## What it’s Like to Grow up Poor, but Fall in Love with Philosophy:

## A Notice to the Profession in Case it Forgot

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“So if it’s all love, show me love then.”

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Perhaps no issue is more widely debated in feminist philosophy and critical race theory than the role that the experience of oppression should play in our theories. It inspires original, exciting research. Yet in spite of a nominal commitment, our profession struggles to confront the personal experiences of oppression of our students and colleagues. Among academic philosophers, just as in the world at large, group-based vulnerabilities vary widely: racist exclusion and disrespect, statelessness and a lack of formal legal status, sexism, ableism, heteronormativity, and childhood poverty. It is vital to respect our differences to build inclusive professional networks and welcome a rising generation of young philosophers whose backgrounds do not align with the privilege, wealth, and whiteness that define academic philosophy. Like fish swimming in poisoned waters, it is hard to notice the background conditions that both sustain academic life and undermine the wellbeing of its participants.

In this short essay, I reflect on my personal experience of what it’s like to grow up poor, but to fall in love with philosophy. My motivation is not just to share anecdotes. To be sure, the more we share our stories of hardship, the less the most vulnerable among us will feel like we live with a shameful secret or a chip on our shoulders or are pariahs. Rather, my objective is to defend the imperative of welcoming diverse backgrounds into academic philosophy. Our personal experiences are valuable for refining philosophical research agendas and challenging status quo perceptions of intelligence and prestige. The profession is lucky to have us: we foster its growth and hold the promise of its future. I also make some recommendations to guide inclusive practices for students and colleagues.

1. In the Beginning

I graduated from a public high school in NYC a month before I turned sixteen years old. I was the only one of my friends to graduate and resigned myself to being “the smart one” among a close-knit circle of drug addicts, musicians, and autobody mechanics—some who embodied all three identities at once—but all of whom lived and worked on Coney Island Avenue in the southern most coastline of Brooklyn, New York. We drifted for about a year. After a particularly bad night out, I woke up alone in a stranger’s apartment. He had pink hair and tattoos and walked me to the train station. As we walked, I felt a wave of gratitude, my eyes welling. I somehow sensed that he had not touched me while I was blacked out. As the train climbed its elevated tracks, I watched the morning sun pour into the faces of the women beside me on the train. I wanted more than anything to be a little more like them. They had somewhere to go. They were busy and dignified in the life they were building for themselves; however modest, it was theirs. Above all, I wanted my body, I wanted my mind. I decided that morning that I would get to college, one way or another. And so, the weird gratitude to a stranger for not violating me in the context of a functional homelessness that would last into my early twenties was the impetus for my philosophical studies.

I was in and out of my mother’s home in my late teens, before I left for good after we lost our home to the housing market crash during which over nine million American families lost their homes from 2006-2014.[[1]](#footnote-1) I took one of two paths available to most women from my neighborhood of Slavic and Central Asian extraction: sex work or domestic work. Because I figured I had some kind of skillset in the latter department, I became a live-in nanny *for a philosophy professor*, of all people. A stark representation of the realities of who I was and of where I wanted to be and might yet still go. But even if I couldn’t believe it then, I was already on my way.

For me, poverty was an immense feeling of aloneness. A kind of drifting into a cosmic void, like being lowered into a sensory deprivation tank. The future, at best, is a promise that won’t be kept and that you don’t believe in anyway. At worst, it’s a threat. Most days you don’t feel anything. Not knowing what to do with one’s own body—that my physical body was a burden to bear, finding a place for it to sleep, eat, pass the hours of the day and night, safely. It wasn’t the condition of my existence, but a stubborn, ever-present obstacle. An obstacle that in Hunter College I assailed by staying in the library until it closed. I filled every research and editorial opportunity in the philosophy department until the chair (and longtime beloved mentor Frank Kirkland) gave me a key to an office. Once I walked out of a local supermarket with an entire ‘party-size’ tray of shrimp cocktail for an end-of-semester class party. The instructor had asked us to bring ‘snacks.’ I probably could’ve just brought nothing but didn’t want to be outed as poor. She was a harbinger of all those to come who would unintentionally exacerbate my insecurity before—and arrogant disdain for—those who were better off. It illustrated how much one person has to sacrifice for what someone else can take for granted.

