# Invisible String: A Personal Narrative of Community and Sisterhood

By

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Submitted to the Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Program in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

I hereby recognize and pledge to fulfill my responsibilities, as defined in the Honor Code, and to maintain the integrity of both myself and the College as a whole.

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Meredith G. Kyser

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M. Soledad Caballero

*My idea of a delicious time is to read a book that is wonderful.*

*But the ruling passion of my life is being a seeker after truth and the divine.*

*-bell hooks*

*And isn't it just so pretty to think, all along there was some*

*invisible string, tying you to me?*

*-Taylor Swift*

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## Introduction

The concept of sisterhood has surrounded me for as long as I can remember. Growing up with an older sister, I was no stranger to the term "sister". I also saw many representations of the topic in literature and media. Through Women's, Gender, and Sexuality classes in college, I learned how sisterhood and community could be powerful through activism and protest, which never occurred to me beforehand. I had not realized that something I assumed was simple could have so many complex layers and perspectives. I want to emphasize how beneficial friendships are while also bringing in the theory that helped solidify my meaning of sisterhood and community.

Before we explain why sisterhood is important, we have to define it. Merriam-Webster has three definitions of sisterhood; "A state of being a sister,", "A community or society of sisters,", and ": the solidarity of women based on shared conditions, experiences, or concerns" (Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary). While those are some definitions people use, I mostly align with feminist theories of sisterhood—particularly ones from Black feminists. In feminist theorist bell hooks' nonfiction work, *Feminism is for Everybody,* she repeatedly references how important sisterhood is to feminism. She states,

> We understood that political solidarity between females expressed in sisterhood goes beyond positive recognition of women's experiences and even shared sympathy for common suffering. Feminist sisterhood is rooted in shared

> commitment to struggle against patriarchal injustice, no matter the form that injustice takes. (hooks, 15)

While women have different experiences with sexism and the patriarchy, feminists are the same in wanting to take down those injustices. In *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House,* intersectional feminist, Audre Lorde, states this about sisterhood and community,

> Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist. Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference - those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older - know that *survival is not an academic skill*. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular, and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.* (Lorde, 112)

We must praise our differences while ensuring everyone has an equal voice in our communities. Those differences can be social standing, race, gender, wealth, class, political position, etc. Sisterhood is not the only thing that matters, instead, it is only the

first part of something bigger–a change for what is right and to make a positive change for feminism. We must not divide ourselves anymore, we must unite to reach our full potential. We must also bring those in who would not find their communities otherwise. In later chapters, I will go further into the works of Black feminists such as Audre Lorde and bell hooks as I believe they are the forerunners for what intersectional feminism looks like today (although they would agree that there is work to be done). I used these important definitions to build upon my understanding and definition of sisterhood. One that will continue to adapt and change through reflection throughout my life.

My definition of sisterhood is a community of people with different backgrounds and lives coming together to reach a common goal. That goal can be as little as wanting friendship or as complex and structured as making a protest group. They are all important in their special ways. One of the main theories that helped me with this definition is the thought of "intersectionality" coined by law scholar Kimberle Crenshaw. Crenshaw has explained that while intersectionality is not the answer to everything, it can be the basis of understanding prejudice and discrimination. She states this in an interview with Columbia Law, saying,

> Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LBGTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things. (Crenshaw, 2017)

To take down patriarchal views and standards, we have to shed light on the problems with *all* of society. It starts and ends with us. To make an effort to do something, we *all* have to participate, making sure we are not leaving anyone out in the process.

In my exploration of my sisterhood and community, I will go further into feminist theory while using real-life examples from the media, going into how sisterhood can be shown as problematic, circling it back to works written by Audre Lorde and bell hooks. I will then outline one of the most popular literary examples of sisterhood, *Little Women*, as I believe it is considerably a powerful representation of finding and establishing community. Then finally, I will go into my personal experiences with sisterhood, and the unlikely place I call my community.

## Author's Note

I often use the term "sisterhood" throughout the piece. While this was a binary term for a long time, I believe it has now lost that part of its definition. I use the term "sisterhood" interchangeably with "community" which is also used numerous times throughout this project. Sisterhood is inclusive and intersectional, and we must not forget that. While you find your sisterhood, help others find their own.

Thank you for reading my story.

## Chapter 1: Sisterhood is…

Sisterhood is essential to feminism. Feminism is essential to sisterhood. We cannot go anywhere without the other. As women, we strive for and need female friendships to build on each other. We cannot grow as people solitarily. We have to have a community of love and acceptance around us to succeed emotionally. In the words of poet, activist, and feminist scholar, Audre Lorde, if we want feminism and sisterhood to work, we must all work together for the betterment of society (Lorde). We must guide younger women toward the right answers about feminism and life. We need to build on each other's differences instead of meditating on our similarities. Women everywhere need to be reminded about the power of sisterhood, as that important narrative gets lost. Feminism was built upon friendships and mentorships, we cannot abandon that vision in our communities.

The author, activist, and feminist scholar, bell hooks, has been forthright that feminism needs to be accessible if we want everyone to believe in it. People have been brought up to believe that to support feminism is to believe in the hatred of men. Many feminist and gender scholars say that is not the case. As bell hooks says, "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression." (hooks, viii.) Audre Lorde and bell hooks (along with many others, but I am focusing on these two), have been pertinent to feminist and gender theories. Without their important perceptions and compositions of scholarly writings, feminist and gender studies today would be next to

nothing. As a Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies student, I look up to them greatly for guidance.

