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## Foreword

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## FOREWORD

OBIORA CHINEDU OKAFOR

In 1997, the first graduate law student conference ever to be held at the University of British Columbia (UBC), and perhaps in all of Canada, was convened at its Green College. The conference was primarily organized by the present author (now a professor at the Osgoode Hall Law School) and Jaye Ellis (currently a professor of law at McGill University. Jaye and I also had the dedicated help and support of a number of other graduate law students. Critically, both of us profited immensely from the robust support, extraordinary commitment, and expert guidance of Professor W. Wesley Pue, who at the time held the Nemetz Chair in Legal History and also served as the Director of Graduate Legal Studies at UBC. Professor Pue's highly imaginative mind, his highly developed communication skills, his wise advice, and his steadfastness were extremely helpful as my collaborator and I plotted, planned, and executed the conference, which began its eventful life in a conversation between Jaye and I while we sat in the then graduate law student's lounge at UBC. Ever the committed mentor, Professor Pue enthusiastically threw the full and considerable weight of the graduate law program behind us—two young graduate students who were still green in the business of conference organizing. Since there was at the time no Canadian precedent for what we planned to do, no model to follow, and no manual to read out of, Professor Pue's expertise, experience, and sage advice was a critical factor in shaping the success that the event eventually was. The financial generosity shown to this first conference by the Pue-led graduate program was extremely helpful as well. It is thus safe to say that we could not have done it without his support. Professor Karin Mickelson, who was a key member of my doctoral supervision committee, was also a committed and able adviser, and an invaluable source of support.

The theme of that conference (the product of a period of discussion, debate, and compromise between Jaye and I) was *the International System in Grotian Moment*. It called upon participants to explore and question the opportunity for international law to take “a great leap forward” that seemed to be presented by the greater fluidity and ferment witnessed in our world system during the 1990s. It appears that although the choice of the theme of this first conference was shaped (at least in part) by the international law training that Jaye and I were receiving at the time at UBC, that theme was in fact most appropriate. It is noteworthy that the keynote speaker at this inaugural conference was Professor Richard Falk of Princeton University, USA, who is widely recognized as having coined the term “the Grotian Moment” in 1985. Even more importantly, the conference was graduate student-centered. A host of them from across and beyond Canada presented papers and otherwise participated in that conference. And the revised versions of many of those papers—having passed peer review—were published in a special issue of the journal *International Insights*.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond this publication, the conference has also had significant impact over the last two decades or so on graduate law programs at UBC and beyond. One can safely argue that the conference in fact inaugurated a kind of significant (if modest) change in the way in which graduate legal education is constituted and experienced in Canada. Almost everywhere in the country, wherever a graduate law program with a sizeable number of students can be found, similar conferences are now organized there on an annual basis. This is certainly the case at such major important Canadian law schools as the Osgoode Hall Law School, the Faculty of Law at the University of Toronto, and the Faculty of Law at McGill University. I am very proud of the fact that the small seed that Jaye and I (ably assisted by our graduate law student colleagues and mentors) planted met very fertile soil, grew into a large and solid tree, and has yielded such a bountiful harvest.

What is more, the process of co-founding and co-organizing this first conference was immensely satisfying and ultimately very beneficial to

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<sup>1</sup> (1997) 13 *Intl Insights* 1–112.

me, first as a student and later as a scholar. Indeed, I was so satisfied and rewarded by the experience of organizing it that the very next year I led the effort to organize two smaller ones (international studies seminars). These two seminars also had international law themes. The keynote speaker at the first one was Professor David Kennedy of Harvard Law School. I am also proud and grateful that I was invited to return to UBC in 2006 to serve as the keynote speaker at that year's iteration of the very conference series I had helped found there as a student. I should also note that the experience of organizing three such conferences at UBC prepared me well for a life of conference/workshop/seminar series organizing—an integral and important aspect of the life of an academic. It also taught me invaluable lessons about the necessity and rewards of collaborating on these and other kinds of projects with my own graduate students.

It is against this background that I must note that, as an alumnus of the UBC graduate law program, I am proud of the fact that the UBC graduate law program has continued to robustly support the tradition initiated by its own students about two decades ago of convening annual graduate law student conferences. I am very pleased to write the foreword to this special issue. Its theme, *Law: Past, Present, Future*, calls upon participants at the 2015 Annual UBC Graduate Law Students Conference to reflect on “where we have come from, where we are now, and where we are going” in terms of how well law has helped or failed to help in making “sense of the complexity of modern life.” It also provided participants with an “open opportunity to explore diverse ideas and consider trends in their areas of interest, as part of a larger discussion about the proper role and place of law in our world: past, present, and future.” In my view, the choice of this theme was timely. This is not just because it celebrates roughly two decades of the existence of the longest running such conference in Canada, but also because of the socioeconomic and human security ferment in which the world currently finds itself. The role that law has played, not just in attempting to solve such problems, but also in producing them, surely deserves both scholarly attention and concerted praxis. The range of topics examined in this special issue, from indigenous legal questions (as ever relevant and pressing as they are) and law's negative impact on demonstrations

(something that has significant implications for the struggles of social movements and other campaigners for social change), to the relationships among law, development and disasters (a significantly understudied and leading edge issue), to the challenges of dealing with the complexity of proportionality analysis in constitutional adjudication (a question that cringes many brows), indicate clearly that this conference did indeed meet and surpass the benchmark set down by the inaugural one.

Thus, while a lot of water may have passed under the bridge since the first conference was convened at UBC (for example, the UBC Faculty of Law itself has since been renamed and the building in which I studied in the mid-to-late 1990s has now been replaced entirely by a shiny new structure), this special issue tells me that one thing has not changed at all at the UBC law school: this is the world-class quality of its graduate law program. It is a fitting monument to the talent and commitment of UBC graduate law students, past and present, and the dedicated guidance of their mentors.

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