

Meaning and Inquiry in Feminist Pragmatist Narrative¹

Abstract: By tracing its own narrative from the feminist pragmatism of the 1980s-2000s back to the *avant-la-lettre* feminist pragmatism of the Progressive Era, this chapter explores the use of narrative within feminist pragmatism. It pays particular attention to uses of narrative in Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Anna Julia Cooper and Jane Addams to reveal the usefulness of narrative as a feminist pragmatist mode of inquiry and of elucidating meaning. The chapter concludes with a brief suggestion of where feminist pragmatist narrative may take us next.

This chapter offers a narrative about the origins and futures of feminist pragmatism, and about the use of narrative within feminist pragmatism. It charts two histories—the more recent history of the first scholars who thought of themselves as feminist pragmatists, and the earlier history of the *avant-la-lettre* feminist pragmatists of the Progressive Era.

While twentieth century feminist pragmatism arose in philosophy departments, the first wave of feminist pragmatists largely operated outside of academic philosophy. As a consequence, they used methods seldom deployed within in philosophy. I attend here in particular to their inventive and powerful use of narrative. The chapter concludes with some thoughts on what the future of feminist pragmatism might hold.

In one sense, feminist pragmatism began in the 1980s and 1990s. Then as now, philosophy as a discipline was male-dominated, but by the late 1980s most philosophy

departments were starting to see gradual increases in the number of women students and professors. The same period saw the rise of neo-pragmatism and a corresponding renewed interest in classic pragmatism. Feminist pragmatism was a natural outgrowth of this conjunction.

To be sure, feminist philosophers' interest in pragmatism arose from more than this coincidence. Feminist philosophers were drawn to pragmatism not only because it was gaining popularity but in particular because they saw in pragmatism a mode of pursuing feminist projects. Some early remarks on the topic by Richard Rorty nicely capture this alignment from the pragmatist side.

In a 1990 lecture, Rorty argued that feminism is better served by pragmatism than by what he termed "universalism"—that is, the philosophical approach that regards moral and epistemic norms as fixed, unchanging, and extending indifferently to all persons. According to Rorty's characterization, universalists attribute injustice and disagreement to people's distorted perception of those norms, not to the norms themselves. On this view, moral and epistemic progress is progress towards a less distorted perception. Rorty argued that this account is too weak to capture such radical feminist projects as those of Catherine MacKinnon and Marilyn Frye. MacKinnon and Frye envision no less than a new being for society, and that new being requires not the universalist metaphor of less distorted perception but the pragmatist metaphor of evolutionary development. For the feminist as the pragmatist, the moral and epistemic world grows and changes with us (Rorty 1991).

Rorty's account of pragmatism corresponds to what Robert Talisse and Scott Aikin (2005) have termed "inquiry pragmatism," which they distinguish from "meaning

pragmatism.” On this distinction, meaning pragmatists focus on the pragmatic elucidation of concepts. That is, they seek to make ideas clear by interpreting concepts in terms of their possible effects in the world. By contrast, inquiry pragmatists are primarily interested in modes of inquiry, occurring not just in the laboratory but across the gamut of human endeavor.

The feminist pragmatism that emerged in the 1990s is deeply animated by this pragmatist conception of inquiry. Some common themes that emerge in that literature are inquiry as a social practice, the entanglement of knowledge with practice, and an emphasis on the perspective of the knower. For many feminist philosophers of the period, pragmatism’s conception of knowledge as situated and contingent was more appealing than the universalizing ideal of objectivity. Thus, Rooney sees feminism and pragmatism alike as rejecting *a priori* and fixed thinking (Rooney 1993); Duran regards both approaches as anti-foundational (Duran 1993), and Gatens-Robinson sees them both as challenging the dichotomous thinking of mainstream philosophy (Gatens-Robinson 1991). Duran puts it vividly: “The core area of intersection between pragmatism and feminism, then, seems to be that they both remind us of the ways in which we experienced life before talking about the experience became more important than the having of it” (Duran 1993: 168).

Further, pragmatism’s treatment of social action as a kind of inquiry and inquiry as a kind of social action aligns with and supports feminist social justice projects. This trend started to emerge most fully in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. See for instance Green’s “deep democracy” (Green 1999), McKenna’s vision of a feminist and pragmatist

utopia (McKenna 2001), and Sullivan's deployment of pragmatism to reveal the workings of white privilege (Sullivan 2006).

