Feminists and pragmatists
A radical future?
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In his provocatively titled 1989 book *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* Cornel West speculates that pragmatism has failed to attract significant numbers of women because of ‘its aggressive and self-confident stance toward the realities of the spheres of power [that] has been virtually the possession of males in patriarchal America’. He asks:

Does American pragmatism put too much of a premium on an aggressive will? Is it but another expression of patriarchal culture? Will the assertive agency of women from different classes and cultures shun this mode of intellectual expression in the future? These questions remain unanswered at present.

The issue, for West, ‘is how American women will reshape and revise pragmatism’; how women’s ‘appeal to their own experiences can enrich and promote an Emersonian culture of creative democracy’.1

Charlene Seigfried, in her impressively ambitious 1996 book *Feminism and Pragmatism: Reweaving the Social Fabric*, argues that far from ‘shun[ning] this mode of intellectual expression’ feminists can indeed ‘reshape and revise pragmatism’ to generate revisionary, transformative philosophy. She suggests that feminist theorists of the ‘second wave’ who eschew a priori, ‘god’s eye view’ analyses in favour of relocating inquiry within the concrete exigencies of human – and especially women’s – lives already occupy an epistemic, ethical and political territory contiguous with that mapped out by such pragmatists as John Dewey and William James, so that feminist ‘gathering’ expeditions could produce useful cross-fertilizations. Seigfried traces a continuity between ‘first wave’ feminist projects contemporaneous with, influential in, and informed by the work of John Dewey, William James and W.E.B. Du Bois, and late-twentieth-century feminisms. Pragmatists and present-day feminists, she contends, have good reasons to unite around a history of commonalities that promise mutual philosophical enrichment.

Taking exception to West’s unquestioning adherence to a ‘venerable tradition of tracing influence “through the fathers”’, noting his failure to ‘break with the tradition of male intellectual genealogies’,2 Seigfried traces another strong lineage through the eminent women who worked with, thought with, wrote with, and taught with the male pragmatists whose names and works are constitutive of ‘American pragmatism’. This lineage reveals continuities ‘through the mothers and sisters’ with feminist debates of the 1990s, bringing to light a rich, yet hitherto obscured, record both of independent philosophical creativity and of extensive collaboration with the principal male pragmatists on the part of such women as Jane Addams, Elsie Ridley Clapp, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, and Ella Flague Young, among many others. This reclamation of an underacknowledged heritage is one of the book’s most impressive achievements. Seigfried traces interweavings of themes, methods, problems and theories central to feminist and to pragmatist philosophies, arguing thus for combining forces and resources around a consonance in purpose and practice.

This project demands many simultaneous chartings and cataloguings. To mention only the most salient: Seigfried has at once to chart the course of American pragmatism through the doctrines of its readily visible male protagonists and the works and deeds of its much less visible or audible female practitioners who figure mainly – in canonical histories of pragmatism
– as the underlabourers (in Marilyn Frye’s sense), the imperceptible yet *sine qua non* backdrop to the work and lives of men. She has to extract from the writings of a by-no-means homogeneous group of philosophers a catalogue of theories, methodological assumptions and presuppositions through which to conjoin their theories and practices as pragmatist. She has to show how, despite West’s aligning pragmatism with the interests and ideas of patriarchal America, it can be a resource for feminists who read past its androcentred, white-male-supremacist stance. She has also to work with a conception of feminism sufficiently nuanced to remain ‘true to’ the multiplicity and diversity of feminisms at century’s end, yet sufficiently aggregated to authorize a feminist label for a collective mining of the resources pragmatism offers. And remaining cognizant of that same multiplicity, she has to ensure that an emergent feminist-pragmatism amounts to more than a white affluent women’s version of a white affluent men’s philosophical project.

