no one would reply...

Ajay Parasram replied. He helped me reframe my questions about everyday knowledge-making in the much more generative language of knowledge-cultivation articulated in Robbie Shilliam's work. Laura Shepherd replied. Unlike me, Ajay and Laura know how ISA works and how to put a conference panel together. And many more people replied. Each email felt like a small moment of solidarity with... something not yet named in my too accusatory, too tentative, probably derivative title. Encouragement that perhaps we could figure it out together.

That next conference was ISA 2020, the one scheduled for Honolulu in March. It was cancelled, of course, along with any ideas I had about sharing stories, families, and food. A year later, a long year of lockdowns, loss, separation, isolation, overwork, and grief, we eventually held our panel at ISA virtually. There could be no sharing of physical space. Olivia Rutazibwa and I, living in vaccine-privileged/hoarding places a hemisphere apart, had each just received our vaccinations and we were each in the midst of experiencing the after-effects. Slightly feverish (Olivia), a bit loopy (me), we tried to figure out ISA's virtual conference platform, an off-brand zoom which did not allow us to share access links with people who had not officially registered (paid) for the conference. We couldn't even see our audience members.

And yet the words seemed to flow. And while telling stories, people shared glimpses of their workspaces, bookcases, makeshift bedroom offices, and pets in their zoom windows. The background sounds of Australian garbage trucks and family members going about their business gave clues at our context and time zones. Kevin Dunn, an expert at fading into the background so others can be heard, made a short film where his students, colleagues and activists theorized IR as if people matter.⁵ And some of the people in the audience, invisible to us in the interface, shared their stories, encouragement and small pieces of their lives. Megan Manion told us about graduate school disciplining. In the chat, Roxani Krystalli shared poetry to help us find words for things that are hard to say.

After that conference, Laura suggested we write our stories down and submit them to the *Journal of Narrative Politics*. I cannot speak for the others but, for me, the continued conversation with the people in that not-quite-zoom-room and the opportunity to learn new forms of writing from skilled storytellers offered another glimpse of something beyond my seemingly-intractable conditions.

⁵ We write in conversation with Oumar Ba, Kevin Dunn, and Olivia Rutazibwa who were part of the ISA panel in 2021 and generously supported us in this writing project (and a lot of other things). Kevin's short film is called "What Would the Discipline Look Like If It Assumed People Actually Mattered?" and it is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqOi7zpz-MQ (April 2021).

What follows are our individual and collective efforts to (begin to) tell stories about IR as if people matter. These are our efforts to start to write, imagine, and, in small ways, bring into being the kinds of work and worlds we dream of. We write in recognition of, and with gratitude to, each other's stories, and the stories of many people we learn with.