The third main line of scholarship within 1980s-early 2000s feminist pragmatism is the revival of historical antecedents. This work took the form of adopting and adapting canonical male pragmatists—especially Dewey—in the service of feminist interpretations and contemporary projects, but also of recovering neglected women pragmatists from the “classical pragmatism” period spanning the late 19th and early 20th centuries.²

This scholarship reveals that while feminist pragmatism was christened in the 1980s and 1990s, its real origins were a century earlier at the dawn of the Progressive Era. Figures who are increasingly included in this first wave of feminist pragmatism are Anna Julia Cooper, Jane Addams, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Ella Lyman Cabot, and Mary Parker Follett.

While they predated the term “feminism”, these thinkers’ attention to gender roles, inequality, families and children, and the private sphere mark them as feminist. For instance, Gilman devoted much of her work to the deleterious effects of domestic labor and confinement on women’s mental capacity. Cooper’s lifelong advocacy for the education of and rights for Black women make her one of the most important founders of Black feminism.

It is more challenging to include these figures in the pragmatist canon because they did not typically occupy the same roles or populate the same institutions as canonical male pragmatists. Pragmatism originated in the association of a group of 19th-century white male scholars who shared not only a cluster of viewpoints, but also a cluster of academic affiliations—especially with Harvard and Johns Hopkins. Since

women were not admitted to Harvard or Johns Hopkins until 1920 and 1970 respectively, women thinkers were absent from the soil from which pragmatism sprouted.

To be sure, most of the first wave feminist pragmatists I have listed had some connections with classic pragmatists. Cooper corresponded with W.E.B Du Bois, who studied at Harvard under William James and Josiah Royce, and who is himself increasingly regarded as a canonical pragmatist. Indeed, Du Bois quoted Cooper's work (albeit without attribution) in his own (Moody-Turner 2015: 51).

Jane Addams was a close associate and friend of John Dewey and influence upon his thought. Dewey taught a number of her books in his courses at the University of Chicago.

The self-educated Gilman is the only one of the figures discussed here not to have received a university education. However, she spent many months at Hull House, the settlement house that Jane Addams co-founded, and often spoke and corresponded with Addams.

Having studied at Harvard's sister college, Radcliffe, Cabot was a student and friend of Royce's, and both influenced her and was influenced by him. Royce read a draft of Cabot's *Everyday Ethics* and recommended she change the title to *Conduct and Power*, but Cabot retained her intended title in order to make plain "the pragmatic purpose" of her work (Kaag 2008: 148).

Among the early feminist pragmatists, Mary Parker Follett had the fewest connections to canonical pragmatists. Like Cabot, with whom she was friends, she attended Radcliffe. However, unlike Cabot, she seems not to have studied with Royce. Nevertheless, her work was influenced by Royce and James. That said, Follett resisted

having her work categorized under any particular school of thought, whether feminist or pragmatist (Whipps 2014: 406).

In short, due to the exclusionary character of the institutions in which classical pragmatism emerged, the genealogical case for counting these proto-feminist thinkers as pragmatists is somewhat tenuous. However, their work shows the unmistakable stamp of pragmatism. Each in their own way, these figures develop and deploy such pragmatist themes as standpoint, evolution, growth, fallibilism, community, and meliorism. Interestingly, due to their distinctive perspectives and roles, they often deploy them in quite different domains than the mainline pragmatists did.

The development and application of pragmatist themes by first wave feminist pragmatists are distinctive in two main ways. As mentioned, they often focused to a much greater degree than their male counterparts on gender, families and children, and the private sphere. Second, while they were philosophically sophisticated in their formation and methodology, they rarely participated in academic philosophy. All of the male classic pragmatists were philosophy professors of one stripe or another, but none of the first wave feminist pragmatists were. Thus, while their work was richly informed by philosophy, it took such forms as pedagogy, social work, management studies, and creative writing.

In some ways, the extra-philosophical, multidisciplinary character of early feminist pragmatism has proven an obstacle to its inclusion in the pragmatist canon. Mary Parker Follett, while influential in management schools, is rarely taught in philosophy classes or cited in philosophical scholarship—this despite an astonishing body of work that develops James's and Royce's (via Cabot's) thought in profound and novel ways.

This exclusion of early feminist pragmatists from the philosophical canon is a regrettable (though remediable) loss for academic philosophy. However, these figures' work outside of philosophy produced highly novel, generative work. For example—and this will be my focus for the remainder of this chapter—the first wave of feminist pragmatists were pioneers of narrative methods decades before the so-called “narrative turn.” To see this, let us consider, each in turn, the use of narrative in Gilman, Cooper, and Addams.