My formative experiences reflected in my philosophical studies by forming a constructive outlet for my anger. With philosophy, I had my first chance to reflect on my life, a tightly wound knot of bad memories to which I had become numb. Even if anger predominated, an entire range of feelings returned to me as I uncoiled memories and used them to sustain my focus to study ethics and politics. I found the concepts to make sense of my experiences. I formed a strong voice and a sense of self. I became *passionate*. I had a way to understand and condemn the world. Even if I couldn’t change my immediate circumstances, at least I could explain why my anger was justified. And for that I will always be grateful to and love philosophy.

My anger has now mostly dimmed. The further in time and space that I move away from my past and my hometown, respectively, the less my memories hold my attention. I get scared sometimes that I will forget, get comfortable and complacent. Yet just as falling in love makes you want to be a better person, my love for philosophy has, with time, driven me to rise above myself. It is important for me to hold onto the parts of myself that had inspired my philosophical imagination. But it’s just as important to me to learn to see the world from the perspective of others who can complete and refine my philosophical imagination. For there are even greater sacrifices so many are forced to make for the privileges I can take for granted in the profession and in the world at large. Though my own experiences have primed me to empathize with others, the firsthand experience of hardship is *absolutely not necessary* to stand in compassionate solidarity with others and to appreciate their perspective and advocate—and even sacrifice—on *their* behalf.

And so, I don’t want to forget my own memories. I also don’t want to forget what Toni Morrison in *Beloved* describes as “rememories” that belong to somebody else and that never happened to me:

‘I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, not just in my rememory, but out there in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.’

‘Can other people see it?’ asked Denver.

‘Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes. Someday you will be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It’s never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

Morrison suggests that some memories of hardship are so acute and so neglected that they become “rememories.” They become something like orphaned memories, outside of received histories and day-to-day conversations, and they linger after the persons who experienced them firsthand are gone. Morrison suggests that it should be the burden of the world to bear rememories and to change the institutional structures that had generated them in the first place. In other words, orphaned memories should eventually find a home in a discursive community. What is more, even if we continue to ignore rememories, they will remain palpable enough that we will “bump” into them. But for philosophers, of course, the goal is not to “bump” into that which holds ethical significance, like hands groping in the dark: it is to mediate, build, and invite community. We just need to figure out how to.

In a collection of essays published in 2019 shortly before her death *The Source of Self-Regard*, Morrison discusses drawing on slave narratives in her research for her exquisite novel *Beloved*. Received narratives of American history had elided the black historical perspective on slavery. Morrison pieces together what was left unsaid in U.S. history books written by whites to uphold white-power regimes for centuries. She looks to enslaved persons’ own accounts of what had happened to them. Her work is the site of a “pitched battle between remembering and forgetting.”[[3]](#footnote-3) She notes that the notion of rememory confronts an unspoken past and the untold experiences of hardship that it conceals in a new way: it amounts to “the effort to remember and *not to know*.”[[4]](#footnote-4) What I take Morrison to mean here is that “knowing” is an open-ended, incomplete, and imperfect process. She cannot “know” the personal experience of slavery in the sense that the mechanisms for constructing knowledge are profoundly unreliable. However, without amounting to “knowledge,” her fictionalized representations honor the ethical demands of memory. They partially fill in the “truth” to represent the millions of enslaved persons who never had a chance to speak for themselves and who perished nameless and forgotten in the Middle Passage and on plantations.

1. Recommendations

Morrison’s notion of “rememory” is a useful normative signpost for thinking about the ethics of inclusion that can guide the redistribution of power and prestige in academic philosophy. In order to build inclusive discursive communities, we must accept that the missing pieces of our collective knowledge require an ever-expanding circle of interlocutors whom we have historically excluded as credible epistemic agents. In a real sense, our profession does not “know” and will never “know” the rememory of those it seeks to welcome. But it must nevertheless attempt to carry that epistemic weight anyway. That is a tall order for a profession that resists mitigating the illicit authority of those who hold de facto power and privilege. And yet it should be the responsibility of the profession to ease the burden—and even sacrifice—for those it nominally seeks to welcome.

