

○ VOLUME 16 NUMBER 2, 2017

Theorist, theorize thyself

Stefanie Fishel
University of Alabama

Looking Back

In conversation, I've joked that if you didn't end up bleeding out of your eyes while in grad school you weren't doing it right. People who haven't been to graduate school laugh a little uncomfortably, and I ease their mind by adding that it wasn't so bad being paid to read and write. I recognize the privilege. People smile indulgently and the conversation moves on. But, after eight years of a master's degree and a PhD, and 4 years on the job 'market,' I have a few long-term health problems that I can't seem to shake. As a good social scientist, I know that correlation doesn't mean causation, but I feel like the R-value is close to one on this one. Academia is hard on the body and soul.

Long hours at the computer shorten eyesight and hip flexors. Our work becomes so personal to us that any critique or rejection is internalized, twisting in our guts. This built in self-critical nature of our discipline and the work schedule of teaching, administration, and research needed to have the chance at tenure punish the mind, body, and soul. A bad reader review becomes an indictment on all we believe in and all we have worked so hard for over the years. As graduate study stretches into the employment search, dossiers sent out to return only silence and make us question our very reason for being. This stress changes little if one is lucky enough to find a tenure track job. It's the same only different. Student opinions and evaluations, shown to be biased and problematic by all studies, are important for promotion. Service work in the university disproportionately affects junior faculty, women, and people of color and takes away time from research, family, and friends. How does one practice self care and create bonds with those around her when faced with the punishing intellectual—and physical—demands of academia?

In my second year of graduate school, I became quite ill. The previous year was a challenging one. It had seen my move from the west coast

to the east coast with my partner driving our old truck hooked to a little trailer carrying all our worldly possessions. My toddler was potty-trained between Washington and New Mexico. The family dog ate M&Ms and got sick in Wyoming. Hurricane Katrina tore through the south that summer leaving misery and gas prices at a record high. My son examined the corpses of the seven-year cicadas in Indiana while we pitched the tent at a roadside campground. All our extra cash drained into the fuel tank as we watched the hills of Kentucky slip by the windows. After a restless night's sleep and a hot shower in a cheap hotel in Frederick, MD, we rolled into Baltimore with twenty bucks in our pocket and the promise of a graduate program at Johns Hopkins University. We applied for food stamps and waited for that first stipend check from the university to arrive.

My first visit to the department included meeting the head of the graduate program. I sat perched on the edge of the chair in his office already struggling with the imposter syndrome that affects nearly all academics. What was I doing here? How did I get here? Have they found out I don't belong already? It turned out that they just wanted me to start my gig as a teaching assistant a bit early. It was such a popular major, and I had come with so much teaching experience, that he wanted me to serve as a teaching assistant. Would I help the department, just for this semester?

Of course, it seemed professionally impossible for an imposter to say no, and politically imprudent for me to decline. I served as a teaching assistant that semester, the semester after, and the semester after that. I took three classes each term toward my coursework requirements and racked up multiple incomplete final grades for those classes. I would finish the papers in the summer after the grades were turned in to the registrar, I said. Except we were not funded in the summer so I took on extra jobs or teaching gigs to pay the rent and day care bills. I wrote after my son went to bed and before he woke up. I read while he played in the park. I graded to Disney movies and *The Electric Company*. This schedule got me through the first year with (only) three incompletes out of the seven classes taken. I taught two discussion sections each for two introductory IR classes and graded around 1500 papers and tests.

All the while, I was serenaded by the helicopters and sirens from the nearby hospital and commuted by bus to the campus. I hadn't lived in a big city for quite some time, and after the quiet of the Pacific Northwest, it was a challenging few months adapting to life in an Eastern city. Baltimore places its own demands on residents; it is a hard and beautiful city filled with equal parts misery and hope. I trudged through urban landscapes on my way to the green quads and graceful marble steps of the university. I discovered that JHU, too, has a fraught relationship with the city it lives in. Johns Hopkins Medical, with its large endowments, is the second largest employer in Maryland, but its expansion on Baltimore's east side is filled with racism, sordid land deals, and displacement of homeowners to make way for upscale housing for the employees of the hospital, among many other issues.

Perhaps those readers who have watched *The Wire* would have a sense of Baltimore and its struggles. I lived within two square miles of where the show was filmed and would often see the actors grabbing coffee in our favorite campus coffee shop, Carma's Café.

