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Feminist Metaphilosophy

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METAPHILOSOPHY: A WHAT AND A WHY

by Kristie Dotson*

Abstract. *Metaphilosophy, when done well, transforms philosophy into projects. It unveils philosophical beliefs and assumptions, translates beliefs into motivations and reasons. It can be frighteningly revealing. I prefer it to philosophy. In this paper, I primarily outline an approach to metaphilosophy, offering a metaphilosophical account that tracks a story (and its echoes) about awakened speculation that I consider broadly philosophical. Here, I recount a couple of experiences, in Black feminist fashion, to explore a root of my philosophical impulses. I narrate my turn to ‘do philosophy’ and ‘forward philosophies’ as a signature result of impactful experiences whose stories make sense of an open-ended wonder and a haunting drive in me. Metaphilosophy, on my account, is an activity that 1) treats our philosophical orientations and accounts like projects by storing their catalysts, extensions, and dimensions, and 2) puts those projects in perspective to illuminate how life and living exceed theory. Though this latter aspect of metaphilosophy is rarely acknowledged, it does not need intention to function.*

Keywords. *Metaphilosophy; Black Feminist Philosophy; Metaphilosophical Versatility; Joy; Storying*

1. Introduction

Metaphilosophy, when done well, transforms philosophy into projects. It unveils philosophical beliefs and assumptions, translates beliefs into motivations and reasons. It can be frighteningly revealing. I prefer it to philosophy.

* Michigan State University

A special thanks to the editors of this special issue, the audience at the 2017 ‘Diversity in Philosophy’ conference at Massey University in Albany, New Zealand and, also, the audience at a 2018 Yale University colloquium talk, especially Briana Toole, Axelle Karera and Elena Ruíz, for their feedback and engagement with this paper. Thank you also to Nora Berenstain for comments on earlier drafts.

Metaphilosophy not only aims at a past or a present of speculative life but also at speculative futures. It not only introduces productive doubt and hesitation but also wonder and faith. It not only assesses an individual's assumptions and orientations but also questions whether one should have accepted them in the first place. It is key for narrations of the 'past' and 'present', especially as those things connect to future-directedness. For me, metaphilosophy is always normative.

We need more metaphilosophy today. Today, there is a shortage of the ability to detect when one is promoting a philosophical position, i.e., promoting a cherished commitment about our worlds that makes one feel at ease within them. We need more transparent reconstructions of the past and the present – not because transparency is ever achievable but because its pursuit might be valuable. We need more attempts at speculative futures. We have needed far more metaphilosophy for a long, long time.

In this paper, I primarily outline an approach to metaphilosophy, offering a metaphilosophical account that tracks a story (and its echoes) about awakened speculation that I consider broadly philosophical. Here, I recount a couple of experiences, in Black feminist fashion, to explore a root of my philosophical impulses. I narrate my turn to 'do philosophy' and 'forward philosophies' as a signature result of impactful experiences whose stories make sense of an *open-ended wonder* and a *haunting drive* in me.

These are metaphilosophical stories insofar as they are how I would respond to questions about my philosophical engagement and my areas of focus. But if you ask me why I choose *these* stories, why I highlight *these* inquiries, I'd say that *these* stories 'feel right' for explaining how my philosophy, my projects, and my positions have come about¹. They are as revealing as they are misleading. And, of course, any metaphilosophical story I give is bound to be just that – a story. A story about stories. But it is also a place to start.

An aside: experiences are complicated narrative devices. Claims about what follows from them are equally complicated, if

¹ A. Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, New York, Crossing Press, 1984, pp. 37, 56, 108.

not entirely delusional. Metaphilosophical stories, I hate to break it to some folks, are always delusional. When they are self-aware, they do well to be suspicious of their own delusions, but that suspicion does not mean they hold no value or potential to illuminate. What it means is that one should not expect metaphilosophical stories to offer irrefutable arguments. One should not expect to measure a particular metaphilosophical story against another and point to its discrepancies as if doing so can undermine the story in question. Instead, what one might expect is to have one's preferences, aesthetic tastes, and faiths exposed – though the catalysts for such proclivities might remain a mystery (especially to the author). That exposure offers sites of critical reflection. Why arrange things just so? What is this notion or that notion? What *is* the conceptual array in the story (which is itself a story)? How does that conceptual array in a story function? What does it allow? What does it cordon off? When is it a good approach? When is it problematic?