Gilman was a writer and social reformer, who took particular interest in the oppressive effects of the domestic sphere on women. Gilman argued that “it is not feminine qualities which distinguish the minds of women so sharply; it is the quality of domestic labor; they are heavily modified by kitchen service, by parlor imprisonment” (Qtd. in Upin 1993: 50).

She explored this theme throughout her astonishing corpus of scholarly and creative writing, which included a wide range of non-fiction books, poetry, plays, short stories, serials and novels. She is best known for her 1892 semi-autobiographical short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” which examines in grisly and unforgettable detail the harmful effects of domestic confinement on women's psyches and well-being.

In the story, a young married couple moves to a country house to allow the wife to undergo the “rest cure” for her “temporary nervous depression” (what we would now call post-partum depression). While the husband goes about his business, the wife's movements are limited to the upstairs nursery, where the confinement—symbolized by the room's yellow wallpaper—leads to the rapid and disastrous deterioration of her mental health. Unable to leave the room for weeks at a time except for brief intervals, the

wife/narrator becomes fixated on the oppressive features of the room—such as, bars on the windows and a gate at the top of the stairs—but in particular the drab yellow wallpaper. She becomes obsessed with every detail of the wallpaper; those details start to shift and eventually come to life in the form of a creeping female figure who starts to emerge in the pattern of the wallpaper. In the end, the narrator strips the wallpaper in an attempt to liberate the woman she believes to be trapped within it. In the process, she becomes the woman.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” brilliantly uses narrative as a method of pragmatist inquiry by making manifest the devastating consequences of the belief that women are weak and therefore require rest and isolation. To adopt that belief, Gilman’s narrative reveals, makes it a reality. That is, the conviction that women are frail and unstable is the very thing that produces their frailty and instability. While Gilman’s philosophical disposition is unmistakably pragmatist, both her use of fiction as a mode of philosophical inquiry and the topics to which she applies that lens are largely absent from her male pragmatist counterparts. Thus, Jane Upin characterizes Gilman as “even more pragmatist than Dewey...because she addressed problems he did not identify—much less confront” (Upin 1993: 38).

If Gilman was more pragmatist than Dewey, Anna Julia Cooper might be said to be more pragmatist than James. Born into slavery, Cooper studied mathematics and theology before pursuing a career as an educator of Black students and academic administrator. Her 1892 essay collection *A Voice From the South* focuses in the first half on the education of African American women and in the second half on the representation of African Americans.

The book ends with “The Gain From a Belief.” “Gain” champions belief as the well-spring of action against the skeptical tendency in philosophy, which Cooper regards as making “the universe an automaton, and man’s future—a coffin!” (Cooper 1892, 291). Cooper addresses an imagined philosophical interlocutor whom we first encounter in a busy marketplace “watching as from some lonely tower” (286) as around him a throng of people busy themselves in search of “wealth, fame, glory, bread” (286). She enters into an imagined dialogue with the philosopher, who characterizes the universe in cold, mechanistic terms. She urges him to direct his philosophical powers not merely to resisting material temptations, but to helping people in need. This dialogue prefaces Cooper’s extended plea for the productive function of belief.

In service of her argument, Cooper offers a compelling narrative of an enslaved man drawn to freedom by the North Star. “You may have learned that the pole star is twelve degrees from the pole and forbear to direct your course by it,” she writes (303).

The slave brother, however, from the land of oppression once saw the celestial beacon and dreamed not that it ever deviated from true North. He *believed* that *somewhere* under its beckoning light, lay a far away country where a man’s a man. He sets out with his heavenly guide before his face – would you tell him he is pursuing a wandering light? Is he the poorer for his ignorant hope? Are you the richer for your enlightened suspicion? (303)

Cooper tells us that there is a “noble work here and now” in helping people to “live *into*” a “conscious and culturable” existence “beyond our present experience” (303). The better life towards which belief compels us is not an afterlife but a better life on Earth. She quotes Wordsworth’s *Prelude*: we find our happiness not in Utopia, “but in this very world, which is the world of all of us” (303).

Four years before William James’s “Will to Believe” lecture, Cooper offered a rich argument for the legitimacy and usefulness of belief rather than skepticism as an

epistemic starting-point. V. Denise James has noted that (William) James's defense of the will to believe focuses on individual action, whereas Cooper's focus is action in community with others: "'While James's notion of belief and self-cultivation may work as a road to personal growth, for Cooper, belief and the actions that it entails are primarily social—for others, with others'" (James 2013: 43). Cooper's main point in "Gain", argues James, is to call believers to action, which remains a shared commitment of "most of us who call ourselves pragmatists" (37).