There is another scholarly article that takes precedence in the Women's Studies sphere, *The Combahee River Collective Statement*. It is one of the most prominent works that highlights inclusivity, intersectionality, and the beginnings of socialism. The contributors of *The Combahee River Collective: A Black Feminist Statement* have all experienced racism, classism, and sex oppression in many different forms. The writers go on to explain that with the help of feminism, we can end these discriminations and prejudices (BlackPast *(1977) the Combahee River Collective Statement*). Everyone, including men and gender non-conforming folks, needs to contribute equally to feminism. White feminism was and still is a harmful threat to feminism. Feminist writer, Betty Friedan, influenced the rise of second-wave feminism with her non-fiction book, *The Feminine Mystique*. Written in 1963, it was a huge step for feminism, but not what we would call intersectional feminism. Freidan only highlights one side of the many stories that revolve around feminism. Since its release, there have been more and more articles about its problematic writing and how it completely left out different races in its narrative. bell hooks states this about *The Feminine Mystique,*

> The issues that were most relevant to working women or masses of women were never highlighted by mainstream mass media. Betty Friedan's *The Feminist Mystique* identified "the problem that has no name" as the dissatisfaction females felt about being confined and subordinated in the home as housewives. While this

> issue was presented as a crisis for women it really was only a crisis for a small group of well-educated white women. While they were complaining about the dangers of confinement in the home a huge majority of women in the nation were in the workforce. And many of these working women, who put in long hours for low wages while still doing all the work in the domestic household would have seen the right to stay home as "freedom." (hooks, 37-38)

*The Combahee River Collective Statement* backs up hooks' theoretical thinking, stating this about the harm of white feminism; a type of exclusionary and discriminatory feminism that only focuses on white women,

> One issue that is of major concern to us and that we have begun to publicly address is racism in the white women's movement. As Black feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires among other things that they have a more than superficial comprehension of race, color, and Black history and culture. Eliminating racism in the white women's movement is by definition work for white women to do, but we will continue to speak to and demand accountability on this issue. (BlackPast *(1977) The Combahee River Collective Statement*)

While on one hand, the feminist movement has made strides to eliminate racism and prejudice in our community, we have to keep doing more. We as feminists, need to include people who have disabilities, and who have different genders, races, and classes.

We must bring everyone into this special community. Feminism is an inclusive movement and we must treat it as such. Feminism was never a white women's movement, we need to stop hiding and be open and critical of our movement. We need to make sure we are making strides for *everyone, not* just *some.* As bell hooks and law scholar Kimberle Crenshaw, inventor of the term intersectionality say; it's for everyone. Feminism builds upon other movements.

I have extensively read many diverse author's works to prepare myself for the senior composition and will continue to do so in order to educate myself, and in turn, educate others. I have read many works by bell hooks and Audre Lorde, as well as read or watched other significant works such as; Carmen Maria Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties* and *In the Dream House*, Eve Ensler's (Now going by the title of V) *The Vagina Monologues,* Greta Gerwig's films, such as; *Barbie, Ladybird,* and *Little Women,* Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*, Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag*, Terese Marie Mailhot's *Heart Berries*, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own,* and Zoe Leonard's "I Want a President", to prepare me for writing this piece. Most, if not all, have to deal with sisterhood and/or community. The community in said book or movie all come together to meet a desired goal. In these stories, they go on a journey to figure a problem out but realize that it was within themselves the whole time. Most times, when making literature and media about sisterhood, the result is not meant to be political, it ends up that way naturally through the storylines and characters that break stereotypes and clichés.

## Sisterhood is Community

When I started at Allegheny College, I immediately knew I wanted to study feminist theory. I heard about feminism in my Global Health class, but I wanted to know more. I wanted to sink my teeth into theory and readings. After a lot of mulling over what I wanted to do for college academically, I decided to sign up for Women's, Gender, and Sexuality classes. In my second semester, I was in two of these classes, Introduction to WGSS and Social Movements. I turned out to be the only freshman in Social Movements. I remember that class so vividly because of the community I was in. I was surrounded by upperclassmen who were chatting about their senior compositions and junior seminars, yet they didn't think of me any differently. To them, I was an equal. Because of the other WGSS class I was in, most times my brain was clouded with what I learned in one class versus the other. Nonetheless, I put my all into these classes. I decided that I wanted to major or minor in WGSS at the end of my freshman year. It was a decision that I am very grateful for.

Within the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies community, there becomes a recurring cast of characters in the classes. In all my classes within this major, there were around the same 5-10 peers in each class. We soon became bonded through these classes and the extracurricular activities we were a part of. We learned from each other's comments and questions. We held each other up when we were unsure. We leaned on each other when we were struggling. We built a community within the four walls of the

classroom. Of course, none of this was done without the help and support of our professors.

## Sisterhood is Personal

Along with fiction work, I researched and read many creative nonfiction works and memoirs in preparation for my senior comprehensive project. In Therese Marie Maihot's *Heart Berries,* and Joan Didion's *Blue Nights* and *My Year of Magical Thinking,* these women put themselves in the narrative out of choice and necessity, writing to heal from their past. They brought difficult topics up to the surface, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder, hospitalizations, the death of their husband and daughter, and many more hard subjects. Yet, Didion and Maihot wrote with such care and introspectiveness, that it made it easy to digest, leaving me feeling incredibly profound to have the privilege to read these special nonfiction works. In Melissa Febos's author note for *Body Work,* a mix of memoir and creative nonfiction workbook, she writes, "Write your life. Let this book be a totem of permission, encouragement, proof, whatever you need it to be," (Febos, xvIII, 2021). Reading these mostly women-centric works, gave me the power to write about myself the way I always wanted to; with passion and truth.

I got into writing "professionally" only this year, when I finally realized that my voice mattered just as much as everyone else's. I took a Creative Nonfiction class out of

the advice from my professor, and finally, I was able to write about what mattered most to me. Most of these essays revolved around my friends or family. Most times, when I sat down to write, my essay would go in a completely different way than I wanted it to. An essay about the worst semester of my life would flow into an essay about my love for my friends. I will go into depth about these special communities in the following chapters. It was a way of saying how much someone meant to you without the pressure of doing it face-to-face. Most people do not know that I write about them, I prefer to keep it hidden so only my peers and writing professors know, scared to know what people will think of my writing.

