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Reading-through be-longing: Towards a methodology for political sciences *otherwise*

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ABSTRACT
Inspired by critical feminist, decolonial, and narrative approaches, this paper invites political sciences scholars to engage in different forms of knowledges (unlearning Western-centrism by centering Asia), (collective) methodology, and data collection (centering stories). We offer a pathway to political sciences *otherwise*, i.e., "as if people matter" and propose *reading-through* as a methodology for open-ended sensemaking at the service of pluriversal co-existence, prioritizing life in/and dignity over mastery or singular truths and fact-finding. *Reading-through* encompasses diverse practices of meeting, co-reading, and co-writing, including exchanging thoughts on fictional/scientific stories in a "live" epistolary *process paper*. To articulate the substantive purchase of *reading-through*, we engage a selection of novels—Szabo's *The Door*, Faye's *Small Country*, Thúy's *Ru,* and, especially Lee's *Pachinko,* a woman-centered multigenerational story on the Korean and wider (north)East Asian colonial/diasporic experience in the twentieth century—and revisit the political sciences theme of belonging as be-longing *otherwise*. Rather than offering a definitive blueprint for Political Sciences *otherwise*, this paper seeks a deeper understanding of how method and methodology are an integral, co-constitutive part of our capacity to fundamentally rethink learned disciplinary conventions towards scholarship "as if people matter."

Introduction

This paper offers the contours of a collective meeting, reading, and writing project that seeks to engage sensemaking in the political sciences[1] *otherwise.* We deploy critical and postpositivist approaches, such as (Black) feminist,

narrative, and decolonial approaches, to theorize *otherwise* both in terms of purpose—"as if people matter"[2]—and praxis—a collective centering of unlearning, and stories and storytelling. We are particularly interested in engaging the idea of unlearning when it comes to desires of epistemic mastery, fragmentation, patriarchy, Whiteness, and Western-centrism (e.g., Bhambra, 2014; Ahmed, 2015; Singh, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018a, 2018b).

The central contribution of our paper is the development of *reading-through* as a method (praxis, techniques) and methodology (philosophy/purpose of knowledge) for Political Sciences *otherwise*, i.e., "as if people matter." What we offer is not a pre-set research agenda or methodology to replace all existing ones. What follows, instead, is an attempt to share and organize the messy process of sensemaking *otherwise* in a scholarly intelligible register. We build on existing critical feminist, decolonial, and narrative contributions (e.g., Shilliam, 2015; Rodney, 1972; Ahmed, 1998; Salami, 2020; McKittrick, 2021; Rutazibwa, 2023) to contribute to a deeper understanding of how method and methodology are co-constitutive in sensemaking in service of a pluriversal existence, prioritizing dignity over mastery and the singular pursuit of truth and facts. Before turning to the broader structure of the paper, in this introduction, we briefly present ourselves, our broader project, and the novels we have engaged with. We take some time to pause at the epistolary document we have called the *process paper,* for it is there, rather than this article, where the fundamental collective writing of this project is situated.

<p align="center">***</p>

We—Seo, a South Korean political scientist based in Seoul who lived part of her youth in France; Olivia, a second-generation Rwandan/Belgian IR scholar, based in the UK since 2013, and Nora, a Hungarian political scientist from Transylvania/Hungary, based in the UK since 2005—initially met each other at the 2022 AJWS/IFJP conference at Ewha Womans University in Seoul.[3] We were especially inspired by the way in which different sources of knowledge(s), worldviews, and scholarly reference points met at the event around various areas of expertise—in our case including citizenship, belonging, migration, (de)coloniality, (Black) feminism, Korean-French international adoption, state-building and nationalism, the European Union, international relations and solidarity, epistemic Blackness and non-Western-centrism, among others.

We initially came together as a reading group. Inspired by insights from narrative, critical feminist, and decolonial approaches, we progressively focused our subsequent conversations on the idea that "each society has its own politics of truth" and "being truthful is being in the in-between of all regimes of truth. Outside specific time, outside specialized space" (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 121). We built on McKittrick's (2021, p. 7) invitation to perceive "theory as a form of storytelling," to try and expose "the intricacies of academic work where fact-finding, experimentation, analysis, study, are

recognized as narrative, plot, tale, and incomplete inventions." This helped us understand that what we had been regarding as theories—stories—in our various subdisciplines, could meet other stories—theories—our personal/ professional stories, as well as fictional works we had begun reading together.

Our first novel, *Pachinko,* by the Korean American writer Min Jin Lee (original English in 2017) narrates a pluri-generational tale of migration, coloniality, and violence centering women and their various resistances. The story entangles the Korean peninsula, Manchuria, Japan, and the United States. To weave a plurivocal conversation, alongside our collective reading, listening, and watching of *Pachinko* (respectively book and audiobook (2017) and tv-series adaptation (2022)), we each selected a novel that we felt resonated with our own backgrounds and some research themes of interest also present in *Pachinko* such as feminisms, coloniality, race, migration, and belonging.[4] This selection procedure was thus both intentional and random, contingent on what came to our mind at that time but informed by our positionalities as researchers and our relations to each other.

Seo suggested we read Kim Thúy's *Ru* (original French in 2009), a Vietnamese-born Canadian writer's novel on the Vietnamese migrant/refugee experience in Canada. Olivia chose Gaël Faye's *Small Country,* which tells the story of a child of French-Rwandan parents who witnesses and narrates his sheltered life in Burundi being ripped apart in the run-up to the 1994 genocide (original French in 2016). Nora brought on board Magda Szabó's *The Door* (original Hungarian in 1987). The book tells the autobiographical story of a Hungarian novelist's intimate and complex relationship with her housekeeper together with the memories of WWII and the terrors and violence of Soviet occupation following the 1956 Hungarian Revolution.

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How is my grandmother, who lives in the present while thinking constantly about her past as if even the most remote ones were so close, making sense of the international? That is, how is a lifetime that travels from the Japanese colonial era, through the Cold War (whatever that is), through the Korean War, through the Vietnam War when my grandma's life overlaps with that of her brother, through military dictatorship, through democratization, through …

I am thinking of a model of thinking through. …

I am thinking of co-reading in terms of the image of overlapping cellophane papers again and again.

