

LETTERS OF LOVE: COMMUNITY TRANSMISSION OF WISDOM
AS A CASE STUDY FOR AN INCLUSIVE PHILOSOPHY

by

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Philosophy is an abstract and densely academic field of study that excludes the engagement of many people. This thesis looks at the exploration of wisdom through a nontraditional lens. Beginning with a critical investigation of the way that power dictates our ideas of what constitutes valid wisdom, I work to identify routes of exploration that exist outside central hubs of power. For this thesis, I will use wisdom synonymously with philosophy, as wisdom is the knowledge of the world that fits within the scope of philosophy—which can itself be translated into ‘the love of wisdom.’ Through the writing of letters, I explore a vision of philosophy that is personal and directly applicable to my shared experiences and might serve as a model for others. By contrasting the experience that I had studying philosophy with a vision that is community- and care-centric, I explore alternative foundations for philosophy. This thesis provides a discussion of philosophy that is in and of itself an exemplar for the way that philosophy could look. This inclusive vision of philosophy benefits wisdom not only for people that stand to be newly included, but also to the field itself by bolstering the collective experience from which we draw truths. This thesis serves as an ode to the beauty of philosophy when made a community practice, and as a way to think deeply about and reflect on the world of which we are a part.

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Introduction

For many, the draw of philosophy is rooted in the desire to understand the experience of living—and the ways we perceive, experience, and impact the world—more deeply. These questions are personal, but also innately human and universally relevant. When we seek to answer questions as vast as those philosophy is responsible for, we must draw from an ocean of experience and perspective equally as vast. However, many non-canonical ways of knowing or seeking truth are excluded from the purview of philosophy. Should we not value the ideas of someone who has not been formally educated? Writes without an extensive vocabulary? Or answers from a place of feeling? This thesis explores why this artificial division between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ knowledge serves to uphold structures of power that benefit only a very select few. If we choose to continue accepting the narrow limits allowed by Western philosophy, we will threaten our ability to find complete and meaningful answers to the questions we ask.

After criticizing the experience that I had studying Western philosophy, I will present a route of playing with philosophy that works to counter the issues I experienced. I experiment with a more inclusive and light way of exploring and sharing philosophy through the writing of letters. The recipients of these letters are people that were impactful in my own creation of a world philosophy that is especially relevant to the relationship I shared with each of these people. The goal of this epistolary experiment in philosophy is to give myself and those I love an experience of philosophy that operates from a place of care and inclusion to counter an experience that prides itself in exclusion. In rejection of an academic system that celebrates rigid discipline, I implement a contrasting strategy of playful engagement with and exploration of philosophical ideas. Far from hoping to be a perfect example of a way to practice philosophy, my goal is to present something that is more carefree and open to any variety of ways to play with

the wisdom people may hold about the world but feel unsure of naming philosophy because of their own experience of being an outsider to the academic world of philosophy. If philosophy is a universal experience that asks innately human questions, then no human should feel that its practice is outside of their capacity.

This thesis is divided into six sections. First, there is a section that situates philosophy/the philosophical tradition that I studied within—giving a basis for my running definition of philosophy through this work. This section also introduces my primary research questions and the work’s methodology, both for the close reading and letter components. Secondly, there is a literature review that captures the most relevant readings to the work of this thesis and identifies the key points and authors. Third, there is a section on philosophy as I would like to see it that juxtaposes my critiques of philosophy. Fourth, there is my exploration of philosophy through five letters that are a practice of embodying an exploration of philosophy as I would like to see it realized. Finally, a short section concludes my thoughts.

Research Questions

An easy-to-find definition of philosophy reads, “the rational, abstract, and methodical consideration of reality as a whole or of fundamental dimensions of human existence and experience.”¹ This definition of philosophy has a certain amount of appeal. The idea of understanding the *reality* of humanity is deeply alluring. But, as a member of humanity, how could I ever pretend to be truly rational? I will never be outside of it, looking in, so it seems dishonest to pretend my understanding could exist in the abstract when it is created only through my very own experience of being human. We must acknowledge that every great philosopher has also been human, with biases and notions created from within the distortions of the society

¹ “Philosophy,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed 24 Nov. 2023, www.britannica.com/topic/philosophy.

they live in. Even beyond this hubris of the rationality of philosophy, we must also recognize that the entirely logic driven application of philosophy often drives people away by becoming overly sterile, and no longer containing enough of the bits of life that can allow us to recognize ourselves in a certain experience. The bits of philosophy that we find in music, poetry, and art often strike us more deeply, and create meaning for people more widely, because they don't seek to be cold, removed, or saturated with ego to the point of abstraction. They embrace the mess and beautiful complexities of being human to understand more thoroughly the reality we exist within. This very embrace of the tangible, the emotive, the lived-in reality, also gives this understanding of the world more power, more substance. When you feel a truth in your gut, when you read beautiful words that remind you of the fleeting beauty of your childhood, mortality, our experience of everyday existence, conceptions of truth... they resonate within you because they do not exist in the abstract—they exist within you, your life, your humanity. They sink into your bones in a way that ties us all together, in the shared and undeniable truths of being human. It's knowing that we are finite, small, and that we know such a small fraction of the things there are to understand. Going into philosophy with humility increases your desire to listen to the ideas that others bring to the table through the understanding that by remaining solely within yourself, the world only becomes smaller, and your understanding of it less complete. The way that academics shape traditional Western philosophy places the rational on a pedestal and trains students to leave other forms of resonance at the door, creating a space in which students with backgrounds that have given them confidence operating within the specific mold of philosophy can thrive while those without appropriate tools flounder or exclude themselves from participation.

The following research questions reflect these concerns:

- What forms of wisdom go unrecognized or intentionally devalued within our society?
- What wisdom have I been given that I do not prize as highly as more formal routes of knowing?
- Can philosophy be reimagined to include a wider scope of wisdom?
- How does knowledge pass through the labor of care?
- How does philosophy place certain ways of communicating wisdom as superior and certain forms of wisdom as better?

Situating Philosophy

“Philosophy,” when I critique it here, refers to the institution of philosophy—academic in nature, mostly Western, and heavy in emphasis on its Early Greek and pre-modern European canon: Socrates (469–399 B.C.E.), Aristotle (384–322 BC), Plato (427–347 BCE), and Descartes (1596–1650), who, though representing just one corner and moment of the body of philosophical work that exists, are nearly synonymous with the field. My own experience in philosophy was influenced by several factors; I studied at a school that put a heavy emphasis on the *history* of philosophy and canonical philosophical works. This reverence for philosophy’s historical figures and ideas is responsible for many of the aspects of the field that do a disservice to its study. The issue arises not from the study of this history in and of itself but from academia’s steadfast devotion to practices and ideas derived from it—ideas that do not serve large sections of the population, and that are perpetuated with little criticality of the limited range of experience they represent. Additionally, the abstraction that the field as a whole faces further obfuscates the dated components of philosophy as they camouflage them within challenging language and texts. Of course, philosophy operating in the abstract can also provide the value of being more universally

applicable. However, if philosophy becomes so abstract that its value and purpose become abstracted as well, an issue arises: access to this bank of knowledge becomes limited not only to those with the education and frameworks necessary to parse its abstraction, but to those with the wherewithal to even *want* to. When certain populations are disenfranchised from the field both they and wisdom itself suffer from this lack of access. My own experience with philosophy was weighed down by a tendency to excuse and uphold unnecessary abstraction and convolution. It was also one that promoted a strong division between logic and emotion despite a stated intellectual understanding of the shortcomings of these exact dualisms. In addition, the response of others to learning that I study philosophy has been either distaste or lack of understanding. These opinions reflect the shortcomings of a field that could instead be seen as deeply entwined with the human experience.