Sisterhood is something that I always felt a part of or wanted to be a part of. Throughout school, I would go around trying to make friends with everyone, trying to find a similar group that I saw in the TV shows I watched. Right now, in my senior year of college and weeks away from leaving, I would say my community of girlfriends is one of the most important things in my life. I do not think that will ever change. I know that I could text any of my friends that I needed something and they would come running. I would do the same for them in a heartbeat. Sisterhood and friendship are so unique, that we have to hold on to it as long as we can.

## Sisterhood is Influential

In many of the works I mentioned earlier, the writers/creators of these works have inadvertently placed themselves into the narrative. For example, Greta Gerwig wrote and directed *Ladybird* out of inspiration from her adolescence. She grew up in Sacramento, went to an all-girls Catholic school, and moved away to the East Coast for college, just like the main character, Christine, or Ladybird as she wants people to call her, played by Saoirse Ronan. One of the most powerful parts of the movie is the friendship between Ladybird and her best friend, Julie. Although they go through many changes in their last year of high school, at the end of the movie they come back together. In Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag,* the main character *Fleabag,* has a tumultuous, somewhat toxic, relationship with herself and her loved ones. From running a guinea pig café to a confusing relationship with a Catholic priest, she feels like she cannot take hold of her life. The one constant she does have is her sister, Claire. Although much like Julie and Ladybird's friendship, it is full of rocky moments, in the end, they'll always have each other's back. These creators try to show the special bonds between sisterhood and do it flawlessly. From looking at these two important works, I began to look at media and popular culture through the specific lens of sisterhood.

In the Summer of 2023, the world experienced femininity in its most powerful form through the release and celebrations of *Barbie*, also directed by Greta Gerwig and starring Margot Robbie, Taylor Swift's *Eras Tour*, and Beyonce's *Renaissance Tour.* Most

folks dressed up in pink to go to Barbie movies, bringing all of their friends and making it a special event similar to the theatrics people would go to when going out to a movie before streaming services. At the end of the film, America Ferrera's character, Gloria, does a powerful monologue to Barbie when Barbie is saying how hard it is to be a woman. Gloria tells Barbie,

> It is literally impossible to be a woman. You are so beautiful, and so smart, and it kills me that you don't think you're good enough. Like, we have to always be extraordinary, but somehow we're always doing it wrong…I'm just so tired of watching myself and every single other woman tie herself into knots so that people will like us. And if all of that is also true for a doll just representing women, then I don't even know. (*Barbie* 1:14-1:16)

It is one of the apex moments of justified female rage that has been shown on the screen. Women felt seen. I felt deeply impacted when I saw it in the theaters. My grandmother talked about the scene on the ride home and how much she loved it. Although similar things from the monologue have been said for years, it reignited that passion for women.

For Beyonce's *Renaissance Tour*, the singer told her fans to all wear silver at her concert, making a glorious sea of community and love. Taylor Swift restarted the trend of making friendship bracelets and trading them with other fans at her concerts. Fans usually dressed as their favorite era of Swift's career. Eras meaning her albums which signified an "era" in her music discography, for example, fans would say, "I'm in my *1989*

era" or "I'm in my *Folklore* era" (*Reputation* and *Folklore* are titles of her albums). For fans, it's more than a favorite album, it's the memories behind them with their personal sisterhood and/or community.

I am also cognizant of the fact that not everyone can experience these special moments. Tour tickets for Beyonce's and Taylor Swift's tours were swept up in mere minutes, and with inflation, movie tickets keep getting more and more expensive. Even if you could not go to the concerts or movies in person, with all of the videos, pictures, and live streams that were posted on social media (specifically TikTok), it made you feel like you were right there with them. It also helped that both Taylor Swift and Beyonce released filmed versions of their tours in movie theaters. Swift released her *Eras Tour* movie to Disney+, making it even more accessible to larger audiences. Although this is not a perfect solution for everyone, it is a small step in the right direction for accessibility in feminist sisterhood.

Even with all of the terribleness of what is happening in the world, we could unite in these special moments. The power of women embracing themselves and others, is feminism. In these special moments, women could embrace their femininity without any consequences or backlash. They did not have to worry about saying the wrong thing or embarrassing themselves, they could just be themselves.

That is what sisterhood is in its most simple form, existing within a group where you do not have to explain yourself. Sisterhood is not the only thing that matters,

instead, it is only the first part of something bigger–a change for what is right and a positive change for feminism.

## Chapter 2-*Little Women*'s Powerful Sisterhood

Sisterhood and community are complicated subjects to portray. No book, movie, TV show, etc has perfectly shown the complexities of sisterhood and community. Despite all the difficulties, there are still amazing examples in the media. From shows like *Fleabag* and *Sex and the City* to movies such as *20th Century Women* and *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, many examples show complex forms of sisterhood and community. Some shows and movies picture the characters coming of age with all the changes in themselves and their friendships, while in other shows and movies, the characters are already of age and tackling adulthood together. I will be examining Little Women by Louisa May Alcott, aided by the visuals from Greta Gerwig's 2019 adaptation, and the story's display of sisterhood during hard times in their family as well as changes all around them socially. This story shows both sides, the sisters coming of age together in Massachusetts while also dealing with their new adult life. In the first part, I will be describing the book and movie adaptation and will also be showing some of the beginnings of feminist theory that is present within these, putting it all in the frame for feminist sisterhood. Then in the second part, I will show how this story plays into my own life. This story is so important to me because it not only fills me with childhood-like wonder and amusement every time I read it, but it also leaves me prepared to go into my newfound adult life.

In *Little Women*, we follow the four March sisters Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy as they grow up in Concord, Massachusetts in the Civil War era. They live a quiet life as their

father Mr. March is away as a chaplain in the Union army. Their mother, Marmee, lets them do as they please, always supporting them in their playful endeavors while at the same time teaching them to act with kindness. They all have their enjoyments in life, Meg enjoys acting, Jo adores writing, Beth loves to play her piano, and Amy loves to paint. No one in their life believes that just because they are women they are not to be doing these aspirations or hobbies, if anything, it is embraced wholeheartedly. Their neighbors, Laurie and his grandfather, Mr. Lawrence, let the March sisters borrow whatever book they want from the home library and Beth uses their piano to rehearse. They also have their Aunt March, who believes a woman's place is at her house serving her husband, and all of the sisters disagree with her. At the beginning of the classic novel, the March sisters are so far removed from love and marriage, that it is almost a joke to them. They want nothing to do with boys and men, only wanting to be together as sisters.