For instance, I read Sunja's story (in Pachinko) through my grandmother's story, which reminds Nora of her grandmother's (or anyone else's) story who reads Sunja's story through Emerence's (in The Door) story, and I read while being reminded of my grandmother's story, that Olivia reads through Gaby's story (in Small Country), that reminds her of her grandmother's story, through which she

> reads Sunja's story … If we keep a record of this overlapping, of all the stories that permeate and seep out of our work of co-reading, what happens?
> (Process paper)

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Although initially conceived as a co-reading project, our collective endeavor quickly turned into a regular meeting and co-writing praxis. It began as a letter and journal writing exercise - a reflective space about the world we inhabit and a means of keeping in touch with each other and with the stories in our novels. Although we are still in the relatively early stages of our project, what we came to call the *process paper* has already developed into a space where we seek the "disruption of conventional thinking patterns" (Zalewski, 2019, p. 621), thus, becoming an essential component of our *reading-through* method(ology).

Rather than writing together towards a concrete academic output, we chose a more open-ended epistolary approach: every two weeks one of us would write *to us* about different aspects of our selected novels in the light of our research expertise to help us with sensemaking down the road. Collated in a single, "live" Google doc, we named these writings our *process paper.*[5] The frequency of our entries coincided with our scheduled online meetings, in-person encounters at academic events, and, at some point, with the writing of this paper. As such, the various forms of our meetings, co-reading, and co-writing contained both clear research output aims as well as what we felt as more joyful, open-ended "just for the sake of it" non-aims. This "just for the sake of it" is less random than might seem at first. We understand it as an integral part of the decolonial invitation to unlearn, alongside learning and relearning (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018c) and as the distinction Shilliam (2015, pp. 24–25) makes between colonial and decolonial science, and between knowledge production and cultivation. He writes:

> to produce knowledge is to lengthen, prolong or extend, whereas to cultivate knowledge is to till to turn matter around and fold back on itself so as to rebind and encourage growth … [K]nowledge cultivation is a necessarily creative pursuit as it requires the practitioner to turn over and oxygenate the past … [it] infers habitation, which means that knowledge is creatively released as the practitioner enfolds [themselves] in the communal matter of [their] inquiry. What is more, this constant oxygenation process—a circulatory one—necessarily interacts with a wider biotope, enfolding matter from other habitations. To cultivate knowledge of deep relation can therefore be understood as "grounding."

Our attempt to pin down and share our ongoing journey towards *reading-through* as a methodology in the format of this academic research paper is, by definition flawed, unfinished, and somewhat impossible, as in, antithetical and in deep tension with the non-mastery and knowledge cultivation aspiration of our whole endeavor (Singh, 2017; Shilliam, 2015; Nyamnjoh, 2017). We could

offer a much more unconventional, poetic, and narrative paper (see e.g., choi et al., 2023). This would have allowed us to not just narrate our desire to disrupt disciplinary conventions, but straight away showcase them. In this first iteration, we nevertheless chose a more explanatory than demonstrative approach to share how we have explored disruptive, often uncomfortable yet joyous alternative scholarly practices and invariably succeeded and failed at unlearning our learned training. We hope that the first iteration of sharing this unfinished work serves as a readable, academically intelligible invitation to engagement with political science method(ology) in our scholarly communities.

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The rest of this paper is structured as follows. The literature overview situates our project in the various approaches that have informed and inspired our research process. It offers a curated narrative of this process (the actual process was decidedly much messier) and shows how it joins what we have gleaned from critical/Black feminist, decolonial, and narrative approaches in political sciences and beyond—before, during, and after our coming together.[6] In the *Reading-through* section, we offer a more detailed insight into the process that turned our praxis of meeting, co-reading, and co-writing into the conceptualization of *reading-through* as a methodology that can be instrumental in shaping research agendas for political sciences *otherwise*. In our *Concluding Reflections,* we return to the offerings and limits of our paper and think about the generative potential of our various themes of interest in political sciences "as if people matter."

On purpose and practice: Critical feminist, decolonial, and narrative approaches for political sciences *otherwise*

> *I was told as a child that there were two rabbits on the moon, pounding rice into flour to make cake. Later, I saw the movie Apollo 13. There were no rabbits pounding rice. My brother told me that the movie was based on a true story. I later heard stories of Apollo 13 being faked. I can't remember which part. I hear many people talk about the movie and the expedition. I still can't tell what is true and false about the movie or the landing(?). All I know is that there are no bunnies on the moon.*
> *When my grandma told me that there were rabbits pounding rice on the moon, what was she trying to tell me? What was the truth in a story that has been transmitted from mouth to mouth, from grandmothers to grandchildren? If my grandmother saw a red moon as we see it today, what would she say? What did grandma understand and see about this world?*
> (Process paper)

A decolonial-feminist purpose ("As if people matter")

At the core of our random get-togetherness is the intention of encountering each other, our own stories, alongside our selected stories at the service of a

type of political science "as if people matter." We find this phrase coined in a special issue of the *Narrative Journal of Politics* co-edited by Koomen (2021) and it builds on a coming together of a set of IR scholars during one of the COVID-pandemic online International Studies Association (ISA) Conventions in 2021, of which one of the authors was a participant. The contention of this formulation is not necessarily that no aspects of political sciences are concerned with peoples and their lives, but that the way we learn and teach the discipline favors distance, abstraction, and objectivity over embodied and historically/geographically situated sense-making that centers the stakes of our endeavors of understanding and study (Muppidi, 2012; 2023; Ahmed, 2006; Koomen, 2021). This matters because, for instance, mainstream migration studies may not inherently prioritize recognizing the yearly, tragic loss of thousands of lives (particularly certain groups of people) in the Mediterranean as fundamentally unacceptable and morally repugnant. Instead, they may tend to first focus on the nation-state and the global institutional structures that govern people on the move.