My reading of these chartings is prompted by more than a detached scholarly disinterest. For many years, colleagues – Seigfried among them – have discerned affinities between my work and the spirit of pragmatism. Even in my first, not-yet-feminist book (*Epistemic Responsibility*), a colleague suggested that I forestall comments that I had unwittingly ‘rediscovered pragmatism’ with a textual acknowledgement of commonalities. Somewhat disingenuously, then, I noted a consonance between the ‘normative realism’ I was advocating, and a concern common to such pragmatists as Dewey, Peirce and James ‘to know and understand the world well’. I suggested that ‘pragmatism is really much more a theory about knowing, in the sense of ‘finding one’s way about the world’, than it is a ‘theory of truth’. Slender as my discussion of pragmatism then was, these proto-naturalistic claims withstand the scrutiny of Seigfried’s readings of pragmatism, to the point where they indeed signal a continuity between the naturalized/socialized aspects of ‘epistemic responsibility’ and issues of philosophical concern to the pragmatists I have mentioned. More recently, with reference to my interrogations of Quinean (scientistic) naturalism in developing an ecologically modelled naturalism, Seigfried has again found points of overlap between my work and the pragmatism she recommends to feminists. Consequently, her book prompts me to ask general questions about what feminist epistemologists could gain from making common cause with pragmatists, and more particular ones about whether my work as I read it is as close to pragmatism as Seigfried’s readings of both have sometimes placed it.

It would be difficult to endorse ‘Emersonian’ democracy as the goal of the exercise because of its hyper-masculinist character; nor do I, a Canadian, unequivocally count among the ‘American women’ West writes about. My distance from them, even as I speak and often find my philosophical place with them, may signal something about the scope of pragmatism, be it classical, feminist, modern, or postmodern. Is pragmatism, after all, so quintessentially American that its theoretical pertinence blurs at America’s borders? Is this an effect of Dewey’s claims about pragmatism’s special salience to ‘ourselves living not merely in the early twentieth century but in the United States’?, his insistence that philosophy in America must ‘somehow bring to consciousness America’s own needs and its own implicit principle of successful action’? Does pragmatism’s being self-consciously ‘of this world’ then limit it to its particular, specific world? I have as yet no answer to these questions, but I think a feminist-pragmatist conversation has to incorporate what Foucault calls ‘a critique of what we are saying, thinking and doing through a historical ontology of ourselves’: a radical questioning of who ‘we’ are who claim a place in relation to pragmatism. In what follows, my remarks divide into observations on the lineage and the legacy that shape such a conversation; I then try to think about its radical future.

**The lineage**

In the good (?) old days when it raised no eyebrows to think of a philosopher’s thought springing from a place in the middle of his forehead, bypassing the ‘merely subjective’ circumstances that made him and his philosophy possible, it was acceptable to turn critical-constructive engagement with a theory into a resource for successor inquiries without asking whether its maker’s misogyny or his madness (Nietzsche), or his Nazi alliances (Heidegger) infected the ideas on which revisionings sensitive to these very issues might draw. Prohibitions on *ad hominem* were very nearly absolute. Now, feminists in the second wave have become more skilled at moving in and out of philosophical systems, drawing on their promise, refusing their damaged and damaging associations. Paradoxically perhaps, in a postmodern era in which selves are multiple and fragmented, and should be able to keep separate their disparate and even contradictory projects, there is a stronger imperative for a coherence that makes appropriations more difficult, and requires them to be more responsible. It is no longer easy to ignore,
say, Heidegger’s Nazism: it is pertinent to consider whether \textit{Dasein} is ontologically predisposed to the moves that issued in its creator’s complicity with National Socialism. And so too with pragmatism: its feminist would-be appropriators have to face James’s relegation even of the women he loved and admired to the underlabourer position, and of their pragmatist ‘contributions’ to products of their womanly attributes; Dewey’s failure to notice ‘that he was privileging a masculine perspective’ in what Seigfried calls his ‘gendered discourse’,\textsuperscript{10} which remains androcentred despite his best social emancipatory intentions. None of these issues is new, all of them are difficult, and dangerous.\textsuperscript{11} Thus gleanings have to be piecemeal, selective; to take into account the constitutive effects of situated subjectivities in making, claiming and circulating knowledge. Seigfried’s book exposes many of these problems: it takes them on critically and constructively, even in recommending pragmatism to feminists.