Despite the gaps and inconsistencies in their fabric, metaphilosophical stories are important. Not only because they can lay bare our desires, whether we try at honesty (or not), but also because they unearth our hopes for future-directedness. Such philosophical storying lends itself to metaphilosophical constructions and futures hoped for (or feared). There is no such thing as a neutral philosophy because there is no such thing as a neutral metaphilosophy. The 'why's and the 'what's for a philosophical story are always revealing, even when one's interlocutor responds to a question about metaphilosophy with a blank stare – a blank stare tells several tales.

In what follows, I offer two stories to illustrate a 'what' for my philosophical wonder and a 'why' for my philosophical work. The 'what' begins with my mother's fears; the 'why' is to maintain the possibility for deep joy. I conclude by summarizing these metaphilosophical stories by identifying some of their delusions and potential insights. Metaphilosophy, on my account, is an activity that 1) treats our philosophical orientations and accounts like projects by storying their catalysts, extensions, and dimensions, and 2) puts those projects in perspective to illuminate how life and living exceed theory. Though this latter aspect of metaphilosophy is rarely acknowledged, it does not need intention to function.

2. *A What: Producing Philosophical Projects*

My first spark of philosophical wonder was kindled before I had consistently learned to count my life in years. My family, headed by my mother – who was and is a wonderful parent – was living in a 2-bedroom apartment. My sister and I shared a room, a room my mother did everything to make a wonderland and a place of learning. I laugh a little as I think about it now: my mother had outfitted the room with a five-shelf bookcase with everything she thought her daughters would need to know: from John Blassingame's *The Slave Community* to Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*. We had a full encyclopedia set, a dictionary, a thesaurus, and very few (if any) children's books. I often think about my mother's prized encyclopedia set (and think about how much she must have saved and spent for it). But I was young. Too young to read any of those books. But they looked pretty on the shelf, so I was reported to have opened them and feigned reading often. I remember trying to read them and not understanding a word. I also remember not particularly caring that I couldn't understand a word. I wasn't clamoring for a certain type of literacy. My mother is a grand orator. I've always been enamored with her ability to speak and paint worlds with sound. Words on a printed page, it seemed to me, paled in comparison.

I begin here because it is important to note that, despite my mother's efforts, my philosophical imagination did not necessarily begin with books. I am aware that many people in professional philosophy would claim 'some book' or written text as their initiation into philosophical wonder. That originating story, in my estimation, influences their preferred aesthetics of the art of philosophy. Some of these same people are tickled in their soul at citations and the interplay of texts with texts. But here, and elsewhere, I differ. My first encounter with books concerned their colors and their aesthetics on a bookshelf. They did not invoke wonder as I cared very little that I couldn't read them. It was enough that my mother thought they should be there and that they were part of the aesthetics of the room.

My philosophical wonder originated elsewhere, as I would tell the tale. One somewhat boring day, I was looking out the lone

window of our bedroom, wishing to go outside. On the floor was my sister, playing with something I didn't want to play with, and in the other room was my mother, puttering around. At some point, it came to my attention that the paint on the window was peeling, and, as is the wont of children with too much time, I started peeling it further, fascinated by how the chips came off. Trying to get larger and larger pieces to come off unbroken, I had no sense of the damage I was doing to the paint on the window (nor how long I'd been at it). All I remember is my mother rushing towards me and yanking me away from the window with a desperation that seemed entirely out of order with the magnitude of my wrong.

'Did you eat any of that?! Did you put it in your mouth?!' I remember my mother asking me, insistently.

I suffered through her alternately forcing my mouth open and hugging me into her chest so tightly I almost couldn't breathe.