In my view, following Morrison, the ethics of inclusion involves cultivating both deliberative reciprocity and an inclination to foreground the voices of the excluded. On the one hand, if we expect to be heard, we must reciprocate, in return, an open disposition to listen and to engage in good faith. That is, treat others like real philosophers. Read their work. Disagree in meaningful and helpful ways. And above all: read and assign in syllabi historically excluded voices and canonical figures. As a Du Bois scholar, I can’t say how many times I’ve been on a panel with commentators who preface their remarks, “Never read Du Bois, but skimmed *Souls* on the flight over—interesting stuff!” Or, “It seems to me that you’re making a mountain out of a molehill—there’s just not enough ‘there there’ in his writings.” I can’t imagine someone on a Kant panel making similar claims about Kant’s worst and most notorious writings, such as his lectures on anthropology and geography.

On the other hand, the project of building inclusive discursive practices is even more demanding than merely cultivating genuine deliberative reciprocity. It asks us toforeground the persons excluded by our profession as holding the promise of its future development. As such, we must accept that those who finished public or community colleges, or were the first in their family to graduate high school and go to college, or enter the middle class *are* the potential future leaders of the profession. They too are philosophical powerhouses to whom we owe our respect and gratitude for bothering with a profession that for too long and for no good reason has made no room for them. I have been lucky enough to teach in public universities for many years now. I enter my classroom with all the seriousness that my students—who tend to be socioeconomically and racially diverse—hold the key to what our discipline could one day become. We must attend to the needs of a diverse student body not just for the sake of inclusion, but for the sake of the potential vibrancy of philosophy itself. Moreover, we owe our students as a matter of moral respect and justice the opportunity to pursue their chosen profession with dignity. Without accepting these claims about the ethics of inclusion, I believe that it will be difficult to garner the collective will to enact the recommendations I outline below.

*Early mentoring.* First, it is vital to start cultivating early informal support networks for students, with a special focus on teaching philosophy effectively to undergraduates. For good reasons, we tend to focus on our graduate students in whose intellectual development we are directly invested. Yet there are serious limitations to this approach. Being admitted into a competitive graduate school often signifies that a student has already scaled a formidable obstacle that many talented but poorer students cannot scale on their own. Unfortunately, admission into graduate philosophy programs often requires an undergraduate degree from some of the most expensive colleges in the world. For example, as my alma mater The Graduate Center, CUNY moves up in rank, admissions committees draw more seldomly on the student body that CUNY is supposed to serve: students like me who attended New York City public schools and CUNY colleges. I have found the same trend in large public research universities across the country.

I suggest we start modelling informal support networks at the undergraduate level that we’d like to see grow in the profession. At least in my case, effective mentoring entailed long mentoring relationships that kept me on track, alerted me to opportunities, and advocated for me when I felt like I was losing ground in difficult circumstances. Just to have someone who is ready to talk philosophy—I mean *really get into it*—was extremely dignifying when I was losing heart. In order to build these kinds of transformative mentoring relationships, potential mentors must earn students’ trust and this takes time. Instead, we often show a weird formal distance from our undergraduate students that leads the more vulnerable to turn away from philosophy because they intuit that few will be there for them when they will need it most. Moreover, it is of course vital to continue nurturing students’ development once they enter graduate school.

*Monetary Support.* Access to resources for economically disadvantaged students is perhaps most helpful of all. Usually, the less a student has, the more likely they will work while in college. Some students raise children or take care of family members, particularly in public colleges. The discrepancies in pay faced bywomen, people of color, and women of color in particular are well known. The attack on FAFSA, Pell, and TAP student aid programs further burdens an already cash-strapped student body reeling from the effects of a string of economic crises. Federal and state subsidies for financing needy students’ college degrees are being depleted by rightwing profiteers. The cost of a college degree is prohibitive, even in a public university system such as CUNY, which was free until 1976.[[5]](#footnote-5) The escalating costs of higher education tightly knits whiteness, power, and prestige, which then seeps into the culture and material reality of academic philosophy. Albeit a small step in the right direction, in my experience, the commitment of a philosophy department to hireresearch or editorial assistants can provide students with much needed cash and help foster the mentoring relationships that are vital for their long-term success. Even the rare monetary essay prizes for majors can go a long way. For the solidly middle class, it is easy to overlook the difference an extra $300 or $500 can make for a student living paycheck-to-paycheck. My mentors also nominated me, again and again, for grants and national awards when I lacked the cultural capital to discover them on my own. Finally, full-time and tenured faculty should consider subsidizing departmental conference travel funds for undergraduate and graduate students, as well as co-writing talks with students, who can then begin accessing our professional networks.