Embedded in this milieu of wealth and poverty for the first year, I started out the first semester of my second year behind in my studies and struggling financially. My partner and I barely made ends meet on his part time income and my stipend. I had to teach, go to class, be a mom, put food on the table, and try to be a budding junior scholar to keep my funding as a graduate student. When I asked about getting a break from the teaching assistantship to better focus on my studies, I was denied. Of course, the rules read that graduate students would not be required to teach in the first year, but there are rules and then there are RULES, if you know what I mean. Couldn't I just help out one more semester? Even though first year students were not supposed to teach—and after the first year only one semester a year was required to keep the stipend—I was told that \$3,000 would be deducted if I declined teaching duties. The stipend paid \$13,000 for a nine-month contract, and I couldn't afford to give up a fourth of my small income.

This additional teaching and grading, and the pressure of keeping up in an already challenging graduate program, stretched my physical endurance and overall health to the breaking point. I got a cold and a cough that second winter that wouldn't go away. Another bitter irony of graduate study at JHU: we didn't get the world-class care available to others, but rather ended up at the student health center on campus. Without a referral to another doctor, we were stuck with the overworked, underpaid, and disinterested doctors on campus. When the cough got worse, I went to the health center, and they told me I had a cough. I went three more times to hear the same thing: just a cough. Get some rest. Drink fluids. I couldn't get a referral to another doctor and couldn't afford to go as a full pay patient so I kept hoping it was 'just a cough'.

I slept on the couch sitting up because I couldn't breathe. I rode the bus to campus in the cold, coughing, coughing. I ate a bag of cough drops a day and swigged cough syrup straight out of the bottle. I did my best to keep it up, but at a birthday party late in the semester, I spent the night in the bathroom throwing up and passing out in even measures. I had a 104° fever and, as the nurse told me the next day, one lung completely filled with fluid. She said it sounded like I was breathing through cellophane: crackly and wet. Cephalexin was prescribed. The next night I was still passing out and throwing up. Get to the emergency room immediately, said the doctor on the phone. Your kidneys may be failing.

I ended up at the downtown ER in the middle of the night. I threw up and had a seizure in the waiting room. An older man with a terrible leg wound called me a junkie and complained that I shouldn't get to see a doctor before him. After an MRI and a restless night in the ER listening to the helicopters that had serenaded me at home, I was diagnosed

with walking pneumonia and an allergy to cephalexin. It turned out the infection was viral and wouldn't have responded to antibiotics anyway. The cure was equal to the sickness, and the dose of full spectrum antibiotics left the friendly bugs in my gut as wrecked as the rest of me.

After the pneumonia abated, I would discover this bout of extended infection, misdiagnosis, and antibiotics left my immune system in a mess. My studies, following my body's cue, were in shambles. I managed to not get kicked out of the program—I think this was more of a danger than I realized at the time—and finish my coursework along with all the incomplete grades.

In my third year, after working as a teaching assistant four semesters, two of the senior professors in the department made this invisible labor visible and the department offered me the Political Science advising position in lieu of teaching. This added an extra \$1,000 to my stipend. What this meant, in practice and all told, was that I worked each semester of my five years at JHU and never had a full semester off per year like most of the other graduate students.

To add the pressure from my department, I had to work second job in Academic Advising on campus to supplement my stipend. Money was still tight so I often lunched on whatever got left behind in the office. The office kept snacks in the back and a large handful of peanuts would often suffice as my midday meal as we never quite had enough money for food. This led to the painful discovery that I could no longer eat peanuts and eventually the realization that I had trouble eating almost everything. I started self-treating through elimination diets.

Seven years ago this April, my Facebook status (a journal, of sorts) read: 'I am living on rice, sweet potatoes, kale, and love'. And theory. Lots of it. My fasting and elimination diet began the same month as preparation for my comprehensive exams. I discovered, while researching organ transplantation, the fascinating world of the human immune system. I have always referred to these moments as 'rabbit holes'. For the more methodologically minded, perhaps this is better visualized as following or untangling a string, but regardless of the metaphor, there is a moment in all projects where we can lose ourselves in the details, the asides, or the background. And, even more crucially, these moments where we fall blindly, groping to understand a new direction or a new piece of the whole story, becomes the more important journey to take. Such was the case with me.