Decolonial[7] and (Black) critical feminist scholarship has given us the tools to read this often-disavowed state of affairs more clearly as well as to go against it. They help us understand our current global order as a racial, patriarchal, capitalist, and postcolonial one. "Postcolonial," in this context, does not refer to colonialism as being in the past or behind us; nor does it merely indicate the period *after* formal colonialism (this is at times referred to as "post-colonial"). It is a concept, approach, and theory to explicitly engage the afterlives of colonialism and transatlantic slavery in our sense-making and analysis of the present (Rutazibwa & Shilliam, 2018). Postcolonial and decolonial approaches explicitly connect knowing through racism, Whiteness, patriarchy, silencing, colonial amnesia, and erasure with who/what gets to live and who/what dies/is disposable (Krishna, 2001; Bhambra, 2014; Dussel, 2008). They engage the artificial divisions between the various life forms and environments, between the manifest (rational) and transcendental worlds as the only valid way to make sense of our worlds (Shilliam, 2015; Grosfoguel, 2007, 2013; Kothari et al., 2019).

These approaches invite us to engage in the labor of unlearning and decentering; of Whiteness (and *White Innocence*, Wekker, 2017) and Eurocentrism, of patriarchy and sexism, of knowledge extraction and erasure/silencing, of desires of mastery and expertise (Kapoor, 2020; Singh, 2017; Lowe, 2015; Azoulay, 2019). They also call us to confront various forms of colonial destruction; *epistemicide*—the destruction of knowledges—*ecocide*—the destruction of life environments—and *genocide*—the destruction/killing of (certain) peoples (Quijano, 2000). In the same vein, the postcolonial or the decolonial does not only relate to the past. It is also a lens that engages with the immaterial, such as knowledge and cognition, and the material conditions that affect the quality/possibility of life, including premature death.

These aspects often remain invisible or become acceptable through our various learned knowledge practices.

Mainstream feminist approaches are often not free from reproducing coloniality.[8] Similarly, engaging in decolonial thought without explicitly engaging the coloniality of gender has resulted in the reproduction of patriarchy and sexism. This is why, even though there are considerable overlaps, we explicitly frame our project in terms of both decolonial and critical feminist approaches.

In this paper, we engage with the critical feminist decolonial invitation to unlearn and decenter. We do this by trying to unlearn Western-centrism. While we do not see this endeavor as one that can be fully attained, we agree that it is through constant attempts or rehearsals that we may acquire the practice of divesting from violent knowledge practices (Estes et al., 2021).

There are various ways to unpack Western-centrism as there are ways to go against it.[9] We understand Western-centrism as something that is more than just tied to a particular geography, people, or history (all the while it is not detached from it either).[10] Western-centrism as a concept and reality also serves to point to historically grounded practices of hegemony including certain knowledge practices which reproduce it.

In this paper, we turn to centering Asia and knowledge-cultivation over knowledge-production as two concrete ways to divest from Western-centrism.

We seek to center Asia in a way that goes beyond merely just shifting the focus from one geography to another (Trownsell et al., 2021). At the same time, given that we are all trained in some version of the Westernized university (Grosfoguel, 2013), intentionally centering another location from which to make sense of the world will always be an enrichment to our understanding of it. Chen's (2010, p. 223) idea of *Asia as Method*, calls for centering and tracing the international/East Asia as both method and place in the "bits and fragments that intervene in local social formations in a systematic, but never totalizing, way." The distinction Chen draws between the need to decolonize (first and foremost the task of the previously colonized peoples) and de-imperialize[11] (the task of former colonizers) has been helpful to think of the uneven, differentiated roles and positions we have in the postcolony.

Centering Asia (or any "place" for that matter) contains in it the dangers of reproducing desires for hegemony and essentialism (Seo & Cho, 2021; Seo & Lee, 2019). It is therefore important to keep the decolonial purpose of this endeavor in mind (Ling, 2013). This requires a more sustained engagement with coloniality in our knowledge-practices (choi, 2015; 2021; choi et al., 2019). It is in this context that, next to centering Asia, we have turned to stories and storytelling as methodology for sensemaking *otherwise*.

Centering stories (for sense-making otherwise)

> If fiction and poetry can be a door to thinking social science anew, how can we bring in fiction and poetry that help sense and use language, and not only language, differently in social scientific research, in theorizing the untheorizable, or maybe, un-theorizing what is rendered theorizable?
> (Process paper)

We choose to engage the aspects of the narrative turn in IR (e.g., Koomen, 2021; Löwenheim, 2010; Dauphinee, 2019; Edkins et al., 2021; Zalewski, 2010; Strausz, 2018; Gabriel-Puri, 2023; Nagar, 2006) that spoke specifically to the structural, historical, material, and situated characteristics of the post-colony. Narrative approaches center (1) stories as potential objects of study or by positing all knowledge, including theories as stories (McKittrick, 2021); (2) storytelling as method and methodology (Inayatullah, 2011; Daigle, 2016); and (3) storytellers as legitimate knowledge-makers. They thus create space for the I-form in scientific and scholarly work (Lapadat, 2017; Inayatullah & Dauphinee, 2016). This overlaps with auto-ethnography and the centering of the author-Self in knowledge-making. Many engagements in IR have paid considerable attention to specifically this aspect of narrative approaches (Inayatullah, 2011; Eget, 2023). While there is the danger of having this attention to the self slide into self-referential and even narcissistic navel gazing (the so-called "me-search"), both decolonial and critical feminist approaches offer various ways to transcend the Self (Haraway, 1988; Lapadat, 2017).

They do this by pointing at the fact that knowledges are situated (Haraway, 1988) and that, more structurally, the locus of enunciation (Grosfoguel, 2007), i.e., the cosmologies, places, spaces, and positions from which one makes sense of the world, really matter. They matter, not just for the quality of knowledge and scholarship, but also, more importantly, for shaping our collective adjudication of who/what gets to live (well) and who/what is disposable.[12] As such, hegemonic knowledge practices (re)produce our global orders and their logic. Issues that seem concerned with positionality and cognition are directly connected to deeply material conditions of life and death and everything in between. Both feminist and decolonial perspectives would consider some Selves in need of more centering than others, depending on how much they serve to counter the erasures in hegemonic knowledge practices (Salami, 2020).