Yet a tension runs through the text, captured in Seigfried’s contrast between Simone de Beauvoir’s well-known remark: ‘Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth’,\textsuperscript{12} and Dewey’s comment: ‘it is natural to men to take that which is of chief value to them at the time as the real’.\textsuperscript{13} Dewey, Seigfried notes, unself-consciously assumes that ‘men’ is generic; de Beauvoir means, quite specifically, men and not women. The tension marked in this contrast is apparent throughout this lineage, recalling West’s remarks about ‘patriarchal culture’, urging feminist readers to examine the limits of the principle of charity they have to invoke in order to \textit{read past} the pseudo-generics embedded in classical pragmatist texts. (Dewey, Seigfried notes, ‘spoke more accurately than he knew when he defined experiencing as what men do, feel, value, and imagine’. ‘For all his sensitivity to different angles of vision [he] does not finally recognize how much his philosophic perspective derives its strength from the fact that it is a view from a privileged center.’\textsuperscript{14}) How far can feminists ignore the practical personal-political effects of lives that kept their female collaborators and cohabitators in underlabourer positions, especially in a philosophy that locates itself down on the ground, where lives are lived and the consequences of inquiry are allowed to matter? The problem is not new for feminist philosophers: drawing on a long, unrelievably masculine and androcentered Western philosophical tradition requires them always to work within such tensions in their salvage and reconstruction projects.

But ironically, such tensions pull more urgently in relation to pragmatists than to philosophers who hold their inquiries apart from the mundane events and patterns of the everyday. The very move that generates their clearest appeal to feminists working with ‘desublimated’\textsuperscript{15} conceptions of philosophy submits salient parts of pragmatism’s ‘politics of the everyday’ to searching critique. So the tale Seigfried tells is ambiguous in the recommendations it generates: even in its focus on Dewey, whose life and works come together in a position feminists could endorse with the least compromise. An alliance with James would entail more serious compromises in gender politics: in part, ironically, \textit{because of} his notably ‘feminine’ style, which in the very act of claiming the label attests to an ambivalent relationship with a stereotyped feminine that cannot be mistaken for a proto-feminism. Seigfried elaborates no continuities between feminism and Peirce, whom she counts among ‘the least feminist of all the classical American philosophers’;\textsuperscript{16} while her readings of W.E.B. Du Bois prompt her reader (= this reader) to want more: here, as West also suggests,\textsuperscript{17} there is real promise for the multiply difference-sensitive projects of the late twentieth century.

Readings past androcentrism and occasional misogyny (James, Peirce) have also to determine – recalling Frye – how to read the stagehands’ stories positively, inspirationally, given the structures that held them behind the scenes, requiring their acquiescence within a patriarchal social-domestic order: the invisibility of Peirce’s first wife in histories of pragmatism is a poignant example.\textsuperscript{18} Yet Seigfried tells these women’s stories as heroic tales of voices that refused to be muted and feminist practice that
refused to be thwarted even though they failed, in the main, to claim the enduring public acknowledgement on which knowledge, in the end, depends. Because they had usually to speak in private or in feminized schoolroom settings, theirs is a muted legacy.

My point is not that these tensions and ambiguities prohibit feminist-pragmatist collaboration, but that they demarcate the territory where it has to work. The lineage Seigfried traces suggests that critical feminist rereadings of Dewey or Gilman can contribute most straightforwardly to feminist revisionary projects— as Lisa Heldke and Ann Palmeri earlier proposed— while a larger feminist-pragmatist union will have to be deeply radicalized to deal with the negative pull of these tensions.