She was terrified, my mother. So was my sister, who had begun crying seeing my mother's panic. And hearing her cries and feeling my mother's ragged breathing and grasping hands, so was I. I felt the kind of fear you feel in your body before it makes it to your brain. I didn't understand her fear, but I *shook* with it. And because she was terrified, so was I.

I am sure that I thought something dire had just happened, even though I didn't understand it or what it meant to have dire things happen. I thought the peeling paint was going to kill me before I understood that I could die. Nothing was clear. What paint was, or how a heap of paint chips could be a threat, or even what 'threat' meant conceptually – none of it was clear.

That's how it goes, I imagine. We inherit a range of fears before we can conceptualize the ill-possibilities that might be said to prompt them.

I imagine someone will tell me that we are born with certain types of fears (fear of falling and whatnot). But I can tell you that the shape of my fears was inherited and learned. Our caregivers pass a great deal down to us. And in this case, I inherited my mother's fear of the very walls that surrounded us. The press of her desperate embrace as she tried to hold me together as if I would

fall apart any minute, and the grip of her fingers prying my mouth open as if to draw out any ingested poison told me that the peeling paint was to be feared. It was everywhere I looked.

My mother never explained her fears to me. She only said that I was never to go near the peeling paint in that apartment (or any other) again. If it chipped, she'd take care of it. After that, she released me to play in the front room with my sister. She also played with us, and I remember the weight of my mother's gaze on me, looking at me as if I were a dream, as if looking away would remove all evidence of my existence.

I never forgot that: the grasping arms, the gripping fingers, the unshakeable fear. Now my mother says I was so young when this happened that she is surprised I remember it at all. She doesn't even remember how old I was – younger than 7, older than 4.

Still, I never stopped wondering: What was that about? What happened there?

It was much later – *much* later – that I pieced together the existence of lead paint in older buildings and the compromised health and development of children living in older tenements. We were poor. I don't need pretty words to describe that state, though I understand that others do. They can feel free to write their own stories. We, however, were poor. And any improvements to that rent-controlled apartment meant my mother would no longer be able to afford it. Housing insecurity, of course, happened anyway and condemned my family to on-again off-again homelessness.

But to make that ramshackle place safer, without actually making it safer, my mother passed the fear of the very walls to her children that day. And I have a hard time saying she was wrong to do so. But if someone were to ask me about how I come to philosophy, this is one of the moments where I recognize the genesis of my philosophical imagination. Those unfocused fears deeply preoccupied me. They preoccupy me still.

Before I could form questions, I played and wondered.

What in the world was that about? What was really going on? What was this place where things like this could happen? Where are we? Where do we live? How was it that a bored child could deface 'property' and come away fearing that the very walls were

trying to kill her? What is this fear? What is this life? And what is the loss of it?

I can't remember how old I was, but I remember my mother's fear and my own. I lived with it and the questions it prompted long before I started actively seeking answers. They will never be, of course, completely answered. But definitive answers became less important than *the search* for them.

As far as I am concerned, the point where my philosophical imagination was activated began with my mother's concern for my life. And though it most likely began before this memory, this is where my philosophical impulses came online in some small way. With her *legitimate* fear of the very walls that surrounded us and my resulting nascent wonder, my philosophical life was brought to my attention. And I never forgot the wonder. I still remember what it feels like to face a space of speculation with very few handles and levers for resolution. I fell in love with that feeling. I still remember it so vividly. How old I was I can't remember; neither can she.

But I imagine this coming to philosophy is both a machination of imagination and a deep need to make sense of that moment. The world changed for me that day. I remember it. I am dazzled by it. I return to it. I speculate about it. And it haunts me still. Part of what haunts me are *our fears*, fears I shared in that day for the first time in my memory, and the real material dangers in the worlds where we, Black people in the US, lived. In places where it was becoming apparent that we were never meant to survive². When I turn to philosophical questions today and ask *What is really going on? What is killing us? What is the world that generates that episode?*, what I am asking is, *What is the fabric of my mother's fears? The fabric of my own? What is this historical present that too often brings death, destruction, and exhaustion? What allows it? What affords its comfort? And why are only some of us so familiar with it?*

² See Lorde, *Sister Outsider*.