As the novel progresses, we meet Theodore Lawrence (or "Laurie" as everyone calls him). He lives a quiet, solitary life with his grandfather and tutor in the mansion across the road. He longs to be a part of their community and sisterhood. With no maternal figures around him, he finds love and support from the chaoticness of the March family. Laurie and Jo immediately become friends after a dance where they both hide behind a curtain, far away from the festivities. Jo says this to Laurie, following their first meeting;

> We'll never draw that curtain any more, and I give you leave to look as much as you like. I just wish, though, instead of peeping, you'd come over and see us. Mother is so splendid, she'd do you heaps of good, and Beth would sing to you if I begged her to, and Amy would dance. Meg and I would make you laugh over our funny stage properties, and we'd have jolly times (Alcott 50).

They both balance each other out, giving in to each other's games and light-hearted schemes. They are so connected, that it is almost as if he becomes one of the March sisters. When it might seem like they will become love interests, they do not and instead remain friends the whole time, that is until he proposes to her and she rejects him. Laurie does not want things to change, desperately wanting to keep holding on to his childhood. At this time, Jo does not seem to know what she wants, especially with her friendship with Laurie. When Laurie proposes to Jo in the movie she states this, emphasizing her need to be her own person;

> You'll find some lovely accomplished girl, who will adore you, and make a fine mistress for your fine house. I wouldn't. I'm homely and awkward and odd and you'd be ashamed of me and we would quarrel - we can't help it even now! - I'd hate elegant society and you'd hate my scribbling and we would be unhappy and wish we hadn't done it and everything will be horrid…I don't believe I will ever marry. I'm happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in any hurry to give it up (*Little Women,* Gerwig).

Eventually, their friendship is repaired, but it is not the same as it was. But they are not the only ones that get involved with romance.

Meg becomes married to John, Laurie's tutor, and lives in a small house close to the rest of her family. Before her wedding, Jo urges her to run away with her. "We'll run off together…You will be bored of him in two years and we will be interesting forever," (*Little Women*, Gerwig). The family continues as it did before but with more hesitation and added maturity. Jo leaves Massachusetts for New York to teach at a boarding house, Amy travels to France with Aunt March to practice her painting, and Meg is content being married to John Brooks, Laurie's old tutor. But it is not only marriage that breaks up the March sisters, it is also Beth's illness and death. Jo comes back to the March house immediately, quitting her job in the process. There is a period of mournfulness heavy in the house, especially as it is revealed Amy and Laurie got married abroad in France. This period of darkness and discontentment lasts until Jo turns to write again, wanting to do something productive and most importantly; to do something for herself. She decides to write her family's story. It is full of magic, wonderful chaos, and most importantly, love, coming full circle with Louisa May Alcott's own story. L. M. Alcott drew inspiration from her own life in *Little Women*, she grew up poor as her father did odd jobs, barely making ends meet for her and her sisters. Alcott never married and was considered a tomboy (much like Jo) by the ones around her. She wrote *Little Women*, wanting a more idyllic life than the one she was handed (Boyd Rioux).

## Feminist Theory and *Little Women*

Louisa May Alcott and Jo March were feminists in their time of the mid-1800s. As with most art or books, one needs to understand the context or time it was written, to understand the book more fully. Throughout the story, Jo longs to be a part of something that simply cannot exist for her, such as; going into higher education, or entering the army. Yet, she finds a way to fill that gap within her. She promotes what we call inclusion today. She cuts off her hair for $25 (in 2024, it would be around $500), so Marmee can travel to ill Mr. March, desperate to do something helpful for the family. It is mentioned many times in the book that Jo wishes she could go fight in the army. But of course, she cannot since she is a woman. Still, she struggles against gender stereotypes, "(Jo) can't get over her disappointment in not being a boy" (Alcott 5), much like Louisa May Alcott did. At the end of the *Little Women* movie, Jo fights for fair compensation and the rights to her book. Greta Gerwig fought for a clear feminist tone throughout the movie. While some disagree that Jo's ending in the book is feminist since she married Friedrich Bhaer, a professor at the boarding house she taught at, Gerwig lets her get what she wanted; she is also running a school and published her book.

Within the feminist narrative of the book and movie, we get a powerful scene between Amy and Laurie, where they talk about whether Fred Vaughn is Amy's true love. She tells him that she needs to think through who she is going to love, aware of the strings attached to marriage in the 1860s.

> I'm just a woman. And as a woman I have no way to make money, not enough to earn a living and support my family. Even if I had my own money, which I don't, it would belong to my husband the minute we were married. If we had children they would belong to him not me. They would be his property. So don't sit there and tell me that marriage isn't an economic proposition, because it is. It may not be for you but it most certainly is for me (*Little Women,* Gerwig).

This string of feminist narratives throughout the story has inspired many young girls for decades that they can be powerful *and* find love. They do not need to pick one or the other.

## More Than A Story

Books are everything to me, filling my world with endless adventures and emotions. As a future librarian, I take immense pride in collecting and reading books. I have 50+ personal books in my small room at college, littering every surface, as well as countless library books begging to be read. It is not just a hobby to me, it is so much more. I am always carrying a book around with me, constantly recommending books to loved ones, and gushing about my recent five-star read to anyone who will listen. I collect books, wanting one thousand by the time I am thirty, that's the amount of books where you can officially call your collection a library. I have two bookshelves back home. One filled with books I have had the pleasure to read. I struggle to make room to squeeze

a book into its assigned shelf; they are organized by genre. On the other bookcase, it is organized by color, since I have not read those yet. On the bookshelves filled with books I have read, I have a shelf of my favorite books. Some of them are classics like *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Great Gatsby* or romances like *Beach Read* and some are ones I would have never thought to pick up like *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, yet, none of these books have made me feel as much as *Little Women* has. It is almost an inside joke with my family, that is how often I bring it up in conversation. I let myself reread it once a year (usually in the fall) and the movie is almost always on a loop. I find myself reacting to the plot points the same way I did when I first experienced it. I feel my cheeks blush when Jo and Laurie meet, tears falling down my cheeks when Beth dies, and a smile on my lips when it ends. Every time I read or watch it, I love it more and more.