Centering stories and choosing to read and write them collectively to engage the sense-making of the world *otherwise* derives from and generates many questions that remain without definite answers in this paper—which is part of a broader ongoing project. In *Woman, Native, Other*, Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) states how once nobody questions whether your grandmother's story is true, a story becomes "just a story" when there is a hierarchy. With science introducing a divide between fiction and reality, a certain hierarchy is made

about "legitimate knowledge" and the stories we are supposed to learn, hear, and engage with. Challenging this divide involves challenging modernity in academic/scientific language and a revision of the concept of the "academic" that is backed up by the concept of the "scientific." If we were to look at the world through the lens of grandma's stories that were made to stand under the category of the "non-scientific," what could we see that we could not or would not see with the "academic" eye? How do stories as stories and not as "just a story" change what we "know" and how we converse? If, as McKittrick (2021, p. 7), we "understand theory as a form of storytelling" and attempt to expose "the intricacies of academic work where fact-finding, experimentation, analysis, study, are recognized as narrative, plot, tale, and incomplete inventions, rather than impartial treatises," does it become easier to see how what we have been regarding as theories—stories—meet stories—the fictional novels that we are reading together as well as our stories as they emerge through our co-writing and conversations?

Somewhat related to our choice to center stories and storytelling and the hierarchies between types of knowing we seek to blur, is the rehabilitation of contingency and randomness as legitimate and integral parts of sense-making. Our collective agenda, following our chance encounter at the conference in Seoul, has been shaped by conversations on life within and out of academia, on the different stories that we had read, watched, and lived, our arbitrary choice of what stories to read together, the stories of ourselves that we wrote alongside our reading—all of which have depended largely on contingencies/randomness.

Though it is questionable whether contingency is synonymous to randomness, contemplating on both terms helps us to question the assumptions of the discipline of Political Science (PoliSci), and more broadly, of modern thinking. How to conceive of contingencies has been the subject of debates, with mainstream strategies ranging from "limiting attention to the non-contingent features of political life, to studying what is contingent in one context as necessary in another, to dealing with contingency through the lens of probability, to minimizing contingency … by understanding it and controlling it" (Shapiro & Bedi, 2007, p. 3). We see these as attempts of mastering contingency and as reproducing a Cartesian, dominantly "mechanistic understanding of the world as made up of discrete, self-contained parts (e.g., sovereign nation-states)" (Pan, 2018, p. 339). The latter can then be unpacked through the promotion of deductive reasoning, a search for causality and regularities, truth-seeking, and valid and reliable knowledge (Halperin & Heath, 2020, pp. 29–46).

By centering the randomness/contingencies of our encounters in person and through the co-reading and co-writing of stories, and by thinking of them as a site of knowledge cultivation, we attempt to unlearn and decenter our own thinking that is deeply embedded in our epistemological and

ontological (Western-centric) training. This practice/praxis is about questioning the purposes of knowledge (*Why do we want to know? Can we really know?*), what we are taught or think as being logical (*How can we make sense otherwise?*), the way some events/things/groups of people are named and treated as controllable contingencies and as being located beyond the realm of knowledge in political science (*How can we think of the realm of knowledge otherwise? How can we do political science otherwise?*). It is also a reminder of how knowledge comes to be: the power relations in shaping sense in political science and the contingencies/randomness behind and around how we conceptualize what seems logical.

We are told stories from a very young age and grow with them. Stories also grow with us. Official stories (by the state, the family) are told, read, and remembered as if they were from the past (e.g., Japanese colonial rule, the Vietnam war, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, WWII, and Soviet occupation in Hungary), but there are some people who live and walk with and through these stories in their everyday lives. Others live and walk through these stories/histories without knowing they are and yet they are. (How) Could staying in and with the stories or being trapped in them, tell us more about the world than what official stories—or academia—do? The limits of official and many academic stories are apparent more so when we focus on the idea of linear temporality and progress of and in the world. How can we imagine temporality *otherwise*? How do we think about the world without or beyond/outside/besides the modern timeline? Beyond the universal? How do we engage with it?

Reading-through: A Praxis of Meeting, Co-Reading and Co-Writing

Meeting(s)

> *How do stories meet? … And why too maybe. As in, what purpose could we imbue the (more or less intentional) meeting of stories with? Should we? … In my mind I have been writing to you already for days now, ever since we had our marathon mind-bending meeting last Saturday, where I think we already did a whole lot of work.* (Process paper)

In the summer of 2022, we engaged in a series of experiences centered around our interactions in Seoul. These encounters spurred discussions on global politics, feminism, empire, and coloniality, stemming from diverse vantage points. Amid these conversations, themes of nationalism, race, racism, (post)colonial conditions, narrative focus, and personal anecdotes were explored. Our collaborative research project, rooted in a co-reading framework, aimed to surpass Western-centric views and the desire for scholarly mastery, aims we soon had to accept might be impossible to fully reach.

Through bi-weekly Zoom sessions, we collectively delved into our chosen novels. These discussions extended beyond scheduled meetings, continuing in group emails and messages that maintained our ongoing dialogue.

A significant shift occurred in October 2022 with the introduction of the *process paper*. This addition brought an extra layer to our co-reading approach. The *process paper* became our collective learning space about "relations of interdependence" (Longino, 1993, p. 111). Bi-weekly entries were penned, exploring the novels and our reflections on what they revealed about some of our own approach to research/ themes. These epistolary entries were shared amongst us, building upon each other's insights, and expanding our collective comprehension.