3. *A Philosophy, in Part, Born of Struggle*

Almost 40 years ago, Leonard Harris stipulated that US Black philosophy is a philosophy born of struggle³. I suppose he was right, in part. Because part of my philosophical imagination was forged in the desperate efforts of my mother and my people to preserve my and their own lives in a place where so much operates to consign us to suffering unto death.

The embodied questions I inherit from those material conditions, i.e., my mother's desperate efforts to keep her children alive (and whole), made some inquiries 'live' and others moot. My interest in philosophy and, more specifically, what I am interested in when I turn to philosophize (when it is not escapism, which has its own embodied catalysts) orbits the struggles of my people and my own family's particular struggles in the US. My philosophizing queries the issues that stand out in sharp relief for those concerns. I fell in love with wonder at a point of heightened fear. And I query the world that produced that fear at multiple levels of abstraction. This is *a deliberate choice* on my part. It is not a choice that follows from my social identity alone, but my social identity is not unrelated to it. It is a kind of diversity I will not abrogate, no matter how unfashionable such a position might be (or might become again) in US academia.

4. *A Why: Producing Philosophical Frames*

The above story, it is important to note, is a half-told tale, and not a very good one if all one hears in it is fear. If all one detects in my mother's concerned grasp and gaze is the fear of lead poisoning, then one has missed the heart of the story. And the fault for that can be cast on *how I told the story* and its function in this retelling. I did not emphasize that the frightening day ended with my mother playing with my sister and me for *hours*. Nor did I add that the length of time of our play was a rare occurrence. And the rarity

³ L. Harris, *Philosophy Born of Struggle: Anthology of Afro-American Philosophy from 1917*, Dubuque, Kendall Hunt Publishing, 1983.

of the conclusion of that day *is also why that memory stands out so clearly for me.*

My mother played with us often. But rarely as long as she did that day. As a single Black mother of, at that time, two young children, that was highly unusual. In any event, my mother made sure that my memory wasn't only one of fear but also of play. The memory of children, which is unbearably short in some ways and extraordinarily long in others, was deliberately calibrated by her playing with us for the rest of the day. I am sure she had other things to do. But my mother joined us at play and made that one of the most memorable days of my life. Her smiles and laughter, even if tinged with fear, were genuine and real. So were our smiles and laughter.

From my mother and community, I learned, many times over, that though the walls could kill and compromise us, there is laughter, that *there is joy*. I was never to forget that we are still alive (when we are). And that we are here – wherever 'here' might be. If the 'what' of my philosophical wonder is born of struggle, its 'why's' are not.

My community knew, and my mother with them, that preserving our physical bodies would not be enough to stave off what is killing us in the US. One also needs to grapple with spiritual exhaustion. This forgetting that 'one is here' and what that might mean is a real danger when facing historical oppression and suppression. Such a context includes an almost never-ending threat of near senseless death (on multiple levels) and a near-indefatigable weariness for those of us who remain. Historical oppression attacks one's ability for 'here-ness' and hampers catalysts for joy. It is, at multiple levels, a tragic context.

My mother and my people taught me that though my life is structured by struggle in many ways, it is also propelled by joy. My philosophy may be born of struggle – I freely admit that, and without shame. But it is propelled by joy. I am here. That matters more than some people are willing to observe. And I, for one, never forget the state of my 'being present'. But that refusal to forget is a story of 'why' I engage in philosophy at all. To explain this, I will share one more story.

At the time of this story my family had grown by one little sister. There were four of us in total (my mother, my two sisters, and me). We suffered a predictable result of housing insecurity in the US context: homelessness. It was, and is, common enough. Many folks suffer it at some point in their lives. My family was no exception. I was 16, my older sister 17, and my baby sister 2.

The story I am about to offer isn't about homelessness – at least, not exactly. As a result of losing our previous residence, the three of us siblings were split up. My older sister and I were living with different family members with enough resources to take one of us (but not all of us) in. My mother and baby sister were living out of our 1973 Volkswagen Beetle.