The legacy
Resisting the Social Darwinist conclusion that it is because it has been ‘tried and found wanting’ that American pragmatism has failed to occupy a prominent place in canonical Western philosophy, Charlene Seigfried represents it as marginalized precisely for its commitment to principles and practices central also to late-twentieth-century feminism. Thus a successful union would be a means of establishing a place closer to the centre for both positions.

Pragmatists, Seigfried recounts, developed early and persistent critiques of scientific positivism; they resisted splitting facts from values; reclaimed the epistemic and experiential import of aesthetics; linked dominant discourses to social domination; reconnected theory and practice; claimed the theoretical primacy of concrete experience; repudiated the spectator stance of philosophical indifference; and addressed the social-political effects of the social sciences. The package is in many respects attractive. Yet one omission that must give feminists pause is (male) pragmatists’ failure successfully to counter the public man/private woman dichotomy that still infects the societies in which pragmatists and feminists devise and enact their theories of knowledge, ontology, morality and politics; and this despite Dewey’s having developed ‘a very specific theory of the self and community’ that departs from the individualism on which a public/private split commonly relies. The sedimentation of that dichotomy in the ‘absolute presuppositions’ of classical pragmatism allowed even Dewey, despite his keenly experimentalist social commitments, to tolerate the calamities and injustices that returned his closest female collaborator— his wife— to a life in the ‘private’ background. Indeed, Seigfried shows that also in his emancipatory educational writings, Dewey failed to notice ‘the absurdity of imagining that children’s social environment is constituted exclusively, even primarily, of men’. So the public/private split works oddly in both directions. I do not mean to suggest that androcentric habits are easily eradicated, or that a philosopher is answerable for failing to think in a conceptual frame that is not of her/his time: my reference to absolute presuppositions makes just this point. But the time-boundedness of a social emancipatory project that overlooks the possibility of emancipating itself from these assumptions has also to be addressed, particularly when its articulator is on record for his openness to innovative, experimentalist thinking, and when provocations to such experiments are there in his life. It is for such reasons that ‘a historical ontology of ourselves’ belongs within inquiry that pushes at the boundaries of instituted social imaginaries.

Where Dewey’s recommendations for ‘a recovery of philosophy’ have the greatest feminist appeal is in his analyses of experience, which diverge radically in their detail and import from the thin, sanitized, experience of ‘abstract masculinity’ on which the epistemologies of the Anglo-American mainstream rely. Nor does experience function merely as one concept among many, for Dewey: the reconfiguring concept he proposes would effect fundamental transformations throughout epistemology.

Critiques of the conception of experience that shapes Anglo-American epistemology have been central to feminist interrogations of orthodox epistemology’s self-certainty as a project of disinterested inquiry committed to establishing a priori, normative conditions for achieving and evaluating ‘knowledge in general’. Feminists have contested epistemology’s self-presentation as an inquiry apart, prescribing from the experiences and circumstances of generic, infinitely replicable knowers who pursue knowledge deemed good ‘for its own sake’, equally available to any knower equivalently placed. They have interrogated the assumption that any and every knower could, as a matter of course, be equivalently placed, with equivalent access to the experiences of which ‘knowledge proper’ is made. They have deplored the rift between the physical-science-derived model on which epistemically sanctioned knowledge must be based and the experiences of would-be knowers across a range of locations and circumstances where knowledge is indeed vital to their capacity to live well, showing that the scientific model plainly exceeds its reach when it is invoked to regulate or adjudicate everyday epistemic practice. Seigfried shows that many of these criticisms...
might lose their sting if feminists were to acknowledge pragmatism’s contribution to epistemology.

Why, then, might Dewey’s eccentric (=ex-centric) conception of experience function as an entry point through which feminist epistemologists could make common cause with pragmatism? Most simply, because he rejects many of the features of experience in orthodox empiricism and positivism that have drawn feminist critique, and because his reconfigured conception of experience is often consonant with feminist reconstructions.