*Little Women* is my favorite book and movie but it means much more to me. I adore them so much that the film and book weave together, unclear when one narrative begins and the other ends. I came to this story in high school and immediately became enchanted by it. Although it is classically written, it is digestible, making you fall in love with the characters effortlessly. I ached for that warmth and love that seeped throughout the March house. I could get rid of the worries and be content there. Although there were plenty of stressors in their time in the 1860s, they did not let it get the best of them, always finding a new thing to do or celebrate. Although I recommend this book to all of my friends and family, some report back to me complaining that it is "boring" because nothing overly dramatic happens. But that is one of the reasons I love it. I love the way

the March family celebrates mundanity and embraces the quiet life. How dinner is always a spectacle, they put on plays for the neighbors, and generally just want to be in each other's company. That is enough for them. While we are living in this busy world, we often forget to stop and "smell the roses"; pausing for a moment and being content with what is around us. Through this book and their utopia-like community, I am reminded of that feeling.

Like every other not-so-feminine, short-haired, closeted girl, I saw myself in Jo March. How she was for feminism before that term became a movement, and how she put her family first no matter what. She loves to read and write, and hides in the attic of the March house every chance she gets. I do similar things. I love to hide in my room, forgetting all responsibilities to read. Her older sister, Meg, is warmer and kinder, and seems to be the voice of reason for her, just like my older sister, Emily (although she would say she is an Amy) is a constant anchor for me. As she is now preparing to get married I am reacting similarly to Jo, wishing we can go back to when we were kids with our hijinks and games. Jo made me feel confident in myself through my femininity, my habits, and my hobbies. I got more into reading because of Jo March. I wanted to start writing because of her. Although many argue that Jo is queer-coded because of her tomboy-ish ways (in the movie, Jo and Laurie are also shown to share clothing), some argue (like my sister and mother) that she is just a headstrong feminist. I believe she can exist as both. Every time I see this story, I dream of fantasies that I wish would pour out of the screen and pages. I wish that Laurie and Jo would get together so she would not

have to get with the professor, but that narrative will never change. I also wish that Jo would say a line about her love for women, but of course, she does not. We cannot write other people's or character's stories. Maybe I want these sides of the story told because I see so much of myself in Jo March that I want her to be exactly like me. Most readers of the book and watchers of the movie can agree she is a feminist, it is the queer coding of Jo that gets fuzzy. Whatever your stance may be, she is powerful, and no one in the book diminishes it because she is a woman. They only push her forward, like my family and friends did for me. I did not need to change the way I looked or acted because I was queer, I could just be.

On spring break in my last year of college, I stood before Louisa May Alcott's bust in the Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. Although it is just a statue, it is the same as standing face to face. There she was, the writer of my favorite story, modeled so carefully from her own life. I ironically was wearing my *Little Women* earrings and carrying my *Little Women* tote bag (purely coincidentally, I swear) for this day trip to D.C. I stopped in front of the statue, tears falling down my face, realizing that I would never meet the author or creators who made this story feel so real, made the sisterhood of the March sisters so realistic, I could picture them right next to me. I would never be able to tell them how much it all means to me. I would never be able to tell them I collect copies of the book, looking in every bookstore if they have one. It was a tidal wave of emotions. Through Louisa May Alcott, I was staring my adulthood down, knowing that

my childhood was leaving me in a matter of months. Almost the same emotions as what the March sisters felt while so many changes happened to them.

In this classic story, they experience disruptions to their utopia-like community ranging from war, courtship, and death. But through it all, there is one constant; each other. This is an exquisite example of what sisterhood and community should look like–free, unyielding, and wanting to spread that joy to others around us. Because of their kinship, they had the competence to take up spaces where they did not fit in. While the way we experience sisterhood changes from person to person, we have to hold on to these feelings while we can before the narrative changes. These stories tell us one thing; sisterhood is forever and we cannot and should not forget that. Being a part of a sisterhood is powerful, not only to the world around us but to ourselves too.

## Chapter 3-Sisterhood in Life

I was oblivious to what my community looked like going up. I did not know how to search for it, always seeming to struggle with the making friends part of growing up. Do not be fooled, I had friends in my adolescence but they never seemed to be the right fit. I constantly tried to find a community or sisterhood (or at least a friend), always inserting my loud yet timid personality into areas where I was not welcomed. I did not get the hint that people did not want to hang out with me, clinging to people who could not care less. I often looked up to my sister, always seeing her with hordes of friends contrasting my lonesome. I wanted to be a part of something where I was valued. I just had to find it.

I was bullied when I was younger, sometimes by my friends, and by the time middle school and high school came around, I was ready for a complete change. I wanted to shed my skin, hating even myself more and more. It did not help that when I was a teenager, I was extremely closeted. It was not until the summer in between high school and college where I finally realized I was queer. There was a lot of self-discovery before all of that happened. In middle school, unable to deal with the torment from my peers, I found myself retreating to the library, finding solace in the stacks of books. I became a library aide in eighth grade and loved every minute of it. The librarians looked out for me more than my friends did, always giving me the best unsolicited advice. It was not until years later that I decided that I wanted to be a librarian; partially because of them. I wanted to create that same sense of community in my library one day.

In high school, I found a good group of friends in the humanities specialty center I was a part of. We were not cool or interesting to other people, but we did not care. We had each other, which was more than enough for us. We also met up early before classes started, wanting more time to be in each other's company. But, like most high school friendships, we distanced ourselves when we got to college. What once was a close connection, where we said every thought that passed our brain to each other, was now nothing more than a happy birthday text.