That year would be the first Christmas we would not be together. My mother, even though for most of my childhood she was not a Christian (no version of it), always made a big deal out of Christmas. She loves Christmas. Every year she made a point to orchestrate a 'miracle'. Something surprising, unexpected, and seemingly impossible. It was a tradition we had all come to expect.

Many don't take note of how miracles are made. How so many of them happen. But the everyday definition of 'miracle' often belies their conditions and reality. Still, my mother is a genius at making the everyday miraculous (because, well, it is).

Anyway, that year, my mother enlisted us – me and my older sister – to help make a miracle for my baby sister. The plan was to get enough money for a 'nice-enough' motel for a couple of nights and to still have enough money left over for a couple of gifts and a small Christmas tree. Let me pause here and explain the 'motel', because I find that few people have an imagination of families living 'out-of-doors'. To repeat, we didn't have a place to stay in common. That means we didn't necessarily have a place to congregate as a family. In the winter, the park areas were too cold for family meetings. But more than that, we were a family of a woman and girls. Public parks are not always safe in the evenings (no matter the season), which is when it was easiest to find time together. So, a Christmas miracle that included a space for our family to congregate safely felt like more than a 'nice thing to do'. It seemed necessary for survival – the spiritual exhaustion was near crushing.

I was, I remember, so excited to be part of that year's Christmas miracle. In the past, we'd been asked in small ways to 'engineer' Christmas miracles for each other. But those instances were nothing on the order of what we needed to do to pull off what we hoped to accomplish that Christmas. We were, we insisted, going to wake up together on Christmas day – that was our ritual, our practice, and we were determined to keep it. My mother was under-employed then, and it took really everything to keep her and my baby sister safe and fed. So, my older sister and I took it upon ourselves to make a Christmas 'miracle'. I babysat and did odd jobs; my older sister braided hair.

And we managed it. We got a room for four days! And we also had a little money left over to get my baby sister Christmas gifts. We went to a discount store and bought five gifts – one of them a cheap plastic train set – and the scraggiest fake Christmas tree we'd ever seen. We loved it.

My baby sister had marveled at an oversized train that ran through a local mall, where we would often spend 'family time'. So, we knew she was going to love the little train we'd gotten for her, even if she would only have it for a day. In all honesty, we didn't expect it to last much past a day anyway; it was just that cheap.

The task of setting up the train fell to me. My baby sister was asleep – she was young, and her gifts were meant to be a Christmas morning surprise – and my mother, who can fix anything, was exhausted and had long fallen asleep. She needed all the sleep she could get in those four days. My older sister, having completed her assigned task of trimming the little Christmas tree, had already gone to bed. She'd braided so many people's hair; she needed to catch up on her sleep as well.

They went to bed, I realized, *trusting me to put the train set together*. But when I tried, it didn't work. To say I was beside myself with worry is an understatement. I knew, without really understanding, why it was so important. I was terrified I wouldn't get it to work.

I spent most of the night fixing that train. I dismantled it (as far as I could), only to realize a spring was malfunctioning. Somewhere along the line, it had been bent out of shape and become completely unusable. I tried everything to fix it, but it was a lost

cause. But then, I tried a paper equivalent for the spring, and I got the train to work! I was extremely proud, extremely tired, extremely happy.

By the time I was done, there was only an hour or so left until everyone was due to wake up. I ended up not sleeping at all. As my family began to wake – my mother first, then my older sister – my excitement grew. I had gotten the train to work! But they didn't seem particularly surprised or impressed. But what did *they* know! They weren't awake when I had lost hope, tried something else, lost hope again, and tried something else, until I achieved what I wanted – it was hard, but I did it; it wouldn't last, but I did it.

Soon, we gently set out to wake my baby sister. When she was awake, we pointed her to her gifts and the raggedy Christmas tree. The smile that lit her face cannot be described. Honestly, I can't explain it. Her smile was so beautiful, her joy so clear – almost hard to take in from the dreary place of family separation and precarious living situations.

