



Memoirs and the Writing of Political Life

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Peninsula proposes a series of contributions that focus less on a specific topic, theme or question, than on a form of expression, a genre or style of writing: the memoir. As an account written from personal experience and knowledge, the memoir is an opportunity to reflect on the disciplinary definitions and delimitations of what qualifies as valid writing of the political and to broaden the scope of what counts as legitimate authorship, experience, or expression of politics. The memoir -- in part because of its evasive, indeterminate limits and criteria -- may serve as a practical critique of the conditions under which political theorists know how to render politics perceptible and make sense of it. Beyond established forms, pre-existing grammars, lexicon, and other instituted traditions that structure language in the study of politics, the rich and complex empirical threads of our practices and events in our lives seem to always resist any definitive re-inscription or theoretical captures. Yet, exploring the possibilities offered by unconventional or unauthorized tracings of the political and looking for politics in manifestations and expressions that are unfamiliar, given the established categories and rituals of the discipline raises many difficulties. Political thinking is constrained in many ways by a set of classifications and assumptions that we are encouraged to take for granted, and which expose us to seeing and feeling through categories that shape our political relationalities. We hope that the memoir, as a form of writing that problematizes the relationship between language, politics, and experience, can provide a different perspective for questioning idealizations deeply inscribed in the discipline that have come to be treated as real (e.g., sovereignty, state, nation, subjectivity, history, reason, law, liberty, equality, security).

For a long time, scholars have debated the relationship between theory and experience for determining what should be privileged as political reality, as having political significance and value. The very idea that such a distinction may exist is commonly cited as a defining feature of modern political thinking, along with privileging theory as the authoritative site for conceptualizing the conditions of possibility of the political. Yet, allegedly, attempts to revalorize practice and experience as a more concrete political reality hidden beneath dominant theoretical accounts of politics signal a posture that is itself a feature of political modernity. So

are attempts to unveil materialities and histories presented as covertly constitutive of our political relationalities, yet subordinated to the authority of prevailing disciplinary assumptions. After all, are hegemonic modern framings of politics not predicated on intrinsically bound, structurally grounded oppositions, like those between the transcendental and the empirical, conception and perception, theory and practice? Have these oppositions not served to produce, but also contain the possibility of radical alternatives within modernity at least since Kant? And, in the context of an issue on memoir, is the decision to turn to the personal, the lived, and the everyday, as a response to the over-determining force of modern categories and classifications, not a re-inscription of our most influential understandings of modern subjectivity? Is it not the case that the specific ontological and epistemological principles of political modernity also enable a modern affirmation of the particular reality of subjects in relation to the formal and universal ideals of present political conditions?

As troubling as these questions may be, they give a sense of the tensions that *Peninsula* in general, and this issue in particular, have been made to endlessly negotiate as their limits and possibilities. These questions were already embedded in conversations among the early artisans of *Peninsula* when debating how the journal would propose actual, important and innovative ideas through its focus on relationality. Part of the effort of editing a new issue after a rather long period of inactivity involved revisiting the archives of the journal. Two pieces, one written by Simon Labrecque, the other by Sébastien Malette as a response to Labrecque, stood out from the collection of unpublished submissions, calls for papers, notes and minutes. In his text, Labrecque shared concerns that determining orientations for the journal in the name of relationality may foreclose *Peninsula* as an object of desire and intentions, rather than open it as an ongoing work of critical thinking about the conditions of politics here and now. Politicizing the vowed inclination to ground the scope of the journal in a given definition of the political (i.e., relational), Labrecque thus asks: is the notion of "relational politics" not tautological? What does thinking about politics in terms of relationality bring to our political imaginary? Is this commitment to a relational approach to politics not simply another iteration of the "truth" of politics? Taking publishing as a site of political action and including political theorists and their work in the fold of what counts as politics, Labrecque suggests leaving behind questions of ontology to consider instead an approach to political thinking that stays in touch with factors and influences that relentlessly compose, decompose and recompose the conditions of our common political life. Malette responds to Labrecque by arguing that, far from being a tautology, a relational approach to politics aims at a concrete problem with practical implications. The discipline of political thought depends on a series of premises that not only postulate, but fetishize the sovereign individual subject. Accordingly, thinking politically about the experience of freedom, community, and violence, for example, is thoroughly determined by this ontology of individual subjectivity that presupposes the autonomy of the political agent in charge of itself and its projects. Malette insists that we cannot be satisfied with idealizations which construct a certain number of realities as given and from which we derive norms and obligations that escape deliberation, especially when they are the pretext to a functionalist valuation of politics and its reduction to a technocratic administration of society. For Malette, this is what a relational approach to politics, *Peninsula's raison d'être*, is meant to address. From his perspective,

contributions to transforming the dominant political imaginary need to be aimed at the ontological level of the discipline -- at the level where what counts as true, and therefore exists, takes form. Debates over where political theorists should intervene in the field of political thought to enrich the realm of political action will not be resolved any time soon, but we believe that to observe politics unfold from the personal perspectives presented in the memoirs published here offers an interesting and uncommon approach for reflecting on thinking politically.