Why do so many feel that philosophy is disconnected from their lives, and see so little value in its study? Philosophy is one of the least diverse academic disciplines,² and I believe that my experience with the Western philosophical tradition can highlight shortcomings that contribute to this lack of diversity. Though the dialogue within the field of philosophy seems to have begun taking a more critical look at its practices and the narrow range of voices included, the work being done to improve still falls short. In one of my philosophy courses early on in my studies, Introduction to Feminist Philosophy, we read Nancy Tuana and Shannon Sullivan's "Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance."³ The essay critiques the blind acceptance of work that speaks to "mankind", and encourages readers to avoid generalizing these writings—of which men were the lone subject—to all people. Typically, this language is read as being non gender

² Eric Schwitzgebel, "The Diversity of Philosophy Students and Faculty in the United States," *The Philosophers' Magazine*, May 30, 2021, www.philosophersmag.com/essays/244-the-diversity-of-philosophy-students-and-faculty-in-the-united-states.

³ Nancy Tuana and Shannon Sullivan, "Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance," Braille Jymico Inc., 2008.

specific, but the authors challenge a dismissal on this front in preference for the recognition that these writings truly were for the lone subject: man. Instead, we should continue to see this work as it was and continues to be: intended for a specific audience in a way that makes full generalization impossible. The “mankind” being referred to truly was a group made up of only men, and White men at that. This critique is what my education so desperately needed to bridge the historic bank of philosophy with the world that we live in today. Yet as soon as this class concluded it became clear that to succeed in my degree I would need to shed this perspective and view the assigned readings as holders of perfect knowledge, rather than as works limited by the time and perspective their author wrote from. In eleven-week term systems with limited time to work through dense readings, professors had to distill the meaning of a lifetime's worth of work into assignable chapter segments. In this expedited timeline a comprehensive overview of the limitations of authors was either entirely neglected or briefly recapped in the span of minutes. It was primarily up to the elective course offerings and each individual student's own motivations to work these philosophic offerings into one's own world experience. The core offerings of philosophy maintain relevance—the very foundation of philosophy rests in our experience as beings of the world at a level that is unchanging. However, much of the literature and the culture that surrounds it is becoming outdated.

Like many departments with strengths in continental philosophy, the University of Oregon philosophy major requires a total of eight specified courses: four ‘History of Philosophy’ classes, a ‘Formal Logic’ class, two ‘Authors’ courses, and just one in a category named ‘Gender, Race, Class, and Culture.’ This showcases the values of the department. The importance of understanding the foundations of Western philosophy in which formal argumentation is prioritized while a scope that seeks to utilize this for the sake of the true personal experience of

students is placed on the back burner. Speaking from a place of feeling without complete coherence is actively discouraged rather than looked at as a tool that can be nourished both for the sake of deeper engagement with the wisdom at play and as a legitimate way of knowing.

There are, of course, many reasons to be cautious of a blind acceptance of feeling as a sole source of truth, especially if the root of feeling is unidentified. Formalizing philosophy into logical structures is important to identifying based versus baseless feelings in the ongoing attempt to locate truths about the world. However, it is also important to recognize that the driving force behind logical arguments still often falls to a behind the scenes basis in feeling. For the questions we do not yet have answers to, our emotive ways of knowing are just as valid a means of exploration. Denying space to feeling falls into the dualistic binaries that privilege certain ways of knowing. To disguise or deny feeling leads to both less clear identification of where a response is coming from and a loss of a route of exploration.

Recently, I was in conversation with a good friend who also just received an undergraduate degree in philosophy. Though it was a good-natured debate, I quickly came to realize that by the very nature of being a 'debate' there was an air to it that was unappealing to me. We both clearly knew how to support our own viewpoints, with logical build ups, monitoring for any potential fallacies from the other, etc. We were playing a game we were both well trained in rather than accepting that we knew exactly what the other person meant. At some point, he admitted that he didn't necessarily think that we actually disagreed. But for him, the fun was largely in the process of this argumentation style that he had spent the last four years perfecting. For me, this form of discourse was what I had found so unappealing in philosophy. So often, classes were overtaken by conversations that sought to poke holes in peers' observations, or by attempts to overturn the writings of philosophers who published their work a

hundred years prior and had only graduate students to defend them against poor interpretations. There is much value in critical thinking, in being able to critically consume the words of others, and in being able to logically elaborate on a point made. However, there is also tremendous value in being able to openly listen, to communicate collaboratively, to seek common ground. Western philosophy has become synonymous with the former depiction, training lawyers and politicians who argue for a living. The actual value of philosophy is something very different. Philosophy has value for the ways it teaches us to grasp the truths of our experience of the world with equal parts certainty and curiosity. It can be applied for the use of law or policy, but most importantly it helps us to see more clearly the world that we *all* get to experience and grapple with.

Methodology

The primary method used in the development of this thesis was close reading. By reading in detail and in depth, I extracted meaning from a variety of works and then synthesized the points most relevant to the questions I posed regarding power and wisdom. Through a careful examination of the language, style, and structure of the text, I identified the audiences they do and do not address. When a portion of a philosophical text or reading caught my attention, I would take note of it to return to review it through the lens of my thesis. By compiling the ideas extracted from close readings, I was able to create a bank of work to support my own process of deliberation regarding how education and power dynamics interact. Once these key passages were identified, I was able to move into a process of recombining them to elaborate on the themes central to my work.

I found myself drawn to some pieces more than others. To try to investigate what my instinct was drawing me towards, I examined the contrast between the pieces that I found myself drawn to include and what I disregarded. Commonalities between the works I was drawn to

largely boiled down to their embodiment of the kind of philosophy I am proposing. This style of processing information led me to critique the traditional educational model of Western philosophy. Authors that lived on the margins of the society they produced philosophy in wrote to a large audience with the intent to include more people in their explorative scope, if not yet in the accessibility of their presentation. I selected the majority of the works I integrated from authors that pushed the margins and criticized existing power structures and the methods of exclusion utilized by them to narrow the range of inclusion in philosophy's consideration.

In a more narrow sense, I tried to include briefer snippets of wisdom from each work in order to make them most broadly applicable to the work that I was doing. By selecting specific aspects, I was able to distill the wisdom of the pieces and simultaneously weave them with one another and ideas of my own to create a well-supported work not dominated by any one author's unique ideas.