When she saw the train, slowly and (somewhat brokenly) chugging around the track, she let out a squeal and a belly laugh that woke up places in me I didn't know had fallen asleep. She was so happy. Her joy was so big! And there it was, what we'd all worked so hard for – the real miracle – that smile, that joy, *that laughter*. It remains one of the best gifts I've ever received.

She didn't have very many words. She was only two. But she started chanting some approximation of 'train, train, train'.

And it was a miracle, I tell you. There was not a dry eye in the house – well, except for my baby sister. Taking on some of her joy, we looked at each other: we'd done it. It had taken an amazing amount of effort, it wasn't going to last, and, soon enough, we were all going back to our reality, but, in that moment, our joy was indescribable.

It was a miracle. Not a Christian one, but a miracle of joy despite a crushing reality. Not the joy of consumerism and the quickly declining environment that accompanies it (I am sure that the cheap plastic train is probably floating in the Pacific somewhere). But the joy of a belly laugh from a two-year-old. I would absolutely wish for better building blocks and a better life situation, but I cannot wish for better results. The beauty of a smile fought for and

preserved. A smile that didn't issue from a safe place or even a good one, but from a 'here'-ness that leaves open the possibility of genuine, bone-deep joy. It isn't a panacea for oppression, but it is a constant part of my life.

I like to think I was part of teaching my baby sister that joy is as much a part of her life as struggle. To watch her live with unabashed joy as an adult reminds me of her two-year-old near-toothless grin. We worked to give her the tools to grapple with the many layers of exhaustion she will find in this life.

I often try to understand that moment and that joy. A joy that people imagine can't exist because all they have are superficial, structural analyses that often reduce poor, racialized groups to exploited masses or else delusional tools of their own oppression or, worse, to the socially dead. So much of Western philosophy often cannot make sense of joy (and its preservation) as anything other than false consciousness or a deluge of delusion; how very sad it can be, how very limited. What an odd range of philosophies to live by. They are also, in my opinion, utter rubbish.

If a philosophy can't explain joy (or even leave room for its existence), then, in my estimation, it isn't very good. It fails to illuminate my life and my drive. That is, of course, a metaphilosophical judgment about a function of philosophical frames. Theory, according to Lee Maracle, aims to empower, offer directions, and, yes, help one «gain control over one's life»⁴. For her, theory rises out of a «human need for common direction». Philosophy, I find, is little different. We work to empower ourselves and to gain tools not only for understanding what we are facing but also for living well – perhaps especially tools for living well.

I've told this story, of my baby sister and that Christmas, before, and people's 'critiques' were telling.

Often, when I hear critiques of 'consumerism' among poor, often racialized populations fighting for their very lives in capitalist countries, I laugh. The 'radical' warns me of death and destruction as if I haven't lived it. The 'conservative' lecture me on my family's

⁴ L. Maracle, *Memory Serves: Oratories*, Edmonton, NeWest Press, 2015, p. 164.

failures to be fiscally responsible, as if such things promise ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’. As if it isn’t my experience that there are no guarantees of life, much less wellness, for Black people in the US. As if some of our very first memories aren’t tinged with the fear that we will be lost too soon. As if settler colonial, anti-Black exhaustion doesn’t kill us as reliably as a pandemic does. They are not unrelated after all.

Those tales of ‘the struggle’ are half-told as they also fail to consider lives with joy. It is as if they plan to add to the ‘heaviness’ with their refusal to think beyond the limits of their theories and, in doing so, heap more exhaustion upon us and obscure all that being alive offers. Certainly, their dire warnings, for their narrowness, serve as building blocks for an exhaustion that kills.

I’ve heard this line: ‘Well, you wouldn’t have had to be in shopping malls if there was more green space’. A little metaphilosophy goes a long way here. I simply respond with, ‘I see, so *that* is your project. You choose to ignore the winter weather conditions, the persistence of violence against women and girls, the relationality of this episode, and *the people*, all for the desire to push a narrowly cast project for better urban planning and earth relations. Well, we certainly do need that. Carry on’. I let the arrogance of my response meet the arrogance of the initial commentary. But, inside, I scream, ‘Can we, at some point, figure out that we have projects?!’ This is important if we are ever to learn from one another. Because this whole comment is utterly beside the point of that story. But that, of course, is according to my own metaphilosophy. *I will not lose joy to theory*. And I sure as hell won’t champion a philosophical orientation that can’t refrain from cutting its teeth on the joy of children.