The letter form as a method/ology (see e.g., Nagar, 2013; Cisneros, 2018; Robinson, 2020; Solórzano, 2021; El-Malik, 2023; Channa, 2017) created a space to record and follow the processes of unlearning through an ongoing conversation. It is not directed towards factual knowledge production, but rather towards a continuous knowledge cultivation in an open-ended "principled"[13] or transformative space where we explore the personal in conversation with the political (see e.g., Somar, n.a.; Pierre et al., 2019). We have un/learned that writing letters as a method of telling stories/theories for sense-making attends to and makes us (as) vulnerable. It means exposing a part of oneself to others, of opening up (Eget, 2023), so that this part of the self becomes integral to how we, collectively, have started to make sense of the world. In this way, each of our sometimes very personal stories has come to constitute a layer in the lens through which we have begun this sense-making endeavor. They constitute a layer of/in theories that are continually shifting and being challenged as a result of our un/learning. Through this epistolary practice of intimacy, trust, caring, and connecting stories, we are constantly reminded of the delicacy, uncertainties, vulnerability, and anxieties involved in the relationship between the author and the reader, between the author and herself and, among academic collaborators, between the researcher and the researched. We are reminded of how abstract "truth claims" become impossible once we keep in mind all the doubts one's thoughts and words entail when trying to communicate with others.

Our relationships, grounded in vulnerability and uncertainties, have grown to include the characters from the stories that we read together. Little by little, the more time we spent together, our stories began to align with the stories of Sunja, Gaby, Emerence, Magda, and An Tinh; their presence became inseparable from our own attempts at making sense of the world. Whichever issue we look at as social science researchers, we are invited to ask: "What would Nora think, what would Olivia think, what would Seo think, what would Nora, Olivia, and Seo's loved ones think? How have Sunja, Gaby, Emerence, Magda, and An Tinh already made sense of our questions through their stories and experiences?"

The joy[14] at the core of this project emerged naturally and beyond our expectations. It entails all of the following: a principled political joy of coming together to make sense of the world and counter colonial violence; a reassurance that one's understanding of violence will be embraced, not gaslighted, without the necessity for agreement or overlap (Rutazibwa, 2020, p. 224). This joy also includes the process of un/learning to become vulnerable and embracing uncertainty, while continuing to write to each other and coming closer to each other. The latter is an act that involves both care and warmth, but also the pushing of oneself outside of one's comfort zone. Furthermore, there is the straightforward joy of community, of grounding, and of being certain that we are waiting to read each other and engage in un/learning together through co-reading and co-writing. Finally, there is the joy of not writing for knowledge production (e.g., publication–not writing to not perish) but for and to each other, for our own sake of un/learning, "as if people matter."

Over time the *process paper* has grown into a messy record of unlearning by co-reading and co-writing of novels, centering fictional and personal stories—the very fabric of "the dough and bricks of who we have become" (Process paper) as a collective. The joyful process of writing to each other opened a site of knowledge cultivation where each of our stories became a ground through which we could start co-reading and re-reading our selected novels. The *process paper* thus became another site for our meetings that has transformed us as we engaged in its creation—it became a transformative, constantly shapeshifting archive among ourselves where we meet, where novels and where our stories meet.

Co-reading (for comparing otherwise)

Yeongdo, Busan, Korea
History has failed us, but no matter.
At the turn of the century, an aging fisherman and his wife decided to take in lodgers for extra money. Both were born and raised in the fishing village of Yeongdo—a five-mile-wide islet beside the port city of Busan. In their long marriage, the wife gave birth to three sons, but only Hoonie, the eldest and the weakest one, survived. Hoonie was born with a cleft palate and a twisted foot; he was, however, endowed with hefty shoulders, a squat build, and a golden complexion. Even as a young man, he retained the mild, thoughtful temperament he'd had as a child.

Pachinko by Min Jin Lee (2017, p. 1)

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I seldom dream. When I do, I wake with a start, bathed in sweat. Then I lie back, waiting for my frantic heart to slow, and reflect on the overwhelming power of night's spell. As a child and young woman, I had no dreams, either good or bad, but in old age I am confronted repeatedly with horrors from my past, all

the more dismaying because compressed and compacted, and more terrible than anything I have lived through. … In this never-changing dream I am standing in our entrance hall at the foot of the stairs, facing the steel frame and reinforced shatterproof window of the outer door, and I am struggling to turn the lock.

<div align="right">The Door by Magda Szabó (1987, p.1)</div>

<div align="center">***</div>

I really don't know how this story began. Papa tried explaining it to us one day in the pick-up truck. "In Burundi, you see, it's like in Rwanda. There are three different ethnic groups. The Hutu form the biggest group, and they're short with wide noses." "Like Donatien?" I asked. "No, he's from Zaire, that's different. Like our cook, Prothé, for instance. There are also the Twa pygmies. But we won't worry about them, there are so few they hardly count. And then there are the Tutsi, like your mother. The Tutsi make up a much smaller group than the Hutu, they're tall and skinny with long noses and you can never tell what's going on inside their heads. Take you, Gabriel," he said, pointing at me, "you're a proper Tutsi: we can never tell what you're thinking." I had no idea what I was thinking, either. What was anyone supposed to make of all that?

<div align="right">Small Country by Gaël Faye (2016, p.1)</div>

<div align="center">***</div>

I came into the world during the Tet Offensive, in the early days of the Year of the Monkey, when the long chains of firecrackers draped in front of houses exploded polyphonically along with the sound of machine guns. I first saw the light of day in Saigon, where firecrackers, fragmented into a thousand shreds, coloured the ground red like the petals of cherry blossoms or like the blood of the two million soldiers deployed and scattered throughout the villages and cities of a Vietnam that had been ripped in two. I was born in the shadow of skies adorned with fireworks, decorated with garlands of light, shot through with rockets and missiles. The purpose of my birth was to replace lives that had been lost. My life's duty was to prolong that of my mother.

<div align="right">Ru by Kim Thúy (2012, p. 1)</div>

In practice, the co-reading of novels entails putting stories into contact with each other in our imaginings. As a result of our "random" selection of novels, we put stories that would rarely or not be put into contact in political science; narratives of children and women in colonial Korea, imperial Japan, contemporary Japan, in Soviet-occupied Hungary, in post-colonial Burundi and Rwanda, and in war-torn Vietnam and Canada. Making sense of these stories from our different positionalities could not occur in the absence of taking the difference between relationality and dominance and imposition seriously, that is, in consideration of our shared yet variable (post)-colonial conditions.