When I was between friend groups or did not feel satisfied with the communities I was a part of, I turned to different things to fill that gap. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, I filled that hole with books, movies, music, TV, etc. I wanted my friends to be the ones on the screen. But that tether was not enough. I needed to find people who liked me for me. My foot was tied to an anchor stuck deep in a sea, my head barely above the already rapid waves. I was going over to different boats, begging for a ladder to climb my way up, but they kept going past.

Although everyone's experience during quarantining is different, we were all more or less isolated, alone, and trapped. On Friday, March 12th, 2020, my AP English Literature teacher gave us the whole class period to talk about COVID-19 meant for all of us. *It'll be two weeks and we'll be back.* We all talked about our extended spring break and what we would be doing to fill our time. We never went back to school after that day. I was at home in Richmond, Virginia, with my parents and sister whose junior year of college got cut short. At first, I almost enjoyed it, taking it as a reprieve from my

senioritis that was consuming me. I caught up on shows and movies, and my family went on our daily walks around the neighborhood. My sister and I learned TikTok dances in our infinite free time. In the county I live in, they decided not to grade any assignments for the rest of the year, so I did not have to do any more work. I knew remote learning was not for me, so I spent my time writing, listening to music, and going on drives, blasting Fleetwood Mac. Then it all got too much. I remember sobbing in my parents' arms about how I would not have prom, my senior band trip, or graduation. I sobbed for the people who did not have the privilege of having a warm place to stay and who had to work on the front lines helping those who were sick. Where I once cherished my immense free time, I now despised it. I was itching to get out of my skin. After a couple of months, I tried to find some sort of normality with COVID-19. I got a job at a fast food restaurant that summer, thinking only of the escape Allegheny College would give me while I was manning the fry station. I needed to get out.

When I went to college, I felt a release from my childhood but I could not find a tether to myself. I was in a black hole, searching and clawing for a way out, similar to how people were during COVID lockdowns. I was not as close to my friends back home anymore. I came out to them the summer beforehand, and when I slowly got settled into college life, they slowly got quieter and more distant. It seemed I turned into an annoyance for them rather than their best friend like I was a month prior. Something that could have been a coincidence hurt me greatly. I was left with no one besides the couple of friends I made in my dorm hall. The second semester came and I found my

community. I finally found my place, a place I had no idea would become a home. I had a great roommate, COVID restrictions were letting up, and I found my sisterhood with a great group of friends. Things were looking up.

## Sisterhood in a Post-COVID Era

We all ached for community during and after COVID-19. I was lucky enough that I was with my parents and sister, but others were alone, having to deal with their loneliness. We all tried to take hold of it, either with weekly Zoom meetings, meeting up with friends outside six feet away, or delving into forms of media that everyone else was watching, trying to connect with a part of them they had broken in the past. Everyone was scared to death, thinking this was going to be our new normal. We wanted to go back to a time when you could go to the movies, concerts, and events, but we were stuck with the same number of people under our roof. We wanted to hug, kiss, and embrace people again. We all tried to pretend what was happening was okay and fine, but in one sense or another, we were all suffering from the lack of connection we were experiencing. When 2021 rang in, we all wished for a break from the loneliness, wanting something or someone to hold on to. We wanted to be included in something bigger than ourselves. I wanted to break out of the shell that enclosed me during quarantine. I wanted to be included in something that made me proud. A place where I can look around and feel valued as a member of something. I wanted to look around me and feel

like I belonged in that space. I wanted to be a part of a sisterhood that was bigger than myself.

When people think of me as a Women's, Gender, and Sexuality major, they often think I would be against sorority life and the "fakeness" and "privilege" of it all. When people think of "Greek life" or "sororities", they picture women going through Alabama rush with fake tans and crystal tennis bracelets. On the opposite side of the spectrum is Greek life at Allegheny (or at any small liberal arts college). When I was Panhellenic President; I eased the potential new members' minds, telling them the recruitment season was much more laid back than what they had seen on TikTok. There would be little to no drama during recruitment (if I could help it). I approached this position, which oversaw my cabinet and all of the sororities on campus, not as a higher-up, but as an equal. Although I wholeheartedly know that it is a privilege being able to be in a sorority because of its monetary price as we pay dues every semester, it is something that pulled me out of darkness so many times through its warmth and tenderness. I owe it to practically everything. I got to where I am today because of my sorority, Kappa Alpha Theta.

I am a proud member of Kappa Alpha Theta. I have been a part of the special sisterhood of Theta since the spring semester of freshman year. During that period I needed guidance on what I wanted from college and who I wanted to spend my college years with. As I sat in my house doing the recruitment nights on Zoom (it was 2021 after

all), I instantly found a welcoming community with Kappa Alpha Theta. There was a click when I talked to all of the initiated members during the rounds. When I went to all of the other sororities, although some of the members in those sororities would become my friends later on, I did not feel that connection like I did with Theta. It felt like I already found my place before recruitment was even over. My mother and sister were Thetas as well and I wanted to make them proud. The sisters[1] extended me a bid and I immediately said yes. Thus began my journey with Kappa Alpha Theta. I am so grateful that I am a part of this sisterhood.

Although I cannot share everything with recruitment and within the sorority because of tradition and ritual, the ceremonies we perform are something that I hold very close to my heart. We guide through them with thoughtfulness, never taking anything for granted, always remembering where we came from.

Theta was founded with strong values in excellence, service, leadership, and knowledge, merits we still hold strong to this day. We were founded in 1870 at Indiana Asbury University (now DePauw University) by Bettie Locke, who originally wanted to join Phi Gamma Delta (commonly known as FIJI), but they declined and instead wanted her as what we would now call a "sweetheart": someone to only wear their pin, a figurehead of sorts. Bettie was appalled and decided to make her fraternity, one for

[1] Although I use the terms sister and sisters when referring to Kappa Alpha Theta, we have/had a number of non-binary sisters. I mention later in this chapter that we do a poll every semester to ensure there is comfortability across the board with these terms. If someone is not comfortable, we change the terminology.

women. She recruited Hannah Shaw, Betty Tipton, and Alice Allen to solidify her group. It became the first Greek-letter fraternity known among women. At first, it was a secret organization until they decided to be proud of what they had created, showing off their pins at the University's chapel. 254 years later, Kappa Alpha Theta is still going strong with 140 college chapters across North America. Theta was founded on early definitions of feminism, wanting equality for women in all spaces, and we still strive for inclusivity today, and we will continue to do so as long as there are running chapters.