The metaphilosopher in me demands that people become more self-reflexive about what they decide to offer up in philosophy, commentary, or criticism. I want to ask, ‘*Why* do you feel the need to ask the questions you ask? Why do you make the comments you do?! There is a story there that is far more interesting than the scripts most philosophers have learned to relish and ritualize’. Feminist philosophy, in my estimation, includes a demand to be able to answer the ‘why’ and the ‘what’ of one’s philosophical work and inquiries. It matters – it has always mattered.

In response to my Christmas story, I've also had someone else try to explain to me that I didn't quite understand the anti-Black forces that were converging to kill me and my family. They droned on in a western tongue about some such death ontology that follows from 'Continental' philosophy that 'explains it all'. I replied, 'Okay, so that's your project'. What I really wanted to say was, 'Who are you to tell me that the way this place is set up is killing me!? The very walls are trying to kill me. I, for one, don't need to make a western philosopher out to have a god's view to figure that out! I learned that early, and I learned it well. And, in my estimation, I learned it better. Because *that* is a half-told tale. And, yes, that is *my* project'.

On the occasions when a little metaphilosophy would go a long way, I never respond with my 'inside voice'. But I do silently query the 'what' and 'why?'

Usually, my interlocutor has no idea they are not speaking out of some ground of universal 'truth' they presume to represent. And one grows tired of blank stares and the resulting bluster being lost in abstraction brings (especially when it is called out). So, when I run into people like that, I try to gesture to their project (from an outsider's perspective) and take my leave. Life is too short. And I have not learned to find joy in the activity of hitting my head against the wall of someone else's lack of metaphilosophical versatility. And what I mean by that is they have not yet learned to turn their faiths into projects for the sake of encountering projects, accounts, worldviews, philosophical positions different from their own.

Audre Lorde, in *Sister Outsider*, indicated a bit of disdain for 'theoretical' analyses⁵. She liked to say that «survival is not an academic skill»⁶. She'll even go so far as to say, «survival is not a theory»⁷. I would inherit that reluctance to give life over to theory (and a whole suite of academic skills) and add this twist: 'theory and theoretical analyses are rarely divorced from survival'. In the

⁵ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, pp. 61, 65, 72, 124.

⁶ Ivi, p. 112.

⁷ Ivi, p. 139.

philosophical stories people tell, the survival of *something* is always at stake – some way of life, some way of being, something is at stake. And I often wonder what current day ‘philosophers’ are fighting for, or whether anyone answers that question these days. I believe they should. But that, as should be apparent, is one of my projects.

In any event, my move to philosophize is not only about struggle; it is also aimed at preserving profound joy. Generally, I don’t write about joyful things⁸. But I always try to leave space for their existence. There is always more to any life than struggle, more than the scenes of oppression that would dominate the conscientious person’s narrative of that life. Do you know why I believe this? Because why bother to outline ‘the struggle’ at all? If life was only struggle, we would have no use for the word ‘struggle’ – it would be called ‘life’. Some will disagree with this, and that is their druthers and, also, their project. One makes decisions about life and its extensions in the philosophical stories we tell, but one does not remove the reality that other stories can be told – even if a lack of metaphilosophical versatility indicates that there are philosophical stories we can be incapable of receiving.

