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Queering Paradigms: From Individual Resistance to Global-Local Impact

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BEE SCHERER, FEB 23 2015

Personal Beginnings

The global social justice academic network *Queering Paradigms* arose from civic defiance to local discrimination. In 2007, as a queer scholar, I felt the need to step up my engagement in social justice activism when my own employer, a Church of England founded university, tried to implement homophobic regulations, which clearly contradicted the institution's then existing equality policies (and which today, after the Equality Act 2010, would be unlawful in the U.K.). I have described the more technical details of these academic-activist origins in an interview for the *Brazilian Association for Applied Linguistics* (ALAB) in 2012. Reflecting auto-ethnographically on the events, I note that conflicting emotions accompanied my decision to take a visible stance. On the one hand, I felt betrayed by the very institution which I had served conscientiously and enthusiastically in multiple functions, by always looking for participation and pushing for change. Still, I was not completely surprised, since I had witnessed on occasions how special protection used to be afforded to fundamentalist Christians on campus. And unfortunately I had myself been on the receiving end of homophobia at work. But bullying aside, I had always stood my ground and worked for change in the university's *Equal Opportunity Committee* until a robust Equality Scheme was implemented; all our work seemed challenged in 2007. Oscillating between despondency and disobedience I opted for a different route: academic activism. From a first local queer studies colloquium (2008), a series of international queer conferences developed operating under a distinct ethos and vision: Queer Theory inseparable from applied and intersectional Queer Activism.

Queer

At the core of this approach is an understanding of 'queer' as proposed by Queer Theorists such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler. Contrary to popular usage the 'queer' of Queer Theory is not simply a synonym for any Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Questioning/Queer (LGBTIQ) person (see the excellent short introduction into Queer Theory by Jonathan Kemp 2009). Instead 'queer' troubles the social hegemonic template of heterosexuality ('compulsory heterosexuality', heteronormativity, heteropatriarchy) and undermines essentialized/-izing assumptions of gender as a binary as merely either male or female (and thus eclipsing non-binary embodiments and performances) and of notions what such 'male' or 'female' categories normatively mean. 'Queering paradigms' as an interdisciplinary, social activism-centred approach presented envisions queerness as 'ricochets' (*Querschläger*): the resistance and defiance of people who leave the expected trajectory of heteronormativity suggesting that 'to queer a paradigm' means challenging the hetero-/homonormative and gender-binarist assumptions of any given academic discourse. Queer subjects defy the 'seduction of identity by exclusion' and celebrate 'the whole potential of sexuality and gender fluidity and diversity'; they explode the limits of normative discourses and break new ground in research and activism for social change (Scherer 2010: 1-2; see also Ball and Scherer 2011: 1).

QP Ethos

Queering Paradigms (QP), both the conference series and the network, functions not only as a platform for

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queer/counter-heteropatriarchal emancipation; QP also poses a challenge to neoliberal academia itself, providing against a fiercely competitive academic context a genial and supportive environment of co-learning and co-creating for both established and emerging scholars.

After the first international conference, with its single-stream panels and intense workshops and discussion, a distinct vision emerged of an itinerant, transdisciplinary *glocal* (global-local) conference series travelling annually from continent to continent with always changing local agency, emphases and impacts. Thus non-local participants find themselves challenged by new contexts and cultural conditions, while the specific activist agenda is set solely by the local organisers and determined by local needs: the sense of grass-root ownership without any imposed (colonial) agenda is crucial to QP.

Changing Policies, Changing Awareness

At its early beginnings in the South of England, QP already contributed to policy changes at Higher Education Institutes (HEIs)/universities. Through persistent prompting and co-creating, my own institution can now pride itself of one of the most progressive LGBTIQ related policies and practices in Higher Education and functions as an example to other HEIs in the UK and even the US.

Following on a conference series manifested in a flow of linked and mutating intersectional foci and discourses (see Scherer 2015). All subsequent QP conferences achieved notable global impact: Brisbane 2010; Oneonta, New York 2011; Rio de Janeiro 2012; and Quito (2012 colloquium and) 2014.

For example, QP2 in Brisbane prominently contributed to LGBT right's debates in Australia. Retired Australian High court justice Michael Kirby delivered a keynote address, in which he emphasised the necessity of policy changes to secure full equality for all citizens. Kirby evoked the example of Australia's colonial past and the ongoing need to revise and abolish colonial laws in line with social justice advances. Commenting on the ongoing debate Kirby positioned himself firmly by stating that 'Legislation that does not allow gay marriage is unacceptable'. These comments were widely reported in the Australian national and local media (including the *Brisbane Times* and *ABC*, *Brisbane* and *The Australian* and *The Age*).

The network has attracted increasing attention and recognition by local and national policy makers; the Brazilian government provided extensive funding to QP4 in Rio de Janeiro thus ensuring the presence of many of the currently famous North American Queer Theory scholars. This influx of dominating North American voices raised the standing of queer research and activist discourses in Brazil significantly. However, of course, the presence of a privileged elite brought with it its own neoliberal and colonial challenges that the local organisers had to negotiate: the high rope act of mediating between high visibility of the regional and South American voices and the politically necessary utilisation of neoliberal academic 'stars' (in some cases: 'divas') provided a valuable learning experience in system subversion through 'playing the system.' The following QP Quito colloquium carried the QP momentum in the Andean region and attracted high profile political support. Opened by the then Health Minister Carina Vance Mafla herself, the colloquium presented a prominent platform for national/regional political discussions, for instance around the illegal lesbian cure clinics in Ecuador.

