I believe the constricting expectations from most eminent Philosophy departments are mostly structural – very few faculty member would deny that there is a need for diversity, yet somehow, philosophy remains a field notoriously reluctant to change. The tenacity of this *status quo* bias is responsible for perpetuating a set of hiring practices that has, until very recently, systematically prevented—implicitly or explicitly—people with unconventional profiles from gaining recognition in the academic ivory tower. We are now thankfully starting to recognize, so it seems, the value that the variety of personal experiences and worldviews that arise from different cultures and circumstances, can bring to philosophy. It is this very concern for equity and inclusion that first led me to engage in the public philosophy activities.

My listening skills play a major role in my work as a public philosopher, both in public venues and back when I taught in prison. In Rikers island, via the People’s Education Initiative[[1]](#footnote-1) I volunteered for, I saw myself as a facilitator who assists people in developing mental dispositions, attitudes of intelligent inquiry through collaborative conversation, and in encouraging rational thought processes. Philosophical education became then an interactive and social practice that aimed at strengthening reasoning and listening skills, but also at providing a safe space for inmates to train on their intellectual abilities despite the very unconventional learning context of incarceration.

At Miami Dade College, Pace university, CUNY CityTech, or before, in the Florida public school system, my students’ backgrounds needed to be taken into account in my teaching methods. Some students were young mothers; others had recently lost their parents after the earthquake in Haiti in 2010. Most of them had few financial and educational resources, and I had to make sure every student was able not only to follow along, but to enjoy the class in a way that made them curious about learning new perspectives on both contemporary issues (in my Ethics classes, for instance, approaching topics like immigration or sexual harassment) and more fundamental philosophical questions. I still systematically encourage students to come to my office hours if I need to be aware of any fact that might affect their academic success and well-being in class.

My dedication to teaching students with difficult backgrounds, both in the public school system and in underfunded community colleges has been useful for teaching inmates, and vice versa: the diversity of the audiences I teach has considerably improved my pedagogical skills at University. While organizing and leading philosophical debates once a week at the Rose M. Singer Center, I learned to constantly readapt to my participating audience. I had to implement engaged learning techniques focused both on intellectual stimulation and respect. Fostering in inmates the habits and attitudes that render them able and willing to engage in a philosophical activity together was both a constant goal and an ideal - incessantly confronted to the complex and very peculiar circumstances of prison life. The loss of autonomy and of agency that inmates experience, the boredom, the fear, the discomfort, the anxieties, the power dynamics at play make philosophy education in prison particularly challenging.

The « public », far from referring to a homogeneous general audience of relatively privileged people, includes persons who rarely have the chance to engage in abstract reasoning due to living conditions, complex vulnerabilities, hierarchies, threats and distrust – issues that most inmates have to face constantly. At Rikers, I was asked to rename my class “debate” instead of philosophy in order to make it “more attractive”: PEI even thought I would find it easier (which I highly doubted) to teach French, or Art - but I stuck with “philosophical debate”. I often asked general questions, one per class (“What is it to be a woman?”; “Can we define happiness?”) and I let the participants interact in groups of 2 or 3 first, for a 5-10 min brainstorming. I gave them some possible insights, and discussed with them some famous philosophical views and art pieces related to the matter. We then gathered all our ideas together and tried to build a structured, rational answer to the questions. We also put together a vocabulary board with concepts, the definition(s) of which the participants were initially unaware of and interested in. I brought a book every week for them to read (the book I last brought was Americanah, from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie) and then share their reading impressions.

The content I teach as a “public philosopher” is often of direct public interest, regarding social and moral issues we all face, but I primarily aim at making any philosophical topic (of direct public interest or not) accessible to audiences that are not necessarily academically trained in philosophy. One of the concerns this public philosophy activity raises has to do with the supposed democratic demand or interest for philosophical questions. Which social groups within the “general public” are really seeking philosophy? When I host symposia open to the public, I know that most people who attend already have some level of academic education – or at least, some intellectual curiosity for philosophical questioning. Regardless, even if indeed there might be an increase of interest for philosophy among the general public, the question of the actual feasibility of public philosophy remains. On the one hand, the skills required for popularizing philosophical ideas are difficult to master (and not taught, to my knowledge, in any philosophy department). On the other hand, the expectations of the public might be misled by prejudices about supposed therapeutic, or problem-solving virtues too hastily attributed to the philosophical activity. And what about audiences who do not spontaneously seek this activity? What about minorities who don’t even have the luxury to indulge in the contemplation of metaphysical objects?

I remember one of my public philosophy talks about the meaning of the word “community” and its usually positive connotation within American society. Why is the concept of community so enticing? Is democratic justice compatible with the respect and recognition of the diverse cultural inheritances? Can we establish a dialog between communities without falling into conflicts of interests and into community confinement? The word community, often somehow associated with the word diversity, raises questions about the possible heterogeneity of social groups. To what extent is diversity welcome in strong communities – within philosophy departments, for instance?I have been trying to point out the benefits, but also the risks of strong identification within any social group: the more you try to identify as a specific community, the more you create walls between communities – risking to promote a certain form of clannishness, and social exclusion. As an Ethics instructor and public speaker, awareness for inclusion is both a research subject matter and a constant pedagogical concern.

Teaching Philosophy is not only about lecturing on abstract moral rules; it is about fighting against ethnic and gender stereotypes within the actual audience you are addressing. It cannot be unidirectional, from a professor to an audience in a vertical way. Professors are not experts who simply deliver answers; they have to learn from people who cannot be perceived as mere passive listeners. I am aware of the challenges of the popularizing task, but I still feel strongly inclined to engage in alleviating the remoteness of scholarship, to instigate a desire for critical thinking, and to offer, as much as I can, its benefits for refining public discourses and opinions. I am indeed convinced that scholars have not only privileged opportunities to contribute to the intellectual guidance of the people in general beyond educational institutions; they also have an obligation to do so. Last January, I began to produce and host “*Can You Phil It?”* [[2]](#footnote-2)*,* a podcast I created in collaboration with Johnny Nicholson, composer, producer and audio specialist. *“Can You Phil It?”* is an interdisciplinary podcast which uses a philosophical lens to explore any topic: time, consciousness, desire, sex and gender, religion, death, perception, language, truth, art and beauty, transcendence, love, friendship, happiness or technology. We critically decipher philosophical jargon and ideas to help our listeners grasp various contributions to the greatest, or the most seemingly trivial, questions of humankind. Not only can Philosophy elevate us above our daily concerns and help us see the beauty of thinking for its own sake, but it can and should also arm us against prejudices and help us improve our intellectual abilities when facing complex questions and situations, on an individual or private level just as much as on a collective, social, or political level. In a world where ideas become more and more confused and confusing, often hijacked by ideologies, the ability to philosophize becomes an increasingly valuable tool. The last episode of our first season actually deals with the status and challenges of public philosophy, in an interview with Barry Lam, associate professor and chair of the Vassar department of philosophy, founder of the Hi-Phi Nation podcast, and Associate Director of the Marc Sanders Foundation[[3]](#footnote-3).

Lastly, I want to emphasize the fact that the status quo bias mentioned earlier, observed in numerous philosophy departments, does not concern solely the type of candidacies they tend to select for tenure track positions: it also has to do, correlatively, with the type of research and teaching areas they value. I always wondered why most “philosophy” departments in Europe and in the English-speaking world were not called “Anglo-European” or “Western philosophy departments” instead[[4]](#footnote-4). Very little is indeed dedicated to other philosophical traditions than the ones stemming from the western world. This dismissal of Eastern, African, Indigenous philosophies, often originating in sheer ignorance, when not in indifference or even outright despise, has startled me since my very first years of college. I was taught to be proud of my very “solid”, Renaissance”, “universalist” education in the Humanities *Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Ecoles* (public preparatory classes, emblematic of social mobility in the French *Intelligentsia*)[[5]](#footnote-5), where we were told we were nothing less than the future “intellectual elite of the nation” (and, derivatively because of the obvious international aura of French culture, around the world). The intellectual authority of the Eurocentric canons we studied extensively was very rarely, if ever, questioned.

I also remember eminent philosophers in La Sorbonne deploring that so many dissertations were now being written on race and gender, under the pretext that it undermined the great tradition of philosophy. The very fact that these professors could feel perfectly comfortable uttering such a regret, is precisely what is problematic. While I have an immense respect for these elder colleagues, I think it is necessary to address this deeply rooted intellectual imperialism of the Western philosophical tradition. I know several people who dropped out of academia, bitter and discouraged, because what they wanted to study was considered too unconventional. We can only be hopeful that Academia will soon look at both originality and unconventional backgrounds as assets rather than an impediments.

1. <http://nypei.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://open.spotify.com/show/5lLMn4ndGkeYfAG8QewbE7?si=KD6RPs9cTE2WQipztHllYw&dl_branch=1> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The MSF recently announced the Philosophy in Media initiative, funded jointly with the Templeton Foundation; I applied to be one of the fellows. The initiative aims to increase the presence of philosophy in print, audio, and video media by training philosophers to write and produce for the public and by connecting philosophers to editors and commissioners in the media industry. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In that regard, I very much agree with many points made by Bryan Van Norden in his book *Taking Back to Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto.*(2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classe\_pr%C3%A9paratoire\_aux\_grandes\_%C3%A9coles [↑](#footnote-ref-5)