Through the meeting of these stories, we discover possibilities of making sense of the world *otherwise.* This approach does not rely on Western-centric categories of comparison that constitute some of the set—explicit or disavowed—units of analysis in political science. An important one in the

context of this paper's interest in decentering the West is the learned disavowal of the West as a crossroad of civilizations (Césaire, 1955; Bhambra, 2014) rather than an imminent, self-contained, singular benchmark of civilization all by itself. Reading our randomly selected novels side by side has shed a different light on the postcolonial condition. These sideway connections (Shilliam, 2015) do not necessarily refer to the West as the colonial center. Rather, they speak to deeply intertwined connected histories (Bhambra, 2014) amongst the variously colonized. These sideways connections carry the potential and necessary insights to re-member (Ngugi, 2009) and "re-stitch the breaches" of colonial violence (Shilliam, 2015).

Co-writing (for blurring fact and fiction/personal and political, structural)

I would like to know about your stories. What are the earliest stories that you remember? What are the stories that make up the dough and bricks of who you have become? What are the stories of your life that struck you the most? What are the stories that follow you day and night? What are the stories that you have told your dearest ones time and again? What are the stories that stay hiding in your mind, that you keep giving a blindsight? How have you been making sense of these stories to make sense of yourself?
We never have enough time to find out about these things.

***

This story is not about that time or the details of the context. I want to share my memories of a dream I associate with that time, but which could have occurred as well at a completely other time in my childhood. It's one that doesn't feature in obvious ways in the "dough and bricks of who I have become" for the simple fact that I don't think it is one that I have shared or one that I actively or often revisit in my own mind. It is just there.

***

I don't quite know why I shared this story. Or if it makes any sense. Or if it is a story. It reminds me of Sunja's, Emerence's Nguyen's story/ies. Of uprooting. Of family. Of parents. Of rapture. Of be/longing. Of change that is not always violent but leaves the deepest mark on who we become. It takes me back to Faye's much better articulated sense of be/longing at the start of Small Country.
(Process paper)

The letter-writing format of the *process paper* lent itself to introducing one another to the rationale of our choices of novels in depth, our respective research expertise, and the key questions we have been grappling with. It was also a space where we exchanged and co-learned some texts on feminist and decolonial studies, and research methods we each felt were important to how we had made sense of the world (prior to our project). For example,

Olivia introduced us to decolonial scholars to help us think about the realities of a pluriversal world, Seo spoke of critical feminist scholars so that we could reflect on how academia introduces hierarchies through the divide between the fictional/scientific, and Nora's choice of methods books propelled us to start to unpack what it may mean to compare differently, to begin comparing *otherwise*.

We also reflected on our confusions and questions about our collaborative project. Were we really unlearning? Were we not reproducing mastery? Was it possible that we were doing both at the same time? We navigated making (such) mistakes as an integral part of the process of learning and unlearning. We wrestled through the importance of (un)comfortable sitting with not knowing or the impossibility of ever knowing fully. It has helped us to slowly learn to enjoy the uncertainty of where this praxis leads us. Instead of seeking set answers to our research inquiries in the form of clear definitions, categories, or concepts, the *process paper* has functioned as an open-ended conversation. It focuses (us) on how we can engage core issues in political sciences in a way that avoids abstraction and helps (us) unlearn their set meanings.

Each entry consisted of a mix of academic responses, references to the novels and deeply personal stories we felt was relevant to how/why we read the stories we read and why we wrote what we wrote. We began to recognize that not only do co-read and co-written stories reveal the ruptures of "dismembered" peoples and individuals in the postcolony, but the similarities in our/their shared experiences. We came to see that these surface beyond and regardless of where we are when we started writing about ourselves and our own past. Writing about our own stories to each other turned us into sites of knowledge cultivation. It transcended our own circumstances in a way that the personal could be perceived as connected to the structural, material, and shared historical features of the postcolonial condition.

Seo shared the stories of survival that her grandmother lived through as a little girl, as a young woman, and as a mother from the Japanese colonial era to the Korean War, military dictatorships, and to the May 18 Gwangju Democratic Movement in South Korea. Olivia was reminded of her parents' different journeys of exile and survival in Congo/Zaire, Guinea, and Belgium against the backdrop of genocide in Rwanda since 1959 and the lingering, constant fear of its return in the years thereafter. Nora shared the story of a young single mother's encounters with ethnic differentiation and exclusion and religious persecution for divorce at the end of the Soviet era.

These personal entries resonate with the story/ies of childhood, uprooting, continuity, and change present in the novels and which, while inevitable, are (often) excluded from an inter-national perspective. Yet, the violence we experience in the inter-personal perspective is bound to leave the deepest of marks on who we (can/have) become as researchers and constitutes the

grounds from which/where we converse. It is against this backdrop that we take note of the deeply personal nature of (social) science, including in the case of our key research themes—feminism, decoloniality, and migration/citizenship.

Reading-through (for rethinking be-longing)

Themes of belonging … and be-longing in / through our novels … bring to mind hooks' (1990, pp. 150, 152) yearning - the politics of … maybe, or just simply yearning—and spaces, which, real or imagined "tell stories and unfold histories … [they] can be interrupted, appropriated and transformed through artistic and literary practice … in that segregated culture of opposition that is our critical response to domination. We come to this space through suffering and pain, through struggle." … The novels present various facets of be-longing, creating a universal thread that unites the past, present and future generations through familial and deeply personal narratives. Anchored in first-person accounts, these stories bind us … Migration is also present, but the novels move beyond an overly geographical focus and present it also in terms of feminisms (anti, often!) and social/class relations—revealing the intricate hierarchies of the social world. The intricacies of how be-longing is portrayed in the original languages could elude us in their English translations were we to read them alone.
(Process paper)

Our praxis of *reading-through* led us to enrich our learned notions of *be-longing*. Academic studies on identity/belonging have centered around forming "imagined" and "sovereign" political communities, particularly at the nexus of politics, IR, and feminist literature (Anderson, 1983; Bosniak, 2008). The nation and nation-state are often placed at the core of these discussions —as the nominal "communities"—while the distinction between private and public aspects of belonging has led to the recognition of two key components.