Beyond close reading, the second element of my methodology is one that closely resembles free writing. To do this, I allowed each of the letters in the final section to come from a place of intuition and emotive sharing of my own ideas. These letters exist as any letter should—something of my own mind being gifted to another person in my life—and explore both the ties between us and the elements of our dynamic that have shaped both of us relative to the other. Each person we encounter in life shapes us in some way, however intangible or small. Through the intentional selection of specific letter recipients that trace the communities of care in which I am interested, I selected a route for my own practice of philosophy. Through the act of sharing what I consider to be my own wisdom with these people, I engage in a practice of reciprocal wisdom. These people who have given me wisdom are the people whose wisdom I can reflect and return. I also sought to be inspired by Maria Lugones' (1944–2020) conception of

playfulness that so beautifully complimented the value I was taught to see in play as a way of learning from my own childhood: “Playfulness is, in part, an openness to being a fool, which is a combination of not worrying about competence, not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred and finding ambiguity and double edges a source of wisdom and delight.”⁴ My letter writing process embodies the principles of play—reminding me of how I wanted to be present in both my ideas and my communication with the people I wrote to: free, brave, adventurous, open to what I stumbled across. Not only did this conscious pursuit of play embolden my attitude to the work I was doing, but it also served as a distancing tactic from the dryness and restraint of academic work that I wanted to move away from.

⁴ María Lugones, “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling, and Loving Perception,” *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987).

Literature Review

The literature selected for the foundation of my work was chosen for two reasons. First, I felt compelled to look at authors who discuss the dynamic between power and knowledge, and more specifically the way that power dynamics have shaped what is viewed as legitimate knowledge or a legitimate route to share it. Second, but with equal importance, I sought works whose authors used some of these “less legitimate routes” to share their wisdom. These authors transform abstract ideas into concrete displays of wisdom that enter the world through their writing. All the selected works take on these exclusive power dynamics directly. These examples set the groundwork for my own process of sharing thoughts with the world beyond my own head.

The dynamic between power and knowledge is complex. How do the knowledge-sharing methods used within families and communities demonstrate teaching that breaks the boundaries of a traditional Western education, a different way of giving and receiving wisdom with reciprocity or even joy? How is it that we can shape and become holders of the wisdom that feels most meaningful to us? By utilizing the frameworks given by Enrique Dussel (1934–2023), Val Plumwood (1939–2008), Audre Lorde (1934–1992), Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986), and bell hooks (1952–2021), my own ideas of what it means to hold and gift wisdom can be examined through the application of my own experiences to these foundations. In practice, I seek to not only explore these ideas within abstract terms, but also spend time developing them in a way that scares me, as a student, to present as a legitimate practice of philosophy. This push beyond what I often see demonstrated within philosophy presents a version of the world that I strive for, in which my own wisdom can be shared freely, with love, as I see fit; a world in which generational

wisdoms build within themselves their own values, not restricted by larger, constricting dualisms that are maintained only for the sake of power.

Enrique Dussel's *Philosophy of Liberation* (2003) examines what it means to be an outsider to a central structure of power and compares it to what it means to be on the inside. He also examines the relationship between proximity to power and the knowledge that a person can produce. Dussel's key idea is that knowledge becomes clouded by power. The closer a person's proximity to a central structure of power, the more their ideas will be clouded by it. Dussel also goes on to extend this idea to state that individuals that occupy space and identities furthest from a Western-centric power hub will be most capable of forming an unclouded idea of liberation; "philosophical intelligence is never so truthful, pure, and precise as when it starts from oppression and does not have any privileges to defend, because it has none at all."⁵ This perspective lends to my paper a clear and well-defined defense of the importance of highlighting who it is that is excluded from a feeling of belonging in discussions of philosophy. Not only should they be included for the sake of equity, but also because they contain the clearest visions of what the world is, what it could be, and the path from one to the other.

bell hook's work, *Teaching to Transgress* (2014) approaches an issue similar to Enrique Dussel's. hooks writes about institutionalized methods of teaching that enforce structures of power. While Dussel discusses abstract ideas of power dynamics within a structure and the broader question of who comprises an outsider to this structure, hooks utilizes her own lived experiences with two different systems of education. In one, Black educators worked to uplift and empower their community through the use of education. In the second, White teachers used

⁵ Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation* (Wipf and Stock: 2003),4.

education as a way to push racist agendas and to teach Black children to be obedient to power. “Bussed to white schools, we soon learned that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was what was expected of us. Too much eagerness to learn could easily be seen as a threat to white authority.”⁶ By directly applying theory to the experiences of a childhood education, hooks is able to clearly communicate how racism utilizes the system of education to serve the reproduction/maintenance of power structures. The goal of exploring this experience is to then utilize theory to help shift the conditions of the world. To achieve truly meaningful and radical transformation in the most deeply corrupt elements of our world requires a deep understanding of the way methods such as education are used to reproduce hierarchies. Through an examination of their lived experience, Dussel and hooks both utilize their positions as outsiders to the White colonial societies within which they live to escape the bias created within those systems.

hooks provides a tangible experience-based application of the ideas Dussel explores largely in the abstract. “I asked students once: “Why do you feel that the regard I extend to a particular student cannot also be extended to each of you? Why do you think there is not enough love or care to go around?”⁷ This way of explaining her ideas makes hooks’ work accessible to a broader audience. The books hooks published can be read more gently than the typical philosophy text, dipping into personal experience, a narrative that pulls wisdom from both intellect and emotion. The reviews from her book *All About Love* (2022) highlight this, “She is an academic wild card, the brilliant feminist whose sharp mind can slice the latest scholarly shibboleth”⁸ and “she provides a refreshing spiritual treatise that steps outside the confines of the intellect and into the wilds of the heart.”⁹ The very form of writing that hooks chooses to utilize

⁶ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (Routledge, 2014), 3.

⁷ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 198–199.

⁸ bell hooks, *All About Love* (Harper: 2000), review on book cover by Boston Globe and Mail.

⁹ hooks, *All About Love*, review on book cover by Seattle Weekly.

means that her ideas will be accessible to a much larger audience. "...one of the many uses of theory in academic locations is in the production of an intellectual class hierarchy where the only work deemed truly theoretical is work that is highly abstract, jargonistic, difficult to read, and containing obscure references...any theory that cannot be shared in everyday conversation cannot be used to educate the public,"¹⁰ This audience includes the very people whose education is essential to her own route to revolution within a system that is maintained through oppression of identities that don't mirror the faces of those in power. This moves us to an understanding of the operations that power utilizes to sustain itself. hooks challenges power with work that does not adhere to the established norms of academia. In fact, hooks once wrote that she "was not an academic philosopher."¹¹ For people without ready access to academia—those at the core of Dussel and hook's works—this is a signal of recognition. This kind of accessible writing can be engaged with by those outside the traditional structures, enabling them to contribute to the core contents of philosophy and become active consumers of its wisdom. There has been a social establishment of what is a valid and praiseworthy presentation of wisdom. This formulation takes pride in abstraction and complex and purely logical structure. It proves to be exclusive. While abstraction and logical framing are not inherently negative, their use to serve purely stylistic preferences directly harmful to the readability of the work in question. When powerful work that does not rely on these methods is legitimated it shows that exclusion does not equate to value. For hooks to break out of the form of densely academic philosophy texts and into books that can be widely read shows a commitment to defying a system that would prefer for critical thinking

¹⁰ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 64.