*The politics of public schooling*. What is more, inequalities in academic philosophy reflect the staggering inequalities not only in higher education but at schooling at the pre-K and K-12 levels across the U.S. The under-resourcing of public schools disproportionately impacts communities of color and black and brown students. Recently, public school students in the worst performing high schools in Detroit won a class-action lawsuit against the state of Michigan because they graduated high school unable to read.[[6]](#footnote-6) *The New York Times* reports:

The ruling came in response to a class-action lawsuit filed by a group of Detroit public school students that cited a litany of severe deficiencies: Rodent-infested schools. Unqualified and absentee teachers. Physics classes given only biology textbooks. “Advanced” high school reading groups working at the fourth-grade level.

[…] The overwhelming majority of students in the Detroit public schools are black or Hispanic and come from low-income families. Judge Clay noted that through the nation’s history, white people have repeatedly withheld education to deny political power to African-Americans and others, most notably under slavery and segregation.[[7]](#footnote-7)

A federal court ruled that Americans have the constitutional right to literacy, without which they are unable to participate in democratic public life. The ruling in the Detroit case occurred in April 2020. It follows class-action lawsuits filed by former public school students in New Hampshire and California. *Note*: This trend *is* the national context of debates about the ethics of inclusion in academic philosophy

Obviously poor educational outcomes in high school leave students unprepared for college. It also prohibits economically disadvantaged students from pursuing any profession at all and locks them into grinding, soul-crushing poverty. If we are serious about welcoming diverse backgrounds into academic philosophy, we must contextualize the inequalities in our profession in the light of the grossly unequal access to a quality higher education and public schooling at all levels. In other words, our commitment to inclusion cannot be myopic. It ultimately entails getting involved in messy political debates that seem prima facie unrelated. As a profession, we *must* defend public schools, as well as affordable—heck, free!—college education as an essential public good.

Moreover, given extreme structural inequalities, our most vulnerable students and their families also require quality, publicly-funded childcare, fair compensation for their labor, health care, adequate shelter and nutritious food, resources without which focusing on one’s studies takes a herculean effort—the kind of effort that drives the heroines of epic poems to battle sea monsters and pagan gods. To be blunt, the profession needs a clear progressive politics. Even if there is reasonable disagreement about which variety of a socialist or liberal democracy best exemplifies justice, there must be a consensus about the crucial importance of public schools and the universal satisfaction of basic needs for all children, including our historically excluded, brilliant, and hardworking philosophy students.

Reflecting on post-WWII Germany, Hannah Arendt observes that “There are more than a few people, especially among the cultural élite, who still publicly regret the fact that Germany sent Einstein packing, without realizing that it was a much greater crime to kill little Hans Cohn from around the corner, even though he was no genius.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In our effort to build an inclusive community in academic philosophy, we must commit to the right of all children to live dignified and flourishing lives, with access to quality public schools at all levels and basic resources, regardless of the beneficial effect it will have downstream on enriching academic philosophy, which it inevitably will. At the very least, it cannot remain a matter of a random draw that a child is fated to attend a local public school district that will teach her how to read. Whatever obstacles I faced, I am somehow left feeling lucky. In fact, I am in awe of my good fortune that even as I drifted after high school, reading was my first love, one that would make it so sweet and empowering to later welcome philosophy into my life.

1. Semuels, Alana. “The Never-Ending Foreclosure: How can the country survive the next economic crash if millions of families still haven’t recovered from the last one?” *The Atlantic* 1 December 2017: [Online](https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/12/the-neverending-foreclosure/547181/#:~:text=Some%20nine%20million%20families%20lost,off%20into%20a%20deep%20pit.). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Vintage, 2004. pp. 43-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Morrison, Toni. *Source of Self-Regard*. New York: Knopf, 2019. p. 324. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Morrison, *Source of Self-Regard*, p. 324. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sherwin, Amanda. “Could CUNY Be Tuition Free Again?” *Gotham Gazette* 20 July 2020: [Online](https://www.gothamgazette.com/city/6444-could-cuny-be-tuition-free-again#:~:text=CUNY%20was%20free%20for%20qualifying,fiscal%20crisis%20led%20to%20change.&text=Since%201976%20and%20the%20institution,and%20tuition%20funds%20to%20operate.). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Goldstein, Dana. “Detroit Students Have a Constitutional Right to Literacy, Court Rules,” *The New York Times* 27 April 2020: [online](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/27/us/detroit-literacy-lawsuit-schools.html). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Goldstein, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. New York: Penguin, 1994. p. 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)