The first addresses social positions, identities, and emotional ties, encompassing the notions of "being at home" and "feeling secure" in the nation-state (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 197). This concept emphasizes the profound personal bonds individuals develop with national communities, places, and eras that collectively define a sense of the national "home." In feminist readings, belonging can also reflect how our immediate surroundings shape our values, worldview, and identity, molding the essence of who we are (Rowe, 2005, p. 16). The second component delves into the politics of belonging, exploring the links between the self and the community, the community and theory, and theory and justice. Again, it can embrace a core tenet of feminist approaches, asserting that the "affective is political" (Ahmed, 1998) by underscoring that belonging is constructed through specific endeavors that in turn contribute to forging collective identities in diverse ways (Yuval-Davis, 2016, p. 367). Essentially, what feminist readings of belonging suggest to us it that, while the national community lens may at first make

it appear as singular, belonging is intricately shaped by intersecting social factors such as gender, race, or class. This complexity calls for a recognition of the multiple "we"-s and "other-s" of communities, spaces, and times—of those (recognized) as included and excluded (Siklodi, 2020, pp. 91–103).

At the current stage of our project, we move towards articulating the notion of "be-longing" (rather than belonging) as a more explicit engagement in a plurivocal conversation and as a fusion of labor and longing that fuels an unwavering search for home. It asks us to carefully consider the dis/similarities in the ruptures/raptures (hooks, 2000) of peoples' situated and generational experiences of colonial violence, dismemberment, severing, ripping apart and dispersing (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018a).[15] These issues grant be-longing a deeply lingering character, revisiting ideas of dignity, freedom, self-reliance, self-determination, independence as anticolonial political concepts and practices. Be-longing thus becomes part and parcel of individual *and* collective aspirations.

Be-longing asks us to reach beyond the key components of belonging in political science approaches to the blurry plurality of absence and presence. By writing in the first person—in all but Pachinko's case, but even here with the focus on different characters' viewpoints in each section—the novels and our *process paper* adopt very clear perspectives for taking events forward with a purpose; that is "as if people matter." At the same time, they ask us to reflect on the often (non)existing divide between fact and fiction through which the politics of belonging is created.

In the novels we learn about the perspective of those who suffer violence having never perpetrated it. We learn about the struggles of traditionally silenced communities and, even more, hear the voices of the minorities within them—migrant women in *Pachinko*, *Ru*, and *The Door;* children in *Small Country* and *Ru;* and the worker, the non/intellectual in *Pachinko*, *The Door,* and *Small Country*. We can draw parallels between our protagonists' labors of be-longing and reflect on the presence of overlapping temporalities and mastery which has served to limit and often undermine their quest of survival or simple life-in-dignity.

For example, we read *Pachinko* through its premise that "[h]istory has failed us" (Lee, 2017, p. 9) and cannot help but think about how this failure applies to and beyond the protagonist, Sunja's life, to her journey to Japan, to her and her family's endless struggle for stability, legitimacy, and even intimacy. It is the close personal nature of these four stories that makes us reflect on our own positionalities and labors of be-longing. We are propelled to reflect on our lives' journey not objectively, not from a "scientific" and "replicable" viewpoint, but through the many narratives of "dreams," "youths," "wishes" "beginnings" and "endings," through "moments of shimmering beauty" (Lee, 2017, p. 558) (Black) feminist research has been seeking to bring to the fore (Ahmed, 1998; Salami, 2020, p. 13).

Through our individual *process paper* entries, we have recognized our diverse roles as descendants of ancestors who faced war, violence, and survival. These experiences shape our perspectives on substantive themes—such as belonging, feminism, and race—which are woven into these novels. Amidst our co-writing, we collectively inhabit various "I's, engaging with different stories and different identifications and yearnings. As we compose our segments of the ongoing *process paper*, we are acutely aware that it is a joint effort, not the work of a single author. However, we remain mindful of the distinct plurality that accompanies us. This perspective offers us a novel understanding of the "I," one that is always plural and relational to begin with. It prompts us to question the identity of the academic author who reads and writes, but also to rethink how identity and belonging is conceptualized and may be knowable as a self-contained unit of analysis, one in relation to or in tension with the (nation-) state.

In our ongoing journey of *reading-through* we notice a language gap that hinders discussing life, death, and shared (post)-colonial experiences in a singular truth-seeking factual register. Yet, in spite of our various nationalities, expertise, and standpoint, we find ourselves sharing understandings of these themes in a different, perhaps non-factual level. The project invites us to—intentionally—learn (which includes unlearning other practices) how to incorporate these other registers of resonance, recognition, and understanding, in our sense-making in political sciences *otherwise*. Our ongoing collaboration, despite this linguistic limitation, challenges mastery and encourages open-ended knowledge. It also makes us experience what the difference might be between universalism or universalizing (the premise of a shared world builds on looking for one shared understanding of it) and the pluriversal (the shared world is a given, but from there imagining and aiming for worlds in which many worlds are possible). This process of *reading-through* has fostered our understanding that political sciences *otherwise* "as if people matter" is deeply enriched by approaching the central themes of life, death, race, and atrocities through stories and conversation, even in the absence of a shared vocabulary, rather than facts or fixable concepts or categories.

Concluding reflections

In this paper we presented a collective reading and writing endeavor aimed at reshaping sensemaking in political sciences. Drawing upon critical feminist, narrative, and decolonial lenses, we introduced *reading-through* as methodology: an alternative purpose and praxis that centers stories and storytelling and invites decentering and unlearning to get at critical feminist decolonial sensemaking for political sciences *otherwise*, i.e., "as if people matter."

Reading-through has offered us deeply personal insights of what happens when researchers actively decenter both history—as written by the "West"—and the state as a/the prism through which to understand the world. It forces us to remember how little we know—as a good thing; how we may resist the binaries that when engaging the colonial and stay with the mess—or the trouble (Haraway, 2016) of the complexity of how power and domination are invisibilized, enacted, and reproduced in the everyday and in our various knowledge practices.