¹¹ Justin Weinberg, "bell hooks (1952–2021) and the Canon," *Daily Nous*, Dec 17, 2021, dailynous.com/2021/12/17/bell-hooks-1952-2021-and-the-canon/.

about the system to remain within academia, largely occupied by those already in positions of privilege.

“The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” by Audre Lorde, shares an intersectional feminist perspective, looking deeper than gender and into the overlapping of social identities to explain discrimination. “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. Racism and homophobia are real conditions of all our lives in this place and time. I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives here. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.”¹² This expands my work regarding the contemplation of the invisible limitations of what is possible. Lorde shares Dussel’s recognition of the limiting scope that exists when critique is born from people who operate in close proximity to, or within power. Lorde provides both a question and an answer, “What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable.”¹³ This points to a solution that can only be found in a radical shift of how we interact with the world and our understanding and allowance for what wisdom is encouraged and supported. When the change that we desire only utilizes the tools within the dominant structure, we do not allow ourselves a route with which to break out of these confines.

According to Lorde, a system of colonial techniques was developed to encourage obedience in the face of unjust power structures. To challenge these techniques, hooks uses the language of individual experience. My own work similarly strives to examine unrecognized

¹² Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (Penguin UK, 2018), 3.

¹³ Lorde, *The Master's Tools*, 1.

ways knowledge and wisdom are passed by using my own experiences of community care and sharing. While educational practices factor into my own work as a portion of the exploration of my childhood, my specific focus is on the ways that philosophy is practiced at a familial level and transmitted within a community outside of dominant power structures. Most narrowly, the letters I write will examine the role of both the maternal line, as well as the role of community and the care possessed in community for enabling one to explore their ideas about the world. The significance of this passing of ideas exists both in the narrow selection of what has felt pertinent enough through generations to become true, and what the society they live in has permitted to be recognized as such. For example, I think of what I know of my great-great-grandmothers, or what I know of my great grandmothers. One great grandmother made quilts and I know this with certainty because the blanket that she sewed me while I was still in my mother's womb sits at the foot of my bed as I write this. On one corner on the bottom half is written in her pen, For Baby, because my name was not yet known. From this quilt I know that she was good at picking out soft and bright complimentary colors. I also knew that she must have loved my mom greatly, which meant that she must have loved her granddaughter and her own daughter greatly as well. This is wisdom to me, to know of my own roots. For others in my family, it must have been as well. With the sprouting of each new generation from the tips of an unfathomably long family tree, the previous sinks into the soup of history but lives on in the wisdom they've left behind—wisdom that takes the form of stories and smarts, of course, but also cribs and quilts. Viewed through this lens, it feels extra important to evaluate ourselves and our communities in the present; to understand how others shape the way we perceive the world around us, how we can formulate ideas we can hold with confidence, and how the ways we seek knowledge reflect the routes of pursuit we think our circles find valid.

All family units, while still generally adherent to many cultural customs and norms, produce a range of internal experiences. Especially within a society that perpetuates ideas of a nuclear family to such an extreme, family units (particularly those that are poor or working-class) are isolated by a system that demands that one if not both parents participate in long hours of work in order to survive. The work of Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Marxist feminist critiques provide a perspective on the positioning of the family structure under capitalism. Within the household, a typically female caregiver creates an ecosystem of her own to take on a huge amount of unpaid and invisible labor. By examining Eva Feder Kittay’s (1946–present) care ethics alongside the work of Marx, the complex role of a caretaker’s labor and the value given to her contribution can be seen most clearly. “I began to see that while equality often entailed women crossing the sexual divide between women's work and men's work, equality rarely meant that men crossed over the divide to the women's side: our side – women's – the side where work was largely, though not exclusively, unpaid or poorly paid care of dependents.”¹⁴ Within this caretaking role she can pass on wisdom that may diverge from the expectations and norms of her social structure, through the very fact that she is in a state of increased isolation. My own family was in a financial state in which my mother returning to the labor force would put us in an even worse economic state due to the loss of federal and state supported health care and subsidized food access, in combination with no support for childcare. My mother worked hard to keep her children thriving and her household functioning. She also received much delight from being a mother, and the fact that she was not employed outside the household gave her some flexibility to create and play with her own ideas through the work of parenting. “Interdependency between women is the way to a freedom which allows the I to be, not in order to be used, but in order to

¹⁴ Eva Feder Kittay, *Love’s Labor; Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency*; Second Edition (Routledge, 2020), preface.

be creative. This is a difference between the passive be and the active being.”¹⁵ Within me, my mother found a comrade with whom she could play and share her curiosity about the world, and she found a source of unified force for raising my siblings. There is great hardship in the isolation of being a stay-at-home mother. However, this isolation can also create a demand for the bond forged between a mother and child; a child may be required to fill the role of friendship and support beyond the role of a typical mother-child dynamic to supplement the community a mother is denied. Whereas the system of a nuclear family weakens a mother’s ability to have a strong and supportive network within which to rear her children, she becomes reliant on the support of a child, and the child becomes equally reliant on her, as not only the primary caregiver but also the primary source of information about the world within the most formative and unshaped years of life—in part due simply to the sheer amount of time the two spend together. Within the bond of a child who is seen by her mother as an equal, a space is created in which to become an active being, and in which creativity can be found. My mother gave us, her children, some of this very wisdom. She always deems us deserving of honesty, the opportunity to weigh in on decisions, and to have equal respect and consideration within the household. Having this equal status also allowed for each of us to be our own people with our own ideas and identities rather than just a role in the family hierarchy, because the hierarchy itself was being challenged. “For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power I rediscovered.”¹⁶ Just as she developed her own wisdom through my raising, I received much of this back in open reflection as well as in her practices of parenting.

15 Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (Penguin UK, 2018), 1.

16 Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (Penguin UK, 2018), 3.