Why engage in such an activity of ‘struggling with struggle’ if there is no joy to be had? Why put what is killing us in perspective? For me, the answer is simple: I philosophize present-day struggles for the experience of a present (and future) that persists *in excess of any story* I might offer. Philosophical storying includes projects. It will always be smaller than the experience and phenomena it aims at. It can never exhaust the present or the future. But that is, for me, part of its beauty. Philosophy is so deeply, deeply limited in the face of life and existence. The difficulty in issuing the ‘what’s and the ‘why’s of philosophical stories often brings us face to face with the possibility that life will always persist in excess of philosophical portrayal. And that is a good thing. *A beautiful thing*. I fell in love with that when I was too young to remember. The wonder *and* the limitations. A good philosophy makes that apparent by

⁸ I don’t. But people do. See, especially, L. Stewart’s *The Politics of Black Joy: Zora Neale Hurston and Neo-Abolitionism*, Bloomington, Northwestern University Press, 2021.

what it makes sense of and, quite frankly, what it doesn't. A bad one forecloses the appreciation of its limits and reduces everything to what can be communicated 'in theory'. The 'faiths' then become part of what we must all fight against. And, of course, this very assessment about the 'work' of philosophy – when it is working – is a metaphilosophical position itself.

5. *A Metaphilosophy*

On the metaphilosophical account offered here, one of the major catalysts for my philosophical wonder is incomprehensible fear. I am majorly preoccupied with 'the struggle', if you will. But *why* I am so preoccupied concerns a consistent thrumming of 'living' that exceeds struggle while never being fully divorced from it. Part of why I turn to philosophy and philosophizing is the persistent drumbeat of joy that lines my life. Philosophical projects have the capacity to train people to render their entire lives in ways that disallow how their living exceeds theory. It bothers me. It's a source of spiritual exhaustion. I suspect it exacerbates violence. And it is the kind of philosophical art I would not hang in my house, so to say.

This, of course, is all a theory itself. A kind of philosophy about how philosophy can function. And not a particularly original one at that. I never make claims to originality if I can help it. I am not that special. But what I have offered does issue from my life and stories. And it does include some delusions, three I recognize, and many I do not.

Chief among my delusions is how much I rely upon my own sense that I can accurately track the originating points of my philosophical wonder. I can't. But the story I offered here *felt right* to be offered here. And, of course, that story (made of childhood memory) might be utterly fabricated. Something happened to catalyze it (my mother's memory and mine help to substantiate that), but why this exact story? Who knows? It does, however, feel right. This is all, in my opinion, part of philosophical artistry. Some things 'feel right', and then we find a way to explain it, thereby

adding conviction. That is not necessarily an accurate tracking mechanism for ‘reality’. But it is not utterly unimportant.

I am also delusional about what my second story has to say about homelessness in a capitalist country. Much of my work, I was surprised to discover, is used by scholars who study homelessness and geography in the US, and that surprise probably indicates that I am delusional about the ways that having been homeless shape my projects and my narrations.

In addition, I have also indulged myself in a delusional lie about not finding value in hitting my head against other people’s metaphilosophical dogmatism. I seem to do that constantly. And I seem to take some joy in it. What is this paper but an engagement in that project?

It is hard to keep my projects in front of me. Impossible even. Just because I became aware of that difficulty does not mean I can avoid it. I can’t. Still, I have learned not to be surprised, even if I am disconcerted, when someone says, essentially, ‘Ah, so that’s your project’. Faced with this response, I have learned to trace my theoretical steps – figure out that my convictions have led me to miss something – and attempt to sit quietly with someone else’s project. This does not ensure I will come up with a comment or question ‘in-line’ with what I’ve encountered, but it does remind me that philosophical stories are all projects, and that they are not all compatible. I am not certain that observation always leads to criticism. In fact, I am sure it doesn’t.

Admittedly, I have many, many projects. And they are not unrelated to the survival of someone, some way of life, and/or something. They are future-directed and, in my estimation, attempt to highlight the *excess* of living in the present. Some of my projects do this by being dry-eyed about the challenges of *living* in the present. But excess is important. I am not the first to say that, but I didn’t learn this from those people’s texts – I learned it from my folks, my life, and the stories I have learned to value and re-tell. Grand joy in some circumstances might be a miracle, but it is also a regular part of life. Without it, I, personally, don’t turn to philosophy and philosophizing at all. That is, indeed, part of my projects. But it is also an *approach* (in a literal sense) to philosophical storytelling.