Looking In

When I began my graduate education I wrote in my first letter that I wanted to study 'the individual in international law'. My thesis was a critique about humanitarian intervention and its contradictions when it came to protecting people in need. I started my PhD with an idea to write about human trafficking and modern day slavery. I quickly shifted to organ transplantation and the illegal organ trade, but my problems

with a recalcitrant immune system and a delicate body soon made me look differently at the body as a site of research. My experience of my body became the way I could interrogate the corpus of my field. Politics is often about bringing unruly interests together for a common purpose, and I felt the struggle to understand my own health could be analogically applied to the struggle to explain global politics.

My interest in the 'individual' or 'person' in international law traveled inside the body, so to speak. I wanted to tell a story about the macro-relations of states and people with micro-relations of my body, and other human bodies. While reading *Corpus* by Nancy, Derrida's writing on auto-immunity and rogue states, wishfully imagining my body as one without organs, and perusing science blogs with nearly religious devotion, I discovered a novel way to think about the human body and its relation to itself and the world around it. This was a new (at the time) technique for analyzing bacteria in their specific communities and one of these communities is the human gut. Called our microbiome, this gathering of bacteria in our guts does a lot of unseen work. They help us digest food, get rid of toxins, produce vitamins, and help keep other less helpful bacteria and yeasts from causing problems. Human animals carry around about three to five pounds of these little guys around. In fact, the DNA of other life forms in our body outnumbers human DNA 10 to 1. This flora can change over time and be affected by diet and changes in your health. They also contribute to our greater health and when the gut flora is compromised, so can your health. Simply put, when this community gets out of whack so do you.

Specifically for my research, metagenomics revealed complex communities of bacteria that inhabit the intestinal tract of humans—the human microbiome. These bacteria protect the human body from disease as well as digest and metabolize food that humans could not otherwise process. This unsettles the common idea of what it means to be human and an individual: human bodies are inhabited by multiple species. Our bodies are partly made from communities comprised of complex and commensal relationships with bacteria that can be disturbed by what we eat, who we live next to, what chemicals and medicines we ingest, absorb, or breathe, and the stresses in our environment.

After setting up my research based on the materiality of the body through metagenomics, I knew that I had to find a way to translate these medical and scientific findings to my discipline. I settled upon the metaphor of the body politic as the framework. This fusion of language and flesh becomes a productive way to look at politics—its workings, communities, connections, illness, and health—and how it is used to naturalize ideas of the state and those living within it. As the body politic is familiar and enjoys a long tradition in political theory, it is also a way to open a dialogue within political science about bodies and states and the complex relations that exist within and among them. I began thinking that for all IR's talk of high politics, diplomacy, foreign policy, and *raison d'état*, most of our understandings of politics came from the

body, from low politics. Hobbes' fusion of human and thing he named the Leviathan and Rousseau's sovereignty as lifeblood are as powerful for organizing our discipline as the logic of anarchy or regime theory.

At the same time that I was discovering the changes in my body and reorienting my research on the above, there were classes to complete, comprehensives to pass, and a prospectus to write and defend. My body was covered in hives and I often couldn't leave bed due to severe gastro-intestinal distress. During these explorations into theory and the biological sciences, the health of my own body continued to be a mystery. The elimination diet helped me to discover a list of food my body could not tolerate; soy and other legumes were the chief offenders. My basic insurance did not cover much, but I ruled out celiac. I would later discover, with access to better medical care at my tenure track job, that I am allergic to a long list of other items in addition to my food sensitivities: wheat, oats, and all nuts but cashews and almonds. These allergies appear to have their start at the end of my extended pneumonia and run in with unnecessary antibiotics.

This nebulous diagnosis of 'food sensitivities' meant that rather than digesting much of the food I ate, my body would push it out through the walls of the intestine. This causes, as you can imagine, much gastric distress and skin rashes as bodily systems not prepared to handle this sort of traffic. There is no histamine reaction like with an allergic reaction, but the discomfort is very real.