Challenging Philosophy

This thesis is a practice of the way I aspire to see philosophy: consciously practiced within community dynamics, rather than viewed as and kept exclusive through the use of obscuring jargon, internal and external educational barriers, and unnecessary, alienating abstraction. As such, it challenges the patriarchal framing of ideas of femininity and associated labors that creates a hierarchy that puts wisdom associated with or transmitted through female lines of the family below the wisdom typically transmitted in association with the other side of the binary. The link exposed by Val Plumwood in her essay “Feminism and the Mastery of Nature,” first published in 1993, reveals the dualisms at the heart of these structures of power. “Dualism can also be seen as an alienated form of differentiation, in which power construes and constructs difference in terms of an inferior and alien realm.”¹⁷ Through dualisms that are unquestioned even by the subject deemed inferior, we become active participants in demeaning our own knowledge and the ways in which we share it. Within a patriarchal society, men’s ability to communicate about emotion has been stunted, and due to this, the allowance of emotive means of understanding that still thrive within femininity must be seen as a disadvantage, or lesser function, to maintain the narrative that men have a natural tendency toward preferred modes of wisdom (like traditional philosophy). If the dualisms that are so often unquestioned come under question, it would require a transformation of how we view the neatly gendered power structures in place. Women are isolated by the very design of household labor. Through a lack of time and space in which to discuss the mistreatments of a current system, women are largely denied the opportunity to unite in recognition of the knowledge they hold, and

¹⁷ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Routledge, 1993), 42.

the knowledge they are denied. Though my mother gained strength from her own wisdoms, there were few people to share this with. As an eldest daughter, who in many ways benefitted the most from a bond of solidarity with the experiences of my mother, we also shared the same messaging regarding how highly we should value these forms of wisdom that we shared—that she had gifted to me.

Finally, we should consider how this labor–motherhood, and the sharing of wisdom—is undervalued. The nurturing of other human beings is often not considered work in the traditional sense because it is not made up of measurable labor and doesn't produce a material product—so it remains unrecognized by wages. A stay-at-home parent is deemed unemployed rather than recognized for having the most endless and precious of jobs in our community. Eva Kittay's care ethics deconstructs the false notion of personal independence, stating that we are a species that depends on support in our early and late life. The initial years spent reliant on a caregiver are important to consider. Devaluing caregiver labor undermines the importance of a child's first years in the world in even the mind of caregivers themselves, thus impacting the way the caregiver values the child's interactions with the world. Consequently, the way the child learns to interact with and learn about the world is not acknowledged in this early stage and instead only recognized once a child enters school. I was lucky to have a mother who valued these early life stages immensely. She taught me to be curious, brave, and independent in my explorations of the world and this form of seeking wisdom will be my lifelong mode of interaction much more so than anything I learned in school. Through the lens of care ethics, we can also further see the devaluation of the labor that is typically done by women. Formal education reinforces the ways of the dominant culture, insisting that children sit still in a classroom, that they answer the questions provided by a teacher, that they raise their hands before speaking, and provide answers

found only within the assigned chapters of reading. In many ways, we lose and restrain the ways that we interact with our own learning.

In a movement past the current state of certain wisdoms, it is also important to look at some of the ways of discovering wisdom that I hope thrive in the future. This desire, for what I hope to be nourished as valuable, is not inherently a conscious pursuit but a pattern of what we see as worthy of being shared and told. Though the naturalization of dualisms can lead to a distortion of what wisdom is seen as worthwhile, the physical space created within a caretaker's (most often a mother's) home creates a safe and still location in which her own ideas can develop with a higher degree of distinction from the surrounding communities' beliefs about the value of ideas. By looking to the distinctions/dualisms of masculinity and femininity, logic and emotion, mind and body, we can begin to observe what information will be most prized within a family and seen as the most important to give to the people coming after you, who turn to you as they begin to develop wisdom of their own. We exist within a culture that has deemed certain types of knowledge to be on opposite ends of a spectrum. On one side of the spectrum, we have highly valued analytical and logical, masculinity-associated wisdoms. On the other, we have more emotional forms of wisdom associated with femininity. Oppressed groups, rarely guaranteed access to education about "respected" modes of communication, are effectively excluded from circles where the use of these modes is required. Alternative modes and tools will always be cultivated: if not taught to "write clearly," storytelling will take new forms. Instead of an extensive education to prepare for careers, ways of survival in power structures that denied access are coached. If these alternate routes are also devalued the people that utilize them will be even further excluded from mainstream conversations in society. The routes that are perceived to implicate intelligence are taught through school systems and family structures that have

significant barriers to involvement—primarily wealth. Within the United States we have a system of higher education that is made exclusive to certain groups by a variety of factors. If one’s understanding of the world cannot be well backed up with a clear logical structure or accepted evidence—both of which require a certain level of compliance with this educational format—their ideas will remain within a smaller circle of influence or remain without regard. Even artists often need to validate and justify their work with gestures intended to signal understanding with certain terms that have been commonly agreed upon within a community. These agreed upon terms often must be permissible, if not created by, the top of this hierarchical power structure.

In Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, the notion of this othering is further expanded on. Closely aligned with Plumwood’s discussions of dualisms, or “the construction of a devalued and sharply demarcated sphere of otherness,”¹⁸ De Beauvoir’s notion of being othered helps to further explore the creation of what we see as femininity and looks to the roles associated with femininity in regard to labor. Women have been pushed into the expectations of household labor, childbirth, etc. and have little room to engage in creative, autonomous activities as their male counterparts do. This thesis looks for a middle ground, where caregiving labor is not a societal obligation or expectation. The minimizing view of femininity extends to the things thought to be intrinsically tied to it. Birth, as a result, is also devalued—its importance and power overlooked. This creation of values that are made to seem natural disguises power’s hand in forming what it means to occupy certain identities. While Beauvoir rejects the capacity of motherhood to be a fulfilling life path, I think that it can’t be ruled out. Instead, we must separate motherhood from the ideas that have been artificially imposed on it, and see whether it then remains incompatible with a fulfilling life.

18 Val Plumwood, “The Politics of Reason: Towards a Feminist Logic,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 71, no. 4 (Dec 1993), 436–462, 442.

In Maria Lugones' *Playfulness, "World"-Traveling, and Loving Perception*,¹⁹ Lugones describes a lack of ability for people to identify with one another. In contrast to identification with one another Lugones depicts arrogant perception, which is practiced by those in power, particularly white men and women, who project their own assumptions about others onto them rather than relating from a place of "'world'-traveling" to truly try to empathize. An important element of the work Lugones does is to define two distinct types of play; a Western agonistic play that has its roots in coloniality and a kind and caring 'true play.' These two ways of operating mirror the same issues in the binary forms that Western philosophy takes in its attempts to teach. An individualistic tradition of stern and rigid knowledge in which one seeks to know more for the sake of their own understanding than anything else is juxtaposed with a form of learning that comes from a desire to experience and learn through the body/eyes of another. Decentering our own experiences and becoming 'playful' in our attempts to learn cross-culturally allows for a far deeper comprehension of others' experiences. Taking inspiration from this idea to move beyond Western styles of projecting our expectations (of what philosophy is, in this case), the following letters offer a way to look at wisdoms and philosophy that are pertinent for how they relate to my own communities. These ideas do not need to be made overly complex or abstract—they can just be spoken simply. Through the implementation of playfulness, rigid Western practices are overturned for the sake of a softer and more inclusive practice of philosophy.

19 María Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception," *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987).