Theta was founded to be a resistance against patriarchal standards, wanting to blur the boundaries between the binaries of sex and gender. Bettie Locke wanted a space where she and other like-minded women could communicate and simply be with each other. At the time, this group was one of the few women at Indiana Asbury University. They felt so unwelcome before that they had to create that space for themselves. What they did was radical and brave. While we have lost some of its resistance from decades of running and with societal changes, it is still radical. We create these spaces throughout Greek life where people can just be themselves with no consequences. No matter their race, class, sexual orientation, or wealth. Sure, the gender/sex binary between sororities and fraternities is still harsh, but both sides are making efforts to blur it here at Allegheny College and across the nation.

We all come from different walks of life, and we celebrate that and we celebrate that we all ended up here in Kappa Alpha Theta. We conduct a yearly survey that shows specific statistics for the chapter and Theta headquarters. It shows us how we are all

different from each other, from our sexual orientation, race, age, grades, class, home life, etc. We have a large amount of LGBTQ+ members, but we are constantly working on how to improve our diversity, equity, and inclusivity efforts, which we do through workshops, open conversations, and anonymous polls every semester on whether to keep the term "sister" based on the comfortability of members. We have events that honor the women who came before us and cherish the ones who support us now. Every year we do a Leading Woman's Tea, where a number of our sisters go forward and talk about a leading woman in their life. We constantly do similar programs like this to inspire connections and to be as accepting as possible of our sorority sisters and whoever else joins our circle.

We have committees made for further understanding of conflicts and problems within the chapter. We get everyone's input, making sure we have the whole story. We are a community in every sense of the word. We aim to resolve these problems and conflicts efficiently and smoothly, so there are no prejudices, gossip, or hatred in the chapter. We meet up every week for chapter meetings and go through business, but we also laugh, converse, and celebrate people's accomplishments. It's one of my favorite times of the week.

We make a cheer section at games, concerts, and other events, always supporting our sisters. As a senior, I cry at almost every event we hold, not wanting this sisterhood I am a part of to end. But it won't. It will reincarnate itself as long as Greek life is a special and safe place for people. While I can describe specific examples of how Theta has

enriched my life here, the pages would be continually endless. My closest friends are in Theta, and I am so passionate about this sorority and will always support them. Something more important to me is my family, and their never-ending love for me, as I share the same love for them. They support me in different ways than my sorority sisters but with the same passion.

## Community is Family-An Interlude

I am so lucky I can find community in my own biological family. I come from a long line of strong women, and I am proud to be a descendant of them. I will be the fourth librarian in the family, and I also come from a long line of educators. I was always taught what the right thing was, but also never be afraid to ask questions and stand up for myself.

Even though we are a family, we are all vastly different. Some people in my family are doctors or in the medical field, others are teachers, others are retired, and others are still in school. Some are quiet, some loud. We have different opinions, thoughts, mannerisms. With each wedding, we add another branch to the family tree. My family is massive, big enough to pull out an extra table during holidays. But on the other hand, my family is also small with my parents, my sister, and I. My family tree is confusing and twisted, but I would never change a thing.

My sister, Emily, is older than me by three years. We at first did not know how to work together growing up, instead, we worked against each other, always bickering about the most ignorant things. When she went to college in 2017, I realized I was lost without her guidance. I attached myself to other people trying to fill that hole that I was missing from her, but it was never the same. Being under the same roof again during COVID helped, being a silver lining in that dark time. During this time, and especially when I went to college, we got closer than we ever had before. Although it helped that we did not live together anymore, we also realized that we were a lot more similar than we thought growing up. We share the same values, the same fears, the same hopes. We are in communication constantly. Whether that be a general update on each other's life, an update about our favorite celebrities, or pictures of her cats, she never waits to reply, always FaceTiming me at the most random times. Emily and I could talk to each other about nothing for hours. I look up to her in almost every aspect of my life. I also look towards other strong women in my family who have paved the path for me and for the generations to come.

I am slowly turning into my mother, Elizabeth. At first, I resisted it, but now I embrace it. She is a school librarian, has a deep love of books, and is the kindest woman I know. She can make friends with anyone she meets. I am proud to be her daughter. To my guiding mother, and all the other women who came before me, you have never hesitated to correct my mistakes but you most importantly gave me a soft place to land. Usually, family and community are seen as separate entities. People usually see their

community or sisterhood as a reprieve from their frustrations from their family or vice versa. I am so grateful they are the same for me. To all the men in my family, especially my gentle father, thank you for stepping to the side so we women can fly.

It would have been very easy for my extended family to not accept me and my queerness. Besides my grandmother who lives five minutes away from my immediate family, we all live up and down the East Coast. They could have easily exiled me from the community, deciding to not invite me to holidays and vacations. Instead, I heard this repeated phrase from my entire family when I came out to them; *We just want you to be happy. If you're happy, we're happy.* Like most queer kids, I thought I would not be welcomed where I should be the safest. I am very lucky that every single member of my family accepted me. It was not until that moment that I realized that I was restricting my full self from my family. I was holding back what was most important. If they did not accept that part, that was it. But they did. While it is still difficult sometimes to be the only LGBTQ+ person in my family, I know they will *always* have my back. My family became my community, my safe space, my fortress.

To those who view their friends as their family, hold them close. You had the unique opportunity to choose who you bring into your inner circle. You have this beautiful chosen family who will do nothing but lift up and celebrate you. Don't let them go.