This is often called 'leaky gut syndrome' and as an IR scholar in-training, my interest was piqued by the analogies that could be made to the Westphalian state. States are leaky, too. Feeling threatened in a system of borders is most often centered on people getting in (and out) in ways that the state can't control. Immigration is filled with analogies to health problems like parasites and viral infections. I began to play with how I could take my leaky gut, a rich tradition of the body in theory, sociology and anthropology to IR. How could I talk about this visceral power of bodies and their ability to speak to global political order, in a discipline that rarely speaks of the body as such, or one that tends to speak of bodies in the tripartite schema of system, state, and individual? Even more importantly, how could this be used to theorize healthier political systems that are more able to adapt and respond to the needs of bodies within them? As we know from watching the changing findings around healthy diets for humans, we can fall prey to fads (the Atkins diet or GOOP) or be faced with contradictory findings about healthy food (should I eat butter or margarine? Is coffee good or bad for your heart?). In fact, we may not know what is good for us. This led me to ponder that perhaps our ideas of the 'body politic' and state can be disrupted, enriched, and re-articulated, therefore enabling us to ask different questions about political community and world politics through both a new reading of old theory and the addition of new understandings of the body itself. Do we, as theorists, know what is healthy for political bodies? To paraphrase Marx, is it enough to

describe bodies when what we should be doing is trying to change them?

Is living in a state 'healthy' when death by government in the 20th century saw over 203 million dead by government? The State was the leading cause of non-natural death in the 20th century. If so many died from margarine in the 21st century would we not remove it from our shelves and diets? Of course, I do not intend to sound flippant about so many deaths, but rather to ask that if states are like people, and if bodies can help us understand politics through metaphor should we not follow the analogy? In other words, if what we think is healthy is actually killing us, what is to be done? A stark example is military funding. In the US, 60% of the total federal budget is used for the military and defense. A strong healthy state has a robust military. But this leaves social programs with the crumbs: a mere 10% of the budget. This spending may be like eating too much bacon during the Atkins diet. We may be losing weight, but at what cost? The cure to one problem—like the antibiotics given to me for the pneumonia—becomes the start of another problem, equally bad and perhaps worse in the long run.

As I had found through my own body—its immune functions and bacterial communities—that health must be defined as an ecological balance of diverse collectivities where 'leaky' may not be as bad as we think it, but rather as clue to how we can live with others, or how we can adjust our diet to be sure we are taking care of those that support long-term health. This adds a bodily component to thinking of how we become more connected be it through economics, politics, or the traffic of people across borders. Following these perspectives, the state would have to be adaptive and flexible in different ways to benefit from the flows and plurality within and across its borders. Bodies, and all the complexities they add to politics, matter.

Moving On

Two years ago, after researching the human microbiome for six years, one of the first diet books focused on eating for a healthy gut microflora was published. I admit I had been waiting for it. I had been eating for the health of my gut microflora and writing about how IR could imagine healthy state politics for some time. I started to write a comedic version in my head while finishing the manuscript based on my dissertation research. It went something like this:

Have you been worried that your borders aren't as tight as they used to be? Feeling a little leaky at the edges? Soggy in the midsection? Institutions not fitting as well as they used to?

Well, there's good news! This diet will show you how those soggy and leaky borders are actually good for you and everyone around you. Not only will you be a healthier and happier state, but those around will enjoy your new relaxed institutions and fresh outlook!

This book will demonstrate that new ways to nurture and support community will build a healthier and more resilient body politic. Generous and welcoming immigration policies and increased spending on social programs will create the strength you have been hoping for!

While my body politic was rebounding, that manuscript about the body politic was delayed by vagaries of a different sort: no job. The crash of 2008 not only affected financial markets, housing and credit, but tenure track jobs in university also became scarce, and by 2011, the year of my graduation, getting a decent, permanent teaching gig was as rare as a unicorn or sasquatch. After three degrees, moving across country four times, and suffering through mediocre health care and poverty wages, there were no jobs to be found, and I found myself in short-term positions with little research support.

I wrote in the borrowed space of tenured professors' offices after teaching their classes during their sabbaticals. This is what visiting professors do: we babysit the intro classes while the tenured take sabbatical. We get their offices when—and only when—they are not there. Sometimes they clear their desks to give us space, but most often they don't. We perch on the edge of desks, surrounded by pictures of kids who aren't ours, posters from conferences we didn't attend, and postcards from students abroad who we never taught. We are squatters: a new, semi-privileged class of academic tenant farmers. A generation of new voices who write from the metaphorical bunker on the frontline of the battle between neoliberal education policy makers and those holding the line to save the liberal arts education from corporate take-over.

When I started my last visiting position in 2013, I was exhausted from the stress of finishing my dissertation on a tiny stipend, finding a post-doc, and moving my family two states away to a new town, surviving on one income in a depressed village, and enduring three job hunting 'seasons' filled with rejection after rejection. That last visiting position was a last minute offer that came in at zero hour. I was a weekend away from applying for unemployment. I had spent the previous day fluttering in and out of various states of anxiety, sadness, and rage. I cried in the bathroom so my son wouldn't see, and punched walls, and sighed wistful sighs for all those kids I would never teach and books I would never write. These are the stages of grief for an academic with no contract for the next year.