Letters

The use of the following letters arose from the change I most desired to see in philosophy, a more inclusive community to be made in which ideas were encouraged and shared and accepted no matter how they were presented or who came up with them. This model was inspired by the relationships in my life where ideas that are philosophical in nature get shared and encouraged, albeit not categorized as philosophy. Letters are just one of many forms through which communities and kin share ideas and knowledge. Oral histories, music, folklore, stories, art, or late-night conversations all function to share wisdom within communities. Even looking back at the canons of philosophy reveals the importance of dinner parties and conversations between friends as hubs for the development of ideas. Expanding the scope of what is recognized and valued, as well as whose ideas are recognized all hold the promise as new additions to our block of philosophical wisdoms.

Letter 1: To My Childhood Friends,

My earliest memory of truly questioning the nature of the world came at a young age, tucked into blankets and sleeping bags at a sleepover. We could not have been much older than ten, if we were that. As late night shifted into early morning, we began to discuss why the world around us looked as it did. How could anything we perceived be true, guaranteed, static, or even real? Beyond our expectations of the world, how was it that in the middle of such an absurd and delicate existence we could rule anything out of the realm of possibility? What prevented a sudden transformation of what we held to be true, or the introduction of something that would upset this stability we expected and took for granted in the world, when the sun was shining and we weren't dwelling in all that was possible?

I remember Anabel's mom finding us locked in the bathroom, having covered all the drains, in tears at the unsettling we had done of our acceptance of the way the world we lived in worked, at the idea that the basic laws we accepted everyday had no foundation we were able to truly identify. This was the first time in my life that a trusted adult couldn't provide an explanation or reassurance about the world.

It was not until much later that I would recall this night as my first practice of philosophy. In fact, I may have let it slide from memory were it not for the fact that I remained close with this group of people as we grew up. We would refer to the night as "the old man" which became an absurdist reference to the source of all being or uncertainty that we had come face to face with that night—young children's rejection of the idea of a God while simultaneously operating as a bow to the human desire for a tangible or graspable explanation for what allows our existence to function and obey the rules we all come to recognize as constant. This flux, between a priori understandings and the beginnings of societal laws that we had been absorbing our whole lives, remained in our minds.

Never again have I experienced such an existential fear of the unknown and a questioning of the security and stability of what is taken for granted.

When I think of what feels wrong in philosophy, I often question my own capacity to make this critique. In such a large and nebulous field that stakes its very being on the essence of what it is to be, or to be known, how could I have possibly absorbed enough to feel certain of my ability to be critical of anything? The point here, though, is that my own uncertainty operates as a known entity. That my capacity to state what I feel and know to be true, at any level, has been undermined by the Western demands of legitimacy through certain patterns of logic. The absolute uncertainty and unraveling of truths of the world that my ten-year-old self experienced

is something that all these years later I can pinpoint as a truth within my experience. My explanation of how we arrived at that feeling may be shaky from the passing of years. The value of the conversation may be doubtful to an outsider due to our age at the time, or due to my inability to precisely defend the feelings that resulted. Regardless, I know without doubt the value and importance of our ability to open our minds to the pure absurdity of the world we found ourselves in.

A nurturing of this knowledge that exists in the emotions, in the gut, in the mind, is excluded from formal knowledge. I can see the value of asking for certainty, of groundings to make claims about the state of the world. However, I also see with clarity the wealth that is held in the far more innate human ways of knowing—the wealth of storytelling, of truths learned from nature, from family, from community, from care. This place of nurturing we experience in life does not exclude the value of logical reasoning. Instead, it opens the gates of what we hold as the most valuable wisdom we utilize as a society to a whole new scope of practitioners of knowledge and encourages an inclusive scope to be pulled into our daily practices with equal value, that can be spoken to with heart still intact.

You were alongside me that night, friends, when we unraveled our certainty in the universe, when we asked how anything could come to be, or how anything could be ruled out. Just because we had not seen or experienced something before was suddenly far from convincing as a reason it could not come to be. To you, I don't have to defend the sheer terror we felt that night as we unwound any of the foundations of truth we had previously relied upon. As we conjured up endless scenarios that would previously have been ruled out by the understanding of the laws of nature that most everyone grasps before they are given a name in science class one day years in the future. This sharing of a moment, an experience, a questioning of the world that

we spend the majority of our life moving in without questioning, makes you the only ones to be able to read these words and truly recall how it felt to be in that moment together, with nothing attaching us to certainty besides the equal terror we could see and hear in one another.

There is something in the mind of youth that gets to experience the world as so much more open to possibility. Without having had years of experience or training in what is known, the ability to ask questions more freely, to not make assumptions about what is worthwhile to explore made us all the more able to play with what is certain.

Letter 2: To My Little Sister,

From the moment we were born, our mom taught us that children were valuable and wise. We were raised to know we mattered, that we were unconditionally respected. However, we were then introduced to a society that didn't seem to agree with this. Children were vessels to be taught and trained. The absence of clear formulations about the world is seen as a thing to be mended rather than as a moment of clarity not yet distorted by the conceptions of reality that are socially created and applied.

The two of us and our brother Lij were lucky to spend years of our early education attending Opal School. We moved from a rigid math- and science-focused school that prioritized worksheets to a Reggio Emilia educational philosophy that placed students at the center of their own learning experience. Rather than centering a pre-selected curriculum, the approach allowed each of us to ask our own questions of the world and seek to understand them. Through the use of experiential learning, we were empowered to seek answers for ourselves. The contrast this creates to a typical public education was stark. Rather than centering our own experience of learning, public education took a sharp turn towards 'right' answers and specific learning targets. We got to experience a microcosm for the issues that are so prevalent in the way that philosophy

exists in academia. Despite the different paths we have taken through education, we shared this experience, the sharp juxtaposition of two approaches to education at such a young age.

Philosophy is not taught as a pursuit that guides students to their own complex understanding of the world from a foundation of experience. Between the values of Reggio Emilia and the love of our mother, we were raised on belief in the wisdom of children. Frequently, I hear people echo ideas about the unintelligence of children—that we are born into the world without any thoughts or ideas and must spend the first portion of our lives having information put into it by people who are older and wiser. Though the wisdom we gain from the people around us is essential to creating a strong understanding of the world, I must absolutely reject the idea that children do not have a form of wisdom of their own. An idea that is often discussed in philosophy is our inherent knowledge. Called a priori knowledge, it comes without the need of experience. It is within. In many ways, this is what young children have in abundance. There are no layers of information piled overtop. No nagging concern about what question is silly to ask, and because of this, a very different form of thinking than you or I have access to. So, hearing the discussion of how little children know has always felt to me like it is missing a fundamental understanding of the width of what wisdom contains. The ability to ask questions without pause, to see the world with fresh eyes, to be free of the lens that develops through years of adjustment. This experience of the world and its operations as novel, and yet to be discovered, allows for children to see it in a way that is often much more honest than our vision as we age. The assertion that children are unintelligent feels like it comes from a place of severely oversimplifying what makes intelligence. Though the aspects of life that are learned from experience may not yet be strongly developed, they may not yet understand how to provide for themselves, read, or answer questions that society has deemed important, there is a clarity and questioning to how they see

the world that, to me, can only be read as a type of wisdom. I discuss this because of the dissonance between these ideas of wisdom, and what they bring to the table.

Students of philosophy are taught to read deeply and think critically, but primarily we are taught to learn a tradition. This is not the issue so much as the lack of room and time to nourish your own ideas of the world. It is vital to seek more of your own answers, and to read philosophy that is written for people like you, who live in a world that resembles your own. The abstraction of the canons is not something to be discounted. The true issue lies in the exclusive nature of the culture of philosophy. Our ability to reach true wisdom is greatly undermined if it does not contain diverse truths. Many of the greats sat and meditated on the world around them to determine which truths were absolute. They considered how to ground realizations. Each of us is capable of these acts: to ponder questions, to look at what we know without a trace of doubt is true, to use these certainties to build a world up around us that lets us feel sure of ourselves, and the earth beneath our feet.

Letter 3: To Three Grandmothers,

You lived through a world that cheated you of so many paths your life could have taken. But this reduction of possibility had a much wider impact than just the harm done to you: the world lost brilliant thinkers—we will never see the full impact you could have made if you had been able to proceed as you dreamed and wished. What might you have done if you could have dived into the sciences or the arts without restraint? We have all lost this due to the caregiving role you were assigned. You urged me to see the world differently, without limitation, and however unintentionally, you also became a piece of enforcement in the structure. My mother speaks often of what she wishes she'd been allowed to dream of; the limited possibilities you had been offered maintained enough of a hold over you that you repeated them, even knowing how

much they had hurt you. I think this cycle can be consciously broken by a community engaging in conversations that are not easy, and that expose patterns of pain and hurt not to critique, but to heal and grow past them. My mother would have loved to be an architect, just as you would have loved to be a scientist, and in many ways, you both found your way to this path, in small doses, in your passions. Yet even with this success, the title or recognition of a larger community is not something you have been given in large enough quantities to claim and acknowledge your own success. You still view these denials of your identity as total loss. I see in you though that each monarch released into the world is a whisper of promise, of healing; each child you teach to recognize milkweed is a reminder that your love of the natural world could not possibly be denied a part of the life that you have lived.

You each have such a distinct role in my life and formation. The ways in which you loved your own children translated into the way that I have been loved and raised. The lessons you taught were powerful regarding the things you have felt passionate about: the environment, the cruelty of our laws, what you desire for me. Most profound though, have been the lessons you have shared about your own lives, about the possibilities given to you, and more powerfully, about the possibilities you have been denied. “A teacher, a nurse, or a librarian,” you were told, when all you wanted was to be a scientist like your own father. An inventor. You have told me about the pride you felt breastfeeding my mother at a feminist conference in front of so many people. Yet, you always conclude this story with a self-demeaning anecdote about how young and silly you were to do such a thing. That the world you had these experiences in is so recent serves as a warning about the direction we are moving in, and as a reminder of how important it is to remember the fragility of the world that is now.

Your own mothers were not easy, not always kind. When you could, you left, still so young. You floated past the dreams of your own future at the recommendation of guidance counselors who instilled the knowledge in you that you could be one of a few things. You both chose separate routes, yet somehow you both made it to the role of wife and mother before you could begin to heal from your own experiences of childhood, where you had been shaped by dysfunction and the hierarchy of parent over child. The love you held for your mother resembled the love you held for your husband, one in which your identity is shaped only in contrast to the trajectory of his life. I don't know what you thought about it. How those early days felt when you were still so young, in love—both with him and the idea of creating a family and a life that felt better than the one you were raised with. You must have dreamed of security, stability, and safety just as much as you dreamed of anything else. The main echo of this early part of your life comes only in snippets, left for me to piece together, to understand from my own mother's explanation of how she saw your experience, your pain. The men that hurt your own mothers put them in a position of survival. They could not find the ability to nurture because they were not given nurturing. Without having grown under care they were not sure how to care for the children that they brought into the world, leaving you with younger siblings to worry about and care for. When you had the chance to leave, it was not with joy for your newfound freedom but rather with the guilt of the idea of those you left behind, siblings you had felt the need to protect, but who you couldn't; you were just a child yourself. How could you have been expected to heal when you were never shown patience or given space to see how the world could be different? The violence inflicted upon your childhoods, that disrupted the love you experienced, created a rift between mother and child. The sacred space for the first moment of learning patterns of care was denied. So the care and motivation that you gave to your daughter was, in some ways,

stunted. But your desire to shape things differently was profound. You saw a vision that I get to live within now.

Various methods of exclusion transformed the life you desired into one that never freed you, or even your children—but I have gotten to benefit from your rejections of these exclusions. You may not have been able to open the doors you wanted to walk through for yourself, but you cracked them for your children, however imperfectly. You elevated them, and in turn I was afforded a head start still denied to so many.

Letter 4: To My Mother,

You created a nest and bought the house on the corner. It sagged and had spent many of its years in a state of ongoing dilapidation, but suddenly it became a home again. Behind the dense wall of raspberries my earliest memories exist under the sun, bare feet held by the warmth of the earth as I played, questioned, and learned. You taught us to be brave in our exploration, as I learned which plants were soft to my fingers, and which led to tingling skin. As I learned what trees made for the best perches, what leaves my chickens loved and which they rejected—with their strong propensity for our ginkgo—I grew to know that my love for our garden was returned to me in the form of sweet blueberries, birdsong, and a thousand snap peas. You taught me to nurture and care for the land as I learned that many of the questions I asked had answers that I could find within myself, in my gut—my instinctual knowledge of when to trust the strength of a branch.

As I grew, I would learn that these earliest memories were not a part of a random pattern. You knew all along the importance of our exploration of the world, of our confidence in asking why the sky was blue, where the birds slept, or how to wait for the berries to ripen. You were confident in the capacity of the natural world to be our teacher, and our ability to learn from her.

When you brought my siblings into the world our relationship took on a new form. I began to see first-hand the conscious and deliberate decisions you made as our mother. More than anything you desired for us to be joyous, brave, and kind humans. You led by example, showing us how to share, nurture, and identify our feelings. There was always room to share how we felt about the injustices the world presented us. We could communicate our needs to you clearly because you always made sure to hear us. “Listen to your body” was key to supporting a toddler in everything from potty training and hunger to anger or joy. We knew that the understandings we gained about the world, our instincts of discomfort or safety were not to be blindly accepted, but still necessary to recognize, examine, and learn from.

Your children have always been your equals. A denial of hierarchical family dynamics led us to know that each of our places in the family came with equal importance, equal respect; that we always deserved a place in conversation, to be heard. Though I grew up with a mother and father I never received a message from within my family that one of you had a different hold on truth than the other. What you each had to teach me was distinct from the other, through the nature of having different things you felt passionate about and inspired to share.