Marta Bashovski's revisiting of her experience at the Enlightenment Gallery at the British Museum speaks to the complex interactions of curiosity, conquest, the cataloguing of knowledge, and the world interior of categories. Bashovski recounts the feeling of being at home in classification systems as she wanders within the vast collection of objects that are meticulously organized and categorized. The ethos of classifying has been internalized to such an extent that its representation not only evokes the "homey comfort" of being situated inside classification systems we are accustomed to, but also offers the occasion to undertake her own classification of the classifications; Bashovski even classifies herself through items taken away from the West Coast of Canada that remind her of home far away from the British Museum. Yet, when Bashovski later sits in her grandmother's living room in Bulgaria, the country of her birth, looking at old family photos, the epistemological difficulty of *thinking* outside of classifications takes a personal turn, raising the question of the possibility of *relating* outside of classifications. Bashovski then seems to suggest that practices of classification may mark the condition of (im)possibility of ever being present at home. The stories being told by our categories impinge on the histories and memories we tell one another, which we cannot quite hear, yet promise to open alternative renderings of forms of classification and association.

Peter Unwin's storytelling finely captures how one's own story is inseparable from the stories of others. Unwin meditates on how the words that the world is made of and the materiality of the world that finds a place in our words reciprocally feed off each other. He speaks to the everlasting experiencing of the past, sometimes our own, sometimes not, and how this experiencing affects one's most profound sense of self and the surrounding world. *My Story*, says Unwin, is an attempt to carry on the blood that had been passed down to him, notably the blood of war. He did not participate in any war personally, yet his identity is in part infused with the living traces of past wars: traces that his grandfather brutally passed to his mother and that filled the stories that were told to him as a child; traces of European wars that crossed the ocean along with his family when they immigrated to Canada, and that found a home in the next room through words being spoken. The past is not finished, and stories, war stories especially, escape attempts to safely bracket them off according to certain historiographic conventions. Unwin's story attests to the endurance of the past (as something that is "enduring," and that, as a result, we sometimes have "to endure") and illuminates how it subtly shapes who we are through the heteronomy of our relations. He invites us to take the time to consider how histories and materialities are made distant, lost or silenced, and yet, how they indelibly mark our lives with the discrete and insistent existence of others. Unwin suggests he does not know himself, he only remembers the smoke of his mother's cigarette and the roasted potatoes she cooked; in-between, a trace of himself that he can sense momentarily amidst the elements of everyday life -- objects,

gestures, or smells that are never fully present. All has changed now that the smoke and the word spoken have disappeared amongst in electronic circuits, so the stories that shape us are everywhere disembodied and dispossessed.

In *Longing to Be Occupied: Trans Desire and Other Technologies of Violence*, Diego Semerene describes himself as a self-exiled Brazilian subject living in the United States, who seeks to recreate a sense of being at home, especially when "alone at home." What ensues is the coded repetition of a fantasy in which the husband, the "bull," and the wife are directed to enact sexual violence that is reminiscent of the author's most intimate memories of his mother's nightly plea to not be penetrated by his father. As Semerene explains, sex between the bull and the wife unfolds as a kind of rape, except that the wife -- the author himself -- is the one who authored the scene, deceiving the only other party truly involved into carrying out a violence described as "heterosexuality's most fundamental totem." Drawing from the insight of psychoanalysis literature, Semerene identifies the logic of his unconscious as what makes him desire to be made a woman by being inhabited by male sexual violence. Far from being a vector of disembodiment and dispossession, the digital technology used to arrange the meeting is a condition of possibility for the corporealization of the unconscious. The memoir, the scene and the evoked memories present sexuality as an economy/performance where the (im)possibilities for agency, vision, clarity, consent, and responsibility are revealed as ambivalent. What remains intact is the real possibility for violence and its potential for shaping subjectivities. And yet, when Semerene reclaims his own "rape as a device qua device" and as a "(wo)man-making method," he reaffirms his position as the author of a womanhood that reminds him of home.

Jessica Neasbitt describes being haunted by the spectre of disciplinary boundaries, as she attends a seminar in Feminist Science Studies -- an interdisciplinary field grounded in the refusal of a clear divide between the scientific and the humanities, the technical and the philosophical, especially the science studies and feminism. As a former inpatient pharmacist committed to interdisciplinarity research, she hoped the seminar would be the occasion to reconcile disciplinary binaries that are often viewed as "some sort unholy marriage of research [polluting] the purity of specific discipline." However, rather than offering an escape from the haunting, the seminar turned out to be just another scene where the refusal to consider intra-action played out: the seminar became divided, people jumped ship. Making the decision to fully embrace the haunting, Neasbitt's journey quickly shifts to exploring boundary-making itself -- the cutting, the measuring -- as a general economy of sovereignty. Empty seats around a table as reminders of those who left, memories of enslaved Africans evoked in the poems of Marlene NourbeSe Philip and who were measured and sacrificed for potential insurance payments, or area codes acting as signs of a home that can never be reached are cited as opening a rift into the unquestioned reality of limits to expose the role we all play in the making of cuts. At the heart of the haunting, says Neasbitt, is a co-constituted violence, a violence that comes from taking measure, imposing, and enforcing boundaries. She suggests that the weight of measuring implicates those who measure, who take stock, echoing quantum physicist Niels Bohr, who observed that we are unable to measure without becoming part of the measurement. As Neasbitt

discovers, this complicity in creating the very determinate boundaries that constitute the haunting can only be responded to in the aftermath of the exploration itself.

By exploring elements of their personal experience through the conceptual language of politics and reflecting on politics through the seeming banality of the quotidian, the authors of these memoirs offer a contribution to de-reifying political concepts and theories. In this sense, we see reflecting on one's personal condition of living with others in the world as an opportunity to reflect on the study of politics.