For Dewey, ‘Experience is no slipping along in a path fixed by inner consciousness’: it is no mere spectator, but a matter of ‘simultaneous doings and sufferings’, ‘the intercourse of a living being with its physical and social environment’. Far from being primarily psychical, subjective, experience attests to ‘a genuinely objective world which enters into the actions and sufferings of men [sic]’. It is neither punctiform, static, nor passively receptive, but an active involvement; it is ‘experimental, an effort to change the given’; it is ‘pregnant with connections’, ‘full of inference’. It is ‘undergone in connexion with activities whose import lies in their objective consequences – their bearing upon future experiences’. And those consequences are visible in the ‘successful activities of the organism’ working within and in connection with the environment to effect changes that enable life to endure, that turn ‘hindrances … into means’.

Experience as Dewey configures it generates a secularized – indeed, a naturalized and socialized – picture of scientific knowledge that neither aspirles to the purity of abstract universalism nor represents itself as a master narrative, hegemonically paradigmatic of knowledge ‘in general’. Scientific inquiry is, for him, a located practice stimulated by how something – he takes water as an example – enters into experience, acquires meaning, needs to be known ‘in connection with a forecast of the consequences it will effect when responded to’ in a natural event of knowing. Pragmatism, he maintains, takes ‘its stand with science … [and] also with daily life’. Thus for Dewey, ‘the directive presence of future possibilities in dealing with existent conditions is what is meant by knowing’: man the seer gives way to man the foreseer, equipped with an inherently forward-looking and creative intelligence. Intelligence thus conceived can ‘liberate and liberalize action’. The epistemic agent whose intelligence is thus invoked is in and of this world, socially evolving as ‘an intellectually free and responsible individual’ whose knowing is ‘about’ and conjoined with his community and environment.

Knowledge, then, as Dewey represents it, is neither a priori nor disinterested; he is sceptical of the very idea of ‘knowledge in general’ abstracted from the particularities of active, engaged experience. Traditional accounts, he maintains, ‘have not been empirical, but have been deductions, from unnamed premises, of what experience must be’. In Dewey’s view, people seek knowledge not for ‘its own sake’, but for the sake of solving problems that originate in concrete experience and demand responses in particular circumstances and for a variety of reasons, among which disinterestedness scarcely figures.

Even this brief summary reveals why feminists could find a resource in this resituating of epistemology within the real world, where knowing makes a difference to people’s lives. This is no small shift, for it relocates the whole epistemological project. Brought down to earth, relocated in a lived, organic environment, reason and knowledge are ‘desublimated’, as they also are in a naturalized-socialized feminist epistemology that avoids scientism, contests a hegemonic social imaginary of dominance and instrumentality, centres its attention on knowing as responsible, ‘thoughtful practice’ and works toward realizing the communal-ecological possibilities that a successor epistemology, as I conceive it, has to offer. For feminists, pragmatists’ engagement with these very questions about ‘the epistemological turn’ reveals that malestream philosophy has not, after all, been seamlessly impervious to critical-constructive voices making arguments prescient of and consonant with their own. At the same time, gauging the extent of the commonality, assessing the inclusions and omissions that persist in the work of many pragmatists, works to sharpen feminist critiques of an androcentrism that runs even through projects so close to theirs.

This last point returns me to the tensions within which feminists drawn to (Deweyian) pragmatism have to work. Some of them are apparent in Dewey’s essay, others in Seigfried’s text. Like my earlier points, many of them are about generics: in this instance about how experience and experiencers, for all the radicality of their relocations, still function as generic. At the same time, gauging the extent of the commonality, assessing the inclusions and omissions that persist in the work of many pragmatists, works to sharpen feminist critiques of an androcentrism that runs even through projects so close to theirs.
Seigfried is aware of the tensions that subjectivity issues generate for pragmatism. She notes that historically women in pragmatism, even in their validations of personal experience and their solidarity with other women, had no access to ‘explicit and sustained criticism of sexism’.35 They had at their disposal no theoretical apparatus within which to develop social-structural analyses that could reveