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A DIALOGICAL RESPONSE TO FEMINIST UTOPIAN FICTION:  
CONVERSATIONS AFTER *HERLAND*

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If numbers represent a kind of meaning, the numbers of books, chapters, and articles containing the keyword, “conversation,” indicate that we are interested in the idea of understanding through a particular kind of exchange. Conversation in the philosophy of education offers something beyond presentation, apology, or debate and even if the success rate of treatises proclaiming the value of conversation is tentative, the fact that we are attempting to initiate, extend, and even reclaim<sup>1</sup> conversation as a valid method of learning appears significant.

Plato’s use of dialogue, while not a conversation, offers an example of a particular exchange even though the roles of teacher and learner in the dialogue are fairly rigid. The teacher valiantly feigns a co-learner role but the veil is delightfully thin. Beyond this classical form of dialogue, conversation positions the participants in a different light of learning. Conversation offers philosophers of education a place in which winning the argument or being right or destroying that which is not one’s own are approaches set aside to move toward mutual understanding.

Wendy Kohli describes her editorial ground rules for participating in the volume, *Critical Conversations in Philosophy of Education*.<sup>2</sup> Contributors were expected to resist going after one another, resist finding flaws in the other argument, and attempt to overcome the philosophical training goal of “get it right.” Kohli offered the possibility that through conversation we might gain a greater insight of others and of ourselves and that those understandings had a positive potential for the field. “Obviously in my commitment to dialogue, I was revealing some of my own investments and beliefs, particularly a belief in the possibility for understanding, if not agreement.” This notion that thinkers, speakers, philosophers, theorists, teachers and experts can participate in conversation that is motivated by a desire to understand and grow is either terribly naïve or wondrously hopeful.

After reading Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland: A Lost Feminist Utopian Novel*,<sup>3</sup> I was challenged to write a dialogical response. I wondered what it would be like for the balanced, wise, and steady Ellador to meet a principled, feisty, and edgy American woman. And, what would it be like for these women to disagree not only about particular issues but also about the very way they approach life? How might a conversation through letters help them to understand both the other and the self and how might two people explain the longevity of such a difficult conversation? I had been bothered by the lack of

passion in *Herland* and I imagined that a Herlander would be just as bothered by the extreme passions of our society. While Perkins Gilman took the sequel to *Herland*, *With Her in Ourland*,<sup>4</sup> in a very different direction, this response examines how two women can maintain intimacy and respect in the midst of vast differences. How do people committed to conversation and relationship sit with enormous tensions and, to borrow from John Dewey,<sup>5</sup> how might this inform, for all participants, a principled middle ground?

#### THE MEETING

The morning mist was lifting from the harbor as the tugboats spoke to one another in a call-response across the water. In a few moments I would be able to see my brother's figure at the rail of the massive ship. It had been almost three years since we had laid eyes on each other.

Van's wire had been mysterious and I was eager to hear the whole story. He had gone south with two friends on expedition and while three were coming back, it was a different three. They had discovered a strange exotic land, a land of women, all women, who lived in peace and abundance. They spent time in this land first as prisoners, then as students of the culture, then as friends. One explorer had married and stayed in "*Herland*," another had been thrown out, and the third, my brother, was bringing his new wife back as a student of our culture.

Before they left, I had instructed Van to never marry until women had equal footing with men in our country lest he become a tyrant. I'm sure I never would think of yoking myself to such an institution until I achieved emancipation. At the time, Van had accused me of being drunk, which I was, but I am a clear thinker even in the throws of hard liquor.

My warnings aside, I should not be surprised my dear brother would marry. I am only surprised that he would marry some delicate bobble picked up on expedition. I wondered if there would be five minutes of conversation between her and me in the years to come.

Shaking such heavy thoughts from my head, I looked to the ship's rail and saw him and he looked wonderful. I ached to throw my arms around him at once. He saw me, smiled, and then waved madly. He yelled something unintelligible as horns blared, dockmen hollered, and passengers cupped their hands to send messages to shore. I shook my head and signaled that I could not hear. Then he pointed with both hands to the woman beside him.

A wave of shock rolled over me. She was extraordinary. She stood almost eye-to-eye with Van, neither shrinking from him nor dominating him. She was everything I had not envisioned her to be. Short hair, simple dress, skin that had seen the light of day. I loved her immediately. I know that must sound ridiculous,

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but I did. And in that moment I knew she would always be in my heart.

Our first conversations were awkward in content but strangely comfortable and familiar in tone. Those few days together in New York have lasted me a lifetime. No matter how much time and space separated us, I could always hear Ellador's voice and see her face. Her voice was steady and curious, her face unusually and sometimes inappropriately calm. Her favorite way to begin a sentence to me was, "Charlotte, help me understand..."

Within a few days of arriving in New York it was clear to all of us that Ellador must leave the city. Oh, she loved the city and was fascinated by and analytical about the crowds, the art, and the industry; but the city choked her, quite literally. As strong and healthy as Ellador was, she could not breathe New York and I could think of no more important place to be, so we parted. In the late spring of 1916, Van and Ellador left for the Northwest and Ellador and I began a conversation by correspondence. On these pages I share a bit of our journey because it is a journey of souls. We have always been able to live with our agonism and angst. It is a wondrous thing. At first I thought I would teach Ellador all she needed to know but as it turned out she taught me.

#### THE CONVERSATIONS

*My Dearest,*

*I send you greetings from your brother. We want you to come out to see us. We miss you terribly. We are waiting for rain today. I've been on the porch reading everything I can get my hands on. The newspaper reported that your fond acquaintance, Margaret Sanger, was arrested and put in jail. I engaged in conversation with the woman next door about Margaret and had the strangest encounter. She seemed to think that Margaret was bringing down the government, the home, the church, and the entire educational structure of the United States. Charlotte, help me understand what Margaret is doing.*

*With devotion, Ellador*

Dearest El,

I shouldn't wonder that Holly Homebody would dig at Margaret. Many women want to stay stuck, or keep their daughters stuck so that they have company in their misery. But Margaret is doing incredible work. She was a nurse who took care of poor women for years. She saw how inhumanely they were treated and how unwanted pregnancies destroyed their lives. Women must have equal rights to men and those rights must include control over their bodies and over the choice to have children. Our government and our churches pervert the purpose of human relations and support the murder of women emotionally and physically by denying these rights.

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Margaret declares that women should have control over if and when they bear children. Some die in despair in back alleys ridding their tired bodies of unwanted children. There are other ways to live. I've enclosed a copy of Margaret's new book, *Family Limitation*, you and Van must read it and I hope the two of you discuss these matters thoroughly. It's a shame that most women cannot enjoy the glorious nature of sex without fearing pregnancy. I, for one, delight in sexual passions but cannot think of bearing children. What are your thoughts dear one?

As for Margaret—in this “democratic” society where freedom of speech is touted, she has been arrested for speaking freely! We visit her and support her. She is right. We must fight.

Charlotte

*My Charlotte,*

*There's much that confuses me about your last response, and much that confuses me about your country. I understand when the society does not think a woman should have children. It is a rare thing, but it does happen, even in my land. We speak to some women and encourage those who don't show the inclination toward full motherhood to refrain from giving birth. But I do not understand anyone not wanting motherhood. Motherhood is life. Motherhood is what binds us together. Motherhood is the nation, it is a people.*

*While physical relations with men are pleasant, it's the possibility of motherhood that makes them glorious. Also, I wonder: is the control of pregnancy something intended for poor women or all women? It seems to me that sometimes, in your society, the wealthy offer services to the poor not to really help the poor live better but to end the nuisances with which the poor burden the rich.*

*Ellador*

Dear Ellador, My Sister,

Motherhood is a choice, or it will be a choice, when we are free. But women in our world have no choices. Motherhood doesn't unite us; in fact it often makes us fight over the scraps under the table. Freedom and respect are much greater forces of unity. I can't imagine that all women in your country wanted to be mothers; surely some of them did other things. Wasn't that their freedom and right? It is our society that forces women to make horrible choices. Sometimes a fetus must die in order for a woman to live. And here I speak of not just physical life but emotional and spiritual life as well. Of course this is for all women, as it is now only wealthy women can afford both safety and secrecy in these medical treatments.

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If women can control getting pregnant in the first place there will be less need of abortion, but even so, abortion should be made safe. In order for motherhood to be truly honorable, a woman must have the basic rights of choice. I fight because it is wrong for women not to have the say over their bodies and over their lives. If I don't fight, things won't change. Haven't you ever fought for something? What are the passions of your heart, my dear one?

Always, Charlotte

*Charlotte Dear,*

*Of course all women in my country want to be part of the Motherhood. Motherhood is life. That doesn't mean we do not do many other things. Why do all your arguments hinge on either/or propositions? Motherhood was one of the things we share, the primary thing we share. We share every aspect of giving life, nurturing it, and educating it. We are all mothers, we are all children, and we are all sisters. In turn, we all do what our abilities and talents lead us to do. I worked in forestry but each of us adds to the balance of our society. Each of us does what best satisfies that balance. It's not something to fight about. If change is needed, and it often is, it is accomplished through development and cooperation.*

*And this passion that causes you to fight, I don't understand how that serves the goal. Does this passion keep you balanced or does it keep you off balance? Help me to understand this Charlotte. Your approach to your problems seems to lack practicality. You and your enemies deplete your energy and resources keeping things quite stirred up but you solve nothing, accomplish nothing. You protest and brawl; you get thrown into jail and harangued from the pulpit. Your adversaries protest and brawl, they lower themselves to demeaning speech and printed word.*

*Why fight about rights when people, men and women, rich and poor, are weighted down with ignorance? It seems to me, dear sister, that you are on a crusade like the poor souls of the dark past, and while you are fighting for life and freedom and choice, you are actually destroying those things you claim you want. Forgive my own lack of subtle understanding here, but your society seems most comfortable living in extremes and less willing to find a balance that is principled and functional.*

*Lovingly, Ellador*

Dear Ellador,

How can you be here for so many months, coming from a peaceful and generous nation where people are fed and educated and encouraged, and not understand there is something here that needs to be fought?

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Unlike you, I do not find the sense of steadiness to be beneficial in our society. Balance may be something we accomplish many years from now but it will not be accomplished until the battle is waged and the fight is won. I cannot sit on a fence when my sisters are suffering. I cannot sacrifice progress for a comfortable middle, a lukewarm bath, or a compromised life.

Men, in general and for the most part, are tyrants. I love many of them, but they are tyrants. There is no practical solution to this dilemma. It is all-or-nothing, because if it is not all, we will have nothing. I do not fault you, my dear one, for not understanding this. Your land is much less complicated than ours. Your issues and problems need conciliation. Ours, on the other hand must be purged.

Forever, Charlotte

*Dearest Charlotte,*

*You are not entirely correct about my people. In our past we have had to make some difficult decisions and act on them in painful ways. What we found by way of those historical times was that fighting and purging are less practical than development, education, and cooperation. But these latter acts take time, wisdom, and most of all leadership.*

*Purging the evils of society offers little benefit if the society fails to process the reasons for the existence of those evils. You do not seem interested in understanding why these wicked beliefs and customs exist and how they have served your civilization. Neither have I seen any evidence that you have common agreement that these things no longer serve your good and need to be changed. I realize, of course, there is no probability of such a vast society agreeing on any one thing; yet, there has been little time spent on preparing the ground to receive a common seed. You rip at the heads of the ugly weeds but do not get at the root and you certainly don't work the soil to make it harder for the weeds to grow.*

*I have defended my country, even from the husband who sits next to me. I have studied history and literature and science with great enjoyment, meditated and spent hours in the gymnasium. But all of this does not lead me to flail about and fight. It leads me to a stability, an equilibrium, in all of my life. Help me to understand why living in the extreme is superior to the center---in our language center means heart. It does not mean giving up your passions but finding a way to live honorably at the very center of being.*

*I have seen poverty, sickness, and dirtiness in many parts of your land. These are things my own country does not have, not because we fought about them, but because we found that we had enough for everyone to have enough. We found balance. And finding balance is quite practical. If those who don't*

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*have enough simply fight and take, then doesn't it merely create a new group that doesn't have enough? If your women take from men they will certainly have more, but what do they benefit from men who have less?*

*I also wonder if your critique of men is not a one sided critique of human nature in the midst of these impossible rules to which all your people conform. I do not see that men have a corner on the market of tyranny. Surely you cannot argue that women are only the victims of men and not also the victims of their own despotism. I regularly observe women oppressing children, white women subjugating women of other races, and affluent women stepping on the poor.*

*In search of understanding, Ellador*

El,

It's hard to explain what's necessary in this situation when you haven't experienced the same inequalities in your world. You ask pointed questions and raise a heart wrenching argument. If cooperation among us was possible I suppose there would be little benefit in fighting. But cooperation is not a staple in our society. Our society is not one based on mutual survival, like yours. Our society is based on profit and power. Garden metaphors seem to fall short in the face of dehumanization. These aren't just a few weeds, my friend, this is a poisoned ground and it is killing.

I would rather fight for equality than be handed second-class status with a dotting smile and a pat on the behind. To be given something that is yours is an act of patriarchy. Therefore, we must take what is rightly ours: the vote, the choice over our bodies (in pleasure and the condition of the womb), education, ownership, and sadly a host of other things.

Ellador, it's not merely that men have most of the power, they have it all. To be perfectly honest, I am confounded by that fact, aren't you? As far as I can see the greatest lie perpetuated on the race is the notion that men are superior when they're hardly bright, and can't do more than one thing at a time. Their bodies are awkward and unreliable. They are prone to pout and whimper. I am hard pressed to find the necessity of them save three things: procreation, orgasm, and lifting heavy objects (though I confess there are creative ways of getting around two of these three). Yet, there they stand over us—in church, in classroom, in court, in government, and in the workforce—not to mention the home, always the home. They will continue all of this as long as we allow it. We are at fault too. But I refuse to strengthen the fault any longer. I will speak and I will fight. Oh El, tell me you understand. You must understand.

Your Charlotte

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*Charlotte My Darling,*

*Your description of men hardly does them justice, and moreover, it hardly does you justice. Although I have not lived long in your bisexual world, I do understand relationships among people and they are hardly confined to fertilization, pleasure, and lifting heavy objects. Maybe your men are tyrants because you give them no other role.*

*Van tells me, and I have read that women **are** finding a place in the church and in education. It is slow but women have come a long way. It seems that government and work cannot be far off. This is all very different from my country. Women do all things and there is no need for this struggle between the sexes because there are no men. But in that I'm beginning to see some lack in our own world and possibilities in yours that we do not have.*

*Holly was over the other day and I asked her about these things. She said that most women here don't want the vote and they don't need the education and legal rights of men. She said she was not a man and didn't want what they have. Of course, this adds to my confusion. I'm hard pressed to find common goals among your people. And here I see again the impracticality of your fight.*

*Have your women and men once sat down together and listened to one another? It would be more practical to understand various points of view and attempt to find commonalities and ways to act together. Actions, too, must be studied in light of what each accomplishes and what each abandons. As I see it, this is the way to reach the heart, the center of a society. It is most functional and most humane.*

*El*

Dear Ellador,

You really must stay away from Holly. At least promise me that if you do have children here you will not let them breed with hers! But, my dearest, your other points have cut me to the quick. I feel the strength has gone out of my legs and in the last days I've been too prone to tears. I must have some time to think and respond.

Always to you, Charlotte

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*My Sister, My Self,*

*Forgive me quickly for causing you any pain or tears. That was never my intent. But it seems to me; dear one, that in these extremes in which you live; love is closer to hate, despair is closer to ecstasy, and fear is closer to arrogance than one might think. Take time, take no time, take all the time you need but help me understand Charlotte.*

*Fondly, El*

Dearest Ellador,

Forgive you? I think not. Not because I refuse to forgive, quickly or otherwise, but because there is nothing between us to forgive. Odd, isn't it? We are so different. We come from such dissimilar places and our views always seem to be in conflict, yet our agony and angst is with the circumstances and not with each other. How have we done that? If another had said half the things you have said to me they would be my indisputable enemy, yet you are my closest friend; you are more than friend. How is it that beyond kinship ties, we are able to live with these disagreements? It amazes me and it amazes my other acquaintances. What do you make of it?

Love, Charlotte

*My Charlotte,*

*Women in my land have lived like this for years, although the bond you and I have is certainly exceptional in my experience. In my land it is such an old phenomenon we consider it natural but it wasn't always, just as it doesn't seem natural here. This "amazement" in which we participate comes not only from the words we share but the silences and sighs we share. There are gifts in this "odd" conversation by correspondence: time to listen, time to think, time to struggle to comprehend, time to remember that our goal has never been to win the other, but to understand the other and become stronger for it.*

*To respond to your question, "how?" I would simply say I see two actions: necessity and desire. They play a part in my society and they play a part in our relationship. It is necessary to not only tolerate our differences but to live with them. The body cannot stand upright without muscles working against each other. My people discovered, in a profound way, that we could not survive without one another and so the ability to engage in common action beyond our opposing views was necessary. Your people once knew this and they will someday know it again. The other part of the explanation is desire. Dedicated relationships live with disagreement because they choose to. That may seem thin but do not let such an appearance fool you. Our hearts remain in an eternal embrace amidst*

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*the struggles, inside and out, for we have discovered that one cannot stand without the other, and we, my soul mate, desperately want to stand.*

*Forever, Ellador*

#### NOTES

1. “reclaim” refers to the discussion presented by Jane Roland Martin, Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of the Educated Woman (New Haven: Yale University Press. 1985) in which the author discusses the missing conversation about female education and asks as well as answers the question, “Does it matter that this conversation over time and space is missing?”
  2. Wendy Kohli (Ed.), Critical Conversations in Philosophy of Education (New York: Routledge. 1995)
  3. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Herland: A Lost Feminist Utopian Novel (New York: Pantheon Books. 1979)
  4. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, With Her in Ourland: Sequel to Herland (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers. 1997)
  5. John Dewey, Experience and Education (New York: Touchstone. 1938)
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