## Community in My Future

I am at this weird spot in my life. I am looking outward to my future wondering and worrying about where I will fit in after college in Pittsburgh, hoping I can find a community there. But I already do. Some of my favorite people live there, awaiting my arrival in the city. I have my cousin, Brittany, who cannot wait to take me to her favorite brunch spots, my sorority big, Riley, who will show me all of her favorite places, and my future roommate, Isabelle, who cannot wait to make memories in our apartment. They will not hesitate to bring me into their own sisterhoods and communities. I will find a place to be. But most importantly, I will make space for others. At the same time, I am also trying to keep hold of what I have here at Allegheny. Yes, soon I will have to let go and let my friends carry on without me, but I know I will come back. I will always be back.

In community and sisterhood, there cannot be a community without outreach to others. If you are not reaching out to others who might not have a group of their own, you are not doing your all. Going back to my definition of sisterhood, sisterhood is a community of people with different backgrounds and lives coming together to reach a common goal. For my sorority, our mission is to offer women lifelong opportunities for intellectual, and personal growth. For my family, it is to create a warm and welcoming environment for everyone. Although the goals of each group can differ, you must not stay stagnant. We have to unite with those who think differently than us, and who act

differently for change to happen. To end this with an Audre Lorde quote about the progressiveness of sisterhood,

> For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered. It is this real connection which is so feared by a patriarchal world. Only within a patriarchal structure is maternity the only social power open to women. Interdependency between women is the way to a freedom which allows the *I* to *be*, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative. This is a difference between the passive *be* and the active *being*. (Lorde, 111)

Be a part of something that is feared but also so special and supportive. Sisterhood is all around you. You just have to know when to jump for it. If you open your heart and eyes, you will have someone with their hand outstretched ready for you to take that leap.

## Conclusion

Writing this has reminded me of how important learning from others is. That is one of the beauties of sisterhood; the opportunity to learn from other's experiences and pasts. But most importantly, we have to learn from ourselves, always trying to be better people. We must always double-check our implicit biases, and make sure our communities or sisterhoods are productive. In this, I will explain how we can support our communities for the better and display the future of this project. This is only the beginning of my realization of sisterhood.

In Kappa Alpha Theta we have special chapter meetings every semester or so where we all go around and propose ideas for the sorority to ensure all voices are being heard. For instance, things that are being shared[2] during these meetings are along the lines of "Can we have another DEI workshop?" or "I have an idea for a sisterhood activity,". We make it clear at the beginning of the meeting that no suggestion is unwelcome. The cabinet then takes it to their executive meetings and works to make the sorority a better place. We put in the work to make sure we have positive and productive outcomes.

If we put no effort into inner work while striving for equity and justice, then nothing constructive will be done. While we are doing this theoretical thinking of our communities in sisterhood, we need to keep reminding ourselves not to make these spaces accidentally harmful. Most times we do not know we are being exclusionary.

[2] I do not go too deep into specifics here for confidentiality reasons.

White feminism is still prevalent today in many spaces whether we realize we are exclusive or not. As I mentioned in the Introduction, bell hooks says this about feminist sisterhood;

> Feminist sisterhood is rooted in shared commitment to struggle against patriarchal injustice, no matter the form that injustice takes. Political solidarity between women always undermines sexism and sets the stage for the overthrow of patriarchy. Significantly, sisterhood could never have been possible across the boundaries of race and class if individual women had not been willing to divest of their power to dominate and exploit subordinated groups of women. As long as women are using class or race power to dominate other women, feminist sisterhood cannot be fully realized. (hooks, 15-16)

I chose to share this quotation twice to emphasize that we need to remember where we came from. Feminism was created to be included in spaces where women were not welcome. Inclusivity must be in our minds when we are a part of sisterhoods. There was a time when the feminist movement was very rich and white, a time when women wanted to vote–but did not add BIPOC women into their agenda. We have to reach out across groups, races, genders, sexes, classes, etc, to see our vision of complete feminism become a reality. We must patch up the huge mistakes women have made from discriminating against underrecognized people; a reality that still is not completely erased in our society. These marginalized people are important folks who have a place in our feminist sisterhood. Although no one wants to be critical of their communities, we

have to if we want to be as inclusive as possible. The Combahee River Collective says this about their community;

> We believe in collective process and a nonhierarchical distribution of power within our own group and in our vision of a revolutionary society. We are committed to a continual examination of our politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice. (BlackPast (1977) The Combahee River Collective Statement)

While I am not saying we must model this example perfectly, we can use this image to picture what our sisterhoods and communities should look like. Even if there are intrinsic hierarchies in your sisterhood or community from executive roles or seniority being in that space, we must make sure everyone has a voice. To do that is simple in theory and practice; reach out to those slipping under the surface, no matter the reason. Just like Jo and Laurie, who created a community together with a common goal; to have fun amidst the hard times of the Civil War, we can do the same with our communities. Even in the time of the 1860s when it was a very patriarchal society, Jo had the same amount of power as Laurie (some argue she had the upper hand most of the time). As I mentioned in Chapter 3, your communities or sisterhoods do not need to be complex in nature. I cannot judge what makes your community fair or unfair, as that is for you and your group to decide.

At this point, I also have to do some searching for myself. Right now, I do not have a difference between sisterhoods and communities, and maybe one day I will, but

for now it will live in the ether, changing and forming into different places and meanings. I will continue to use this comprehensive project as a resource for myself, on what sisterhood should be. I will also share this with others as I see fit. I plan to send this to my sisters in Kappa Alpha Theta, as a reminder of the things we are doing for good and how we can always strive for better. In the future, as I continue to edit and polish up my writing, perhaps it will be published in part with my future dissertation or in a book of essays. But overall, who am I to say as I am currently in my senior year of college what becomes of this? I put it all in the hands of my future. I leave you with one of my favorite quotes from bell hooks, a constant resource in my Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies journey; "Loving friendships provide us with a space to experience the joy of community in a relationship where we learn to process all our issues, to cope with differences and conflict while staying connected."

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