Everything is Relevant

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2011–2018
The City of Brotherly Love
I write from my new home in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. From where I sit, I can see the sweep of downtown from the Center City District all the way to the Old City. I can see I.M. Pei’s Society Hill residential towers just past Washington Square, which were an early 1960s effort to rejuvenate a then-declining part of the historic heart of the city due to the massive loss of its industrial base and the exit of the solidly middle class to the suburbs. As recently as the late 1990s, vast areas of downtown Philadelphia were little more than fallow lots full of weeds. Since then, however, the city has been rapidly gentrifying with its population growing at a healthy clip, particularly among young urbanites (many of whom have been squeezed out of the New York real estate market), and the decommissioned Navy Yard now serving as the headquarters for several multinational corporations. In short, what I see is nothing less than the history of the city’s social and economic disasters, and the political resolve (however fitfully executed) to address its problems.

My recent move to Philadelphia was prompted by the offer of a professorship earlier this year from the School of Design at the University of Pennsylvania. At first, I was unsure about making such a drastic change in my life. But my wife thought that the interaction with students in the context of an Ivy League school would be something that I would enjoy. The move here was not without its stresses. For instance, I spent nearly three hours in the waiting room at the Philadelphia Electric and Gas Company (PECO) just trying to open a residential account because it was necessary to have my ID verified in the presence of a PECO representative. Many who sat in the room waiting with me were there to either prove their identity or dispute a bill. Many of them were very poor and did not necessarily possess forms of identification such as passports or driver’s licenses. I was reminded of how contentious voter rights are in the United States with many of its jurisdictions making it difficult to vote because of such onerous ID requirements. After I left the PECO building, I discovered a shoeshine shop employing older black men with stooped backs, riven faces, and coarse hands. Photographs of famous Philadelphian athletes, past and present, covered the walls. The man who shined my shoes spoke a patois that betrayed his poverty. Everything he said issued out of a life of hard work. As he shined my shoes, I looked at him from my privileged height and thought about the history of America in all its glory and infamy.

The more time that I spend encountering people on the street, in playgrounds, and at the university, the more I am reminded of how much Philadelphia is an African-American city. There are numerous markers of the city’s rich African-American history where I live on South Street, from the Engine 11 firehouse (the city’s de facto headquarters for
African-American firemen during the segregation of the Philadelphia Fire Department that lasted from 1919 to 1952 and the “Mapping Courage” mural (memorializing the work of W.E.B. Du Bois) painted on the firehouse’s outside wall to the Waters Memorial African Methodist Episcopal Church and Ms. Tootsie’s Soul Food Cafe. This is a history that I am eager to learn more about now that I am a resident here. The following day was Canada Day and I found myself standing in front of the George Washington memorial in Washington Square. The memorial is an elegant one, with a statue of Washington standing before an eternal flame burning on top of the grave of an unknown revolutionary soldier. The statue’s gaze is directed toward the nearby Independence Hall. A group of Americans were standing next to me. Their faces were solemn and their hands over their hearts. A couple of young children approached the memorial and were instructed by their parents to salute the sculpture. My thoughts turned to Canada for I could not imagine a Canadian equivalent. I wondered how my toddler son would be influenced by the patriotic impulse that is so fierce in the United States. He has recently become fascinated by the American flag and points excitedly whenever he spots one fluttering atop a skyscraper or hanging above a residential doorway. He has even started to utter the word “star” due to the prevalence of this symbol on the Star-Spangled Banner.
I was nineteen years old when I visited Philadelphia for the first time. I was a science student then and knew little about art. My trip to the Philadelphia Museum of Art was due more to a sense of touristic obligation than a curiosity about art. At one point in the museum, I walked into a room that was empty save for a large wooden door, not realizing that it was part of Marcel Duchamp’s celebrated Étant donnés (1946–1966). Two years later, I took my first class at Simon Fraser University. During a lecture, the instructor showed the class an installation view of Étant donnés. It was then that I learned the “secret” behind the keyhole of the wooden door. When I flew to Philadelphia last month to begin the moving process, one of the first things that I did was to revisit the Philadelphia Museum Art and peep through the keyhole of Duchamp’s door. Upon doing so, I felt like a chapter of my life that had haunted me for many years had finally been closed. Now another chapter is set to open.