Only those who have experienced the death throes of the old world of academic job security know the pain and confusion it brings. The tenured among us offer platitudes: 'you'll get that job you deserve', 'the right job is out there for you', 'someone will fall in love with your research and find a place in their department for you'. But not here. 'The administration has our hands tied', 'You are a wonderful teacher, and 'Someone will recognize that any day!'

I was 'lucky' looking back. The institutions I worked for were as fair and kind as one could ask for given the conditions of many of my visiting professor comrades and the limitations faced by individual departments. I was paid the same, or nearly so, and had the same conference travel funds as the tenure track professors who I worked alongside. My students were smart, engaged, and had drunk the liberal arts education Kool-Aid, and they couldn't understand why I wasn't available to be their advisor or work with them on an independent study.

And then there's carving out time for my research and publications. That book and articles I am told I need to land a job are pushed to the back burner when contemplating the fact that as junior scholars we may have fledgling and promising careers, but maybe *no job* next year. Now, a job is really important for all those little things, like rent and food. We cannot survive on words alone. I am overqualified for most other jobs and my sunk costs at this point are so high that getting out of academia seems crazy. Have I really wasted the last 10 years and racked up \$40,000 in debt to get a job as a bartender? I could have done that before I ruined my health, finances, and sanity in graduate school. To add to the purely financial, I love teaching. I love researching. I don't want to leave this life. Not only do I not know what to do otherwise, I love it here.

I was also 'lucky' to find a tenure track job from which I write this article. In truth, a combination of chance, a book contract, and good friends looking out for me that netted me a permanent position after four long years in the cold. I drove across the country (again) for a tenure-track position. This time we drove two cars, two cats, and one dog, over new mountains and past confederate flags flapping slowly in the wind. This dog was different than the first journey: the M and M's hadn't done her in as we feared would happen many years ago, but rather old age. My son no longer rode in a car seat, but in the seat next to me watching movies on his phone. We drove away from New York where we'd made a life the last four years. More friends left behind in that in-between life of grad school and searching for an academic position. I was starting over again at a new university in new state.

I was also leaving IR. After four years and sending out hundreds of dossiers, the job that materialized was not in International Relations, nor was it even in Political Science. The position waiting for me at the end of that two-day drive was in Gender and Race, a small department nestled at the edge of the Humanities at the University of Alabama. There is another story waiting to be written about my now external relation to the discipline I received my training in.

As I finish this story, I have decent medical care and access to allergy testing and dieticians. I teach a well-balanced two classes a semester and I have time to spend on my research without it coming at the expense of my health. I find myself teaching students with candor about what it means to be methodological in a world where subjectivity should be acknowledged as an important basis for knowledge creation. Use 'I'

statements, admit your scholarly subjectivity, and study the world through your relations and connections rather than as an objective observer. This is not so foreign in women's studies, of course. I no longer find myself fighting the same battles over how we create knowledge and whose knowledge matters. The body and its experiences have always been acknowledged as political in my new discipline, Gender and Race Studies. My intervention into IR and its lack of embodiment doesn't make much sense here, truth be told. My humanities colleagues nod and say, 'Of course, bodies are here in all their specificities. Of course, bodies matter. Of course, bodies are political'. My corpus, in all senses of the word, soldiers on.

Stefanie R. Fishel is the author of *The Microbial State: Global Thriving and the Body Politic* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017). Her past publications include "Theorizing Violence in the Responsibility to Protect" in *Critical Studies on Security* (2013); a chapter entitled "Microbes" in *Making Things International 1: Circuits and Motion* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015); "Remembering Nukes: Collective Memories and Countering State History", in *Critical Military Studies* (August 2015); and "Planet Politics: A Manifesto from the End of IR" in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* (October 2016). Her most recent co-authored publication is "Politics of the Living Dead: Race and Exceptionalism in the Apocalypse", *Millennium: A Journal of International Studies* (2017) with Lauren Wilcox.

Acknowledgements:

This article was made all the stronger by the reviewers and by my writing group at the University of Alabama. Special thanks to Nico Taylor, for his energy and commitment to making this collection happen. Returning to the site of trauma was much easier with all the support I found.