The final feminist pragmatist use of narrative we will look at is Addams's. I am not aware of any evidence that Cooper influenced Addams. However, there were deep similarities between them. Both were educators and social reformers, and both were active leaders in the Settlement movement—a late 19th to early 20th century movement in which settlement houses were established in poor, urban areas to provide a range of services to community members. Cooper was a trustee of and supervisor with the District of Columbia's Colored Settlement House, where she worked with vulnerable folks in the neighborhood. Jane Addams was the co-founder with Ellen Gates Starr of Chicago's Hull House. One of her most striking uses of narrative derives from her experiences at Hull House, and like "Gain" emphasizes beliefs' usefulness rather than their justification.

Hull House served a poor, immigrant neighborhood. Addams's thought is deeply inflected by her attention to the perspectives of those community members. In April of 1916, she published a popular article on the "The Devil-Baby at Hull House." Addams's article relays what happened when a rumor began to circulate that a devil baby had been born at Hull House. For weeks, people lined up around the block, hoping to see the baby (which, of course, did not exist), and eagerly discussing it. In the article, Addams

recounts listening in from her office on the conversations of old women in the queue below.

Addams was struck less by the women's credulity in the tale of a devil baby than by the ways in which they made meaning of the devil baby story, meaning that resonated with their own lives. In one particularly poignant example, a domestic violence victim saw in the devil baby a mechanism that helped her make sense of the abuse she had experienced:

You might say it's a disgrace to have your son beat you up for the sake of a bit of money you've earned by scrubbing—your own man is different—but I haven't the heart to blame the boy for doing what he's seen all his life, his father forever went wild when the drink was in him and struck me to the very day of his death. The ugliness was born in the boy as the marks of the Devil was born in the poor child up-stairs. (Addams 1916)

For Addams, the women's belief in the devil baby revealed their yearning for order and pattern in a hostile world that seemed on the face of it disordered. Their sense of participating in that order – painful as it was – helped to give them equanimity and served as a means of coping.

Addams's account of these conversations models what she called "sympathetic understanding" – the method she developed in order to take seriously the perspectives of the vulnerable and minoritized people Hull House served. Addams was deeply committed to democracy conceived as grounded in identification with the common lot. For Addams, this identification with the common lot requires centering on and taking seriously the perspectives of the community members themselves. Narrative is key to that project.

These feminist pragmatist deployments of narrative are exemplary of both inquiry pragmatism and meaning pragmatism. Through these three striking stories of the confined wife, the enslaved man looking North and the devil baby at Hull House, we can see the powerful way in which early feminist pragmatists used narrative as a method of engaging in pragmatist inquiry and of inviting the reader to participate in that inquiry for themselves. Through narrative, they thus opened pragmatism to readers and community members outside of the philosophical world even as that world remained largely closed to them.

However, each of these stories is also a project in elucidating meaning. It is a core tenet of pragmatism that the meaning of a concept consists of our conception of the practical consequences of that concept. For Gilman, the conception of women as weak and unstable has the practical consequence of rendering them just that. Cooper forcefully elucidates *belief* as that upon which one is prepared to act. Addams's interpretations of the Hull House women's beliefs about the devil baby focuses on the practical meaning those beliefs hold for the women themselves. Thus, while the feminist pragmatism of the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s is overwhelmingly inquiry pragmatism, we can discern within the narratives of the first wave of feminist pragmatists an embrace of meaning pragmatism.

This chapter itself offers a narrative – of feminist scholars in the 1980s and 1990s who saw in pragmatism a means of pursuing feminist projects, and of these same scholars' recovery of feminist pragmatist foremothers from a century earlier who had been excluded from both the pragmatist canon and the philosophical canon. What will the next chapter of that story look like? What should it look like?

Since the early 2000s, feminist pragmatists have continued their work on and in social epistemology, philosophy of science, and social justice, with ever broadening domains of application. In recent years, V. Denise James's Black feminist visionary pragmatism (James 2014) and Amrita Banerjee's transnational feminist pragmatism (Banerjee 2012) have charted important new paths for feminist pragmatists. There remains considerable opportunity and need for much more feminist pragmatist work that actively decenters whiteness and the so-called "Global North." Celia Bardwell Jones (2012) draws connections between classical pragmatism and Latina feminist theorists and thereby suggests the possibility of the emergence of a Latina feminist pragmatism, although, as far as I know, such a pragmatism has yet to robustly emerge.