Reflecting on the messy, open-ended nature of *reading-through* as a distinct PoliSci research method led us to reshape our engagement with the world and ponder the idea of "compar[ing] for different purposes" (Ruta-zibwa, 2023). Conventional categorizations of levels of analysis, differences, and similarities in political science prove insufficient or even impossible. Through the collective reading and writing of stories, we unearth distinctions and commonalities that emerge not from scientific causality, but from rela-tionality and side-way connections. It navigates us towards "deep relations" and knowledge cultivation (Shilliam, 2015, p. 21), emphasizing the opportu-nities of engaging with existing world narratives and our chosen themes, rather than pursuing the generation of "new" knowledge.

A crucial challenge then becomes, how to facilitate a convergence of stories, of stories and storytellers and the nurturing of our own existence, within the academy, both in teaching and research (hooks, 2014; Inayatullah, 2022)? This question matters if we consider that the "sharing of ideas (no beginnings, no ends) enables a terrain of struggle, through which different futures are imagined" (McKittrick, 2021, p. 25). So, the question we must engage with further at this point is, how our political science disciplinary upbringings and habits are antithetical to a project of deep relations? In this paper, we are trying to understand if the method of *reading-through* can be mobilized as a tool of re-stitching, and if so, what that would look like. For now, we probably have more questions than answers to offer.

This uncertainty and lack of clarity might not be a bad thing, however.

We conclude by illustrating the generative purchase of uncertainty through the challenge of language and translation in our project. Despite its commitment to a decolonial ethos, our paper is nevertheless subjected to the limits of our use of the hegemonic English language and other existing hierarchies in academia. It made us reflect upon the "international English" that all of us, whose first language is not English, use in our conversations, in thinking *otherwise*. That we meet, co-read, and co-write in our second or third language means that we are constantly engaging in a process of trans-lation, whether consciously or unconsciously, and that there is space for translation means that there is space for making sense *otherwise*.

We engage in a "multiple and inexhaustible course with millions of encounters and transformations of the same into the other and into the in-

between" (Cixous et al., 1976, p. 883) from which we and our understanding of the international take new forms. Those moments of encountering and transforming are also moments where "language escapes, evades, and crystallizes differently at different times and through different speakers" (Singh, 2017, p. 90). As such escaping, evading, and crystallizing happen, they serve as a reminder that we do not and cannot possess language, text, or what is known through these languages and texts. This reminder is also an invitation to embrace the impossibility of translation (as translation of factual truth and transmission). Such shift of perspective alludes to the idea that once we focus less on how to translate what is impossible to translate and more on why we are trying to translate, something else, something important could become visible and possible. This is the intentional potential that the Korean American poet and translator Don Mee Choi speaks of when positing that "Translation is a Mode = Translation is an Anti-neocolonial Mode" (2020). This is where we situate *reading-through*: as an invitation to navigate the tension between the possible and impossible of sensemaking *otherwise,* because we have to.

> *With much love and curiosity,*
> *Seo*

<div align="center">***</div>

> *In gratitude and joy.*
> *Olivia*

<div align="center">***</div>

> *With lots of thanks and with even more love,*
> *Nora x*
> (Process paper)

Notes

1. We have a broad understanding of political sciences, and, in the context of this paper, we engage it as the main home of our various scholarly trainings and chosen specializations to make sense of our socio-political worlds. These include training in positivist and postpositivist, mainstream and critical Political Science (PoliSci), International Relations (IR) and Comparative Politics (CP) approaches.
2. We borrow this expression from the 2021 *Journal of Narrative Politics* Special Issue titled "IR as if people matter", guest edited by Jonneke Koomen et al. 8(1).
3. We are conscious of the limits that introducing ourselves along nation-state lines pose in the context of this project of open-ended/contingent reading-through. We invite the readers to consider these references first and foremost in grounded, relational rather than fixed deterministic sense. It goes without saying that we could have explicitly engaged with many more other identity markers such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, class, age, job-security, (intergenerational) trauma, ablism, …

4. With plurivocal we refer to literally a multitude of voices, but we also seek to signal the ethos of the pluriversal (a world in which many worlds are possible) over the mere "adding-on" exercise contained in pluralism- many things standing next to each other, not necessarily making others possible through how they exist or show up.

5. At the time of writing, we have over 100 pages worth of material in this process paper.

6. Some disciplines in the social sciences and humanities have made more headway in these approaches. With this contribution we explicitly seek to speak to the often much more recent and marginal efforts in political sciences.

7. E.g., Blaney and Tickner (2017); Bragato and Gordon (2017).

8. See Bhandar and Ziadah (2020) for more radical feminist approaches.

9. Palestinian, African and Indian postcolonial scholars like Said (1979), Ngugi wa Thiong'o (2009), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018a, b, c), and Chakrabarty (1992) have invited us to be intentional about anticolonial scholarship by, e.g., divesting from Orientalism, provincializing Europe, deprovincializing Africa and decolonizing our minds. Others (Acharya & Buzan, 2019; Buzan & Acharya, 2021; Tieku, 2021) have turned to Global IR or Internationalizing IR as a way to counter Western-centrism. Without an explicit engagement with desires for hegemony, merely shifting geographic focus does not do the decolonial labor of divesting from coloniality.

10. Salami's (2020) label of Europatriarchy is an insightful concept in this regard.

11. Recognizing the "vying role of empires" before and after Western hegemony as accountable for both imperial and colonial differences (Doyle, 2020; see also Parvulescu & Boatcǎ, 2022).

12. Cancelling out 80% of available knowledge-makers and sources is, again, not just an issue of inclusion and fairness, but can also simply be seen as a disavowed practice of bad science.

13. Principled (coined by American-Filipina writer, activist, and artist Somar) or transformative space is preferred over the better known label "safe space".

14. It joins the works of people like Penttinen (2013) who have engaged joy in IR as methodology.

15. Rapture/rupture bears relevance to be-longing and the novels' impact, meanings, and intentions. Be-longing entails a constant yearning for home and family as potential sites of rapture, which are marred by rupture due to a series of personal, socio-economic, and political challenges. The novels' impact, meanings, and intentions may differ in English translations for global v. original language for home audiences. However, each novel's acclaim for its portrayal of national culture and history led to multi-language translations by recognized translators, who are specifically acknowledged on some of the covers (notably Ru).

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Disclosure statement

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