When I was little, I recall a conversation where I mentioned that you had no job. You were quick and kind in your explanation that all that you did was one vast job, and an essential one at that. The loads of laundry, feeding of the children, the nourishing of the minds in our home fell to you each and every day. Maintaining a home swathed in safety meant that we were able to trust the world to hold us each day. In a later psychology class I learned about the importance of a young child feeling absolutely secure in their connection to their caregiver to the development of independence. Before that, I had sometimes wondered how our tight bond had come to coexist with my desire to carve out pieces of the world for myself, to strike out on so

many adventures of my own. I went home excited to tell you, and discovered you knew this, that it had always been clear. Motherhood seemed to come naturally to you; maybe it was being the oldest sibling and spending all but the first two years of your life caring for a younger sister, the constant reminders from your mother that you should be a teacher, or your later years spent doing just that. Whatever it was rolled you and motherhood into one thing in my mind for a long time; there was no separating your personhood from your job. Then I moved away, and from a distance—maybe for the first time—I was able to see you more clearly for *you*. To see you as equally you in all the years prior to my existence, in which motherhood was not yet your experience or a part of your definition. In fact, you have spent less than half your life as a mother. In this society, women especially are taught from such a young age to exist *in relation* to others. Independence is glorified, but we are taught even before we can fully form sentences how to make the people around us—parents, teachers, siblings, schoolmates—comfortable, how to recognize the boundaries we should respect in space and sound. Then we grow up, and though we need to stay in constant observance of these lessons, we are also meant to go off to university, to move to new cities, to carve out independence by rejecting the old and comfortable in exchange for the shiny, new, and often isolating and lonely experience of uprooting to satisfy demands of independence and then forming a nuclear unit to appease the expectations of reproduction and family, rather than leaning on more dynamic communities.

This tug of war between our existence as communal animals and the socializations we were exposed to from an early age (and understood to be natural extensions of social life, rather than crafted expectations) has led us both to a life navigating the same flux of unsatisfying connections. Almost every day I have a conversation, or overhear a snippet of one, in which the deep need for close community is mentioned. You met motherhood with so much beauty, but

you were also consumed by it. I was always given enough love as a child, but as I started to gain friendships of my own I realized what you having enough to give to your children had cost you. Of identity and community you had allowed yourself to be drained, because you saw how valuable the exchange was for the complete and total devotion you have to your children. The question of nature and nurture is a tricky one, but my identity can in so many ways be traced to the deliberate and often difficult decisions you made to allow me to be everything you dreamed I could be, and everything that you were not given the resources to be in that moment.

In the past I have thought of all the things I could achieve in life, benchmarks that seemed to match the independence I prized for so much of my life. Now I think about how to create community, how to make space and safety for people to seek each other out—for support and for love and to do away with this vast loneliness that consumes so many. I want to create this community for you, for my siblings, for everyone I have loved and have yet to get a chance to love. You gave this to me when I was little, and in honor of both the sacrifices you made and the world you envisioned for us, I want to multiply it and give it back to you and to all.

Letter 5: To a Future Child,

What do we get from looking forward to a future that has yet to be defined or decided? How can we channel all the hopes and dreams that we have for the world into action by envisioning a future that we may not be able to even reach ourselves, but that we must take actionable steps towards for everyone that will follow us? Philosophy seeks to explain the world, and much of philosophy seeks to critique elements of it, but how do we take this act of meditation, and reflection on the way the world around us works and link it to the dreams that we have for the future? How do we take these reflections and then intentionally decide what we want to be different?

If you were to make the same decision as me and study philosophy, I would support you wholeheartedly, just as I hope I would any path you may choose for yourself. However, if you do study philosophy, I hope that it's in a different context. I hope that you see that you truly belong to the conversation, and it to you. I hope you don't doubt that space you take up, the ideas that you have. They won't all be perfect, but I hope you feel the bravery to share them in spaces that encourage and challenge them in equal parts. I hope that every day you see all the small and big and radical and soft ways that we each practice philosophy. I hope you hear it in the music you listen to, the late-night conversations you have, the questions scrawled in graffiti on bridges, in your favorite stories, in the lessons taught by all the people that love you in small gestures and grand words. You don't need to choose philosophy in academia to be a philosopher in your own right. The great questions of what it means to be human in this strange and beautiful universe belong to me, to you, to us all, just as much as they have to any of "the greats". So much wisdom can be gleaned just from the experience of waking up in the morning, the expansion of lungs, the feeling of sunlight. We each seek an understanding of the world, conscious or unconscious, however defined. I think the greatest acts of philosophy may be simple acts of listening and seeking to understand all you can hear, of being unafraid to read answers from the world and to question all the things you experience as equally novel aspects of this universe we all are experiencing for the first time—and the only time, as far as any of us know.

The world you will live in will be different from mine. In ways, I hope it to be vastly different, but there are also so many ways in which I hope you get to experience the same things that gave me joy. I hope you grow up feeling safe, and unquestionably loved. I hope you spend time among the plants, under blue skies, and dancing in the raindrops. I hope that we have created a world that loves you as deeply as you love it. I hope that I can determine all the

wisdom that is most important to impart on you, and decipher what is most important for you to learn for yourself.

I hope that when you sit and write, or find yourself surrounded by the whispering of trees and the fluttering of birds, you cling tightly to this feeling of awe and joy. You know that the world has given it to you because you made yourself open to the world. I hope you find it beautiful and precious and wild. I hope that you dance and that you sing. I hope that you run and play. I hope that you never doubt that you are loved. When you feel sure and die to tell this certainty to the whole world, I hope that it gives pause to listen and let your truths soak in like a late summer rain.

Conclusion

Writing letters is just one very specific route through which to both explore, play with, and share philosophy. Not as grandiose as a fully defined book, not as comprehensive as an essay. Instead, my goal has been simple: to focus on the people that I desired to share my work and thoughts with. This practice does not make a perfect solution, but it does point to a way forward that mitigates some of what I found to be the most harmful elements of the institution of Western philosophy. By showing that I can engage with the ideas that appeal to me in philosophy, to play with what I see as some of the most important bits of wisdom I have collected, while leaving behind the elements that exclude or scare people away, I have made the pitch both for myself, and for whoever happens to read this thesis, that philosophy is beautiful for its big ideas, for its grappling with the unknown, for its ability to give us explanations for the experience we have living in this world. Philosophy is not synonymous with its shortcomings that live in ego and academia. Though these letters are far from perfect encapsulations of my own thoughts or the teachings that each person has given me, they are beautiful to me for their representation of the way that each person has their own experience with philosophy—and that opening the doors a bit wider for them, creating a space that thrives in listening and caring for ideas—will only make us stronger.

The philosophers that created the foundation for this thesis show that academia has room to respect and appreciate works that reject the common power center and that care for their communities. Opening our eyes to how many ways knowledge can be explored and shared does not distill the truthfulness or accountability of philosophy—it bolsters it, through ideas, through people, and through genuine care.

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