Empowering Activists

The strong support for and presence of activists, artists and politicians from High Court Judges (Australia), African and South American LGBT leaders and artists (USA, Brazil), and government ministers (Quito) further exemplifies QPs impact on societal and policy debates. As a grass-root movement raising societal awareness and pushing for change, the QP impulse snowballs by giving voice to activists and empowering them. To give just two examples, in 2011, QP3 empowered West African activists in their work and search for funding; and after attending QP4, an Argentinean Anarcho-queer activist organised a QP empowering workshop in August 2012 for the local activists in Buenos Aires. There are many personal testimonies how QP has been influencing the next generation of queer academics/activists in their local/regional/national work for social justice. In one particularly moving example, a young Brazilian LGBT activists recounts her QP experience and how she felt inspired to fight against homo-and

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transphobia at universities in Rio de Janeiro in 2012:

[At QPIV,] I met B and we had a conversation, from which I left with a different worldview. A conversation of hope that I regard as a “politico- philosophical “salvation, because I could finally see the horizon from my own life experience. B spoke about the challenges of gender transition, said how important it was for us to stand on issues that are dear to many people and how important it was to participate in conferences that allow these issues to be discussed and addressed from the perspective not only of academia but of different social fields. [...] In that conversation I had with B[] I was able to see [...] a way through education and activism! Three months after QPIV I [...] organized a major meeting at my university to discuss the problems and potential of trans identities, the name of the event was “For the UFRJ for everyone: LGBT identities in HE.” From there I went to [...] social activism for many trans people! We formed a sort of collective that seeks to combat homophobia, transphobia and lesbophobia in various spaces of UFRJ. I used the knowledge acquired in the QP to organize various round tables and debates on the subject of transsexuality. I was invited to give lectures to raise awareness [...]. I started to feel like a human being, a true citizen of otherness whose displacement is very powerful! (Translated from Portuguese; personal communication, 15 Oct 2013)

Challenging Gay Complacency

The impact of QP activities through raising awareness and changing attitudes extends also to the segments of the LGBT community, which are seemingly content with the niche afforded to them by the hegemonic heteropatriarchal discourse. One example is linked to the direct challenge to complacent ‘homonormativity’ (LGBT assimilationism and complacency). In Germany, I published a provocative QP essay on ‘Queer’ in the mainstream Gay magazine *Männer* (issue January 2012), reprinted in abridged form at the leading German gay news forum, www.queer.de. It received within 3 days 73 comments from gay men, many of them assimilationists and hostile to the queer project; the ensuing discussions clearly evidence considerable awareness change and challenge to established patterns of thought (see, for example, this activist blog in response to my piece and its comments).

Concluding Remarks: Scholarship as Activism

Through its activities the QP network sustains an ongoing engagement with non-academic queer activists and artists, growing to 500 registered participants at QP4 in Rio 2012. In true line with ‘intersectionality’ (Crenshaw 1989) marginalised Global-South and subaltern perspectives are given much space and voice: QP research presenting challenging and innovative developments of queering from across a variety of academic disciplines and political spheres has been recognized as “... not only saying, but doing language, in order to give queers around the globe voices of their own.” (Strutt 2012).

In 2015 QP returns with fresh focus to the Global North and to its birth place – a changed and more mature place with a new management and with many dedicated and transdisciplinary colleagues attuned to Social Justice activism. Shifting from colonialities, QP will focus on abilities as *variabilities* (not *disabilities*). Looking for pathways to a non-bodynormative ethics, *Queering Paradigms 6* will itself queer the paradigm of academic gatherings and perform itself as a pilgrimage from one end of the old English pilgrims’ route to another, from Winchester to Canterbury.

Hence saying and doing the same, performative scholarship as activism continues and promises further advances in Social Justice through raising and transforming awareness and changing policies. As a Buddhist I share the view of societal responsibility and action for alleviation of not only individual but also *systemic* suffering with many other Buddhists who are loosely associating themselves under the umbrella of the *Socially Engaged Buddhism* movement. Similarly I believe that as academics in the various fields engaging with cultures and societies we have an inevitable and strong responsibility to advance systemic Social Justice. We simply cannot opt out of activism; whether we like it or not, our roles will always intersect with advocacy and it is our responsibility to use our educational class privilege for effecting change, even if the resulting blurred identity performance appears awkward in the eyes of those peers who maintain the illusion of self-proclaimed outsider critical observers (see Scherer 2015). As responsible scholar-cum-activists we need to embrace our blurred and hybrid roles. Or, as formulated in my *postscript* to the forthcoming

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Queering Paradigms 5 volume:

Ethically, there is no 'mere criticality'; there is always also societal responsibility – 'caretaking' if you want: advancing discourses in a way that empowers participants and enables them to transform systems of oppression and injustice. Queering Paradigms as applied, intersectional Queer Studies invites us to embrace the blurring of our roles and performances as scholar-cum-Social Justice activists. (Scherer 2015).

Queering Paradigms on the web

QP website at CCCU

QP book series (Peter Lang)

Blog

Facebook

QP on wikipedia

Print References

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