Two areas of contemporary feminist thought from which feminist pragmatism remains comparatively disengaged are transfeminism/trans philosophy and feminist social metaphysics. The reason for this may well be the strong inquiry pragmatism tendency within feminist pragmatism. Much (but not all) trans philosophy and most social metaphysics are concerned less with modes of inquiry than with the meaning of such concepts as *sex*, *gender*, *man* and *woman*. Meaning pragmatism offers rich possibilities for trans feminism and feminist metaphysics because it offers a mode of elucidating the meaning of concepts that resists essentialism, focuses on practical consequences in the world, and regards concepts and world as co-evolving.

If, as I hope, feminist pragmatists increasingly take up anti-oppressive scholarship that centers on racialized and trans people, they would do well to echo first wave feminist pragmatists' use of narrative as a mode of critique, resistance, and emancipation. Now as then, stories provide powerful mechanisms both of inquiry and of elucidating meaning.

Now as then, a story's truth consists in its usefulness in helping us both navigate the world and change it.

REFERENCES

- Addams, J. 1916. "The Devil-Baby at Hull House." *The Atlantic*.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1916/10/the-devil-baby-at-hull-house/305428/>. Accessed July 20, 2021.
- Banerjee, A. 2012. "Dynamic Borders, Dynamic Identities: A Pragmatist Ontology of 'Groups' for Critical Multicultural Transnational Feminisms." M. Hamington and C. Bardwell-Jones, Eds. *Contemporary Feminist Pragmatism*. New York: Routledge, 71-89.
- Bardwell-Jones, C. 2012. "Border Communities and Royce: The Problem of Translation and Reinterpreting Feminist Empiricism." M. Hamington and C. Bardwell-Jones, Eds. *Contemporary Feminist Pragmatism*. New York: Routledge, 57-70.
- Cooper, AJ. 1892. "The Gain From a Belief." *A Voice From the South*. Xenia, OH: The Aldine Printing House, 286-304.
- Duran, J. 1993. "The Intersection of Pragmatism and Feminism." *Hypatia* 8.2: 159–171.
- Gatens-Robinson, E. 1991. "Dewey and the Feminist Successor Science Project." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 27.4: 417–433.
- Gilman, C. 1892. "The Yellow Wallpaper." *New England Magazine*: 647-656.
<https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/theliteratureofprescription/exhibitionAssets/digitalDocs/The-Yellow-Wall-Paper.pdf>. Accessed July 20, 2021.
- Green, J. 1999. *Deep Democracy: Community, Diversity and Transformation*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

- James, VD. 2013. "Reading Anna J. Cooper with William James: Black Feminist Visionary Pragmatism, Philosophy's Culture of Justification, and Belief." *The Pluralist* 8.3: 32–45.
- . 2014. "Musing: A Black Feminist Philosopher: Is That Possible?" *Hypatia* 29.1: 189-195.
- Kaag, J. 2008. "Women and forgotten movements in American philosophy: The work of Ella Lyman Cabot and Mary Parker Follett." *Transactions of the Charles S Peirce Society* 44.1: 134–157.
- McKenna, E. 2001. *The Task of Utopia: A Pragmatist and Feminist Perspective*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Moody-Turner, S. 2015. "'Dear Doctor Du Bois': Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Gender Politics of Black Publishing." *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 40.3: 47–68.
- Rooney, P. 1993. "Feminist-Pragmatist Revisionings of Reason, Knowledge, and Philosophy." *Hypatia* 8.2: 15–37.
- Rorty, R. 1991. "Feminism and Pragmatism." *Michigan Quarterly Review* 30.2: 231–258.
- Seigfried, C.H. 1996. *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sullivan, S. 2006. *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Talisse, R. and S. Aikin. 2005. "Why Pragmatists Cannot Be Pluralists." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 41.1: 101–18.

Upin, J. 1993. "Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Instrumentalism beyond Dewey." *Hypatia* 8.2:
38-63.

Whipps, J. 2014. "A Pragmatist Reading of Mary Parker Follett's Integrative Process."
Transactions of the Charles S Peirce Society 50.3: 405–424.

Biography: Shannon Dea is Professor of Philosophy and Dean of Arts at University of Regina, Canada. The author of *Beyond the Binary: Thinking About Sex and Gender* (2016), she lives on Treaty 4 territory and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

Word count (excluding abstract and author biography): 3997 words.

¹ Thanks to Matt Silk and Jay Solanki for their research assistance.

² Charlotte Haddock Seigfried's work has been especially valuable. See, for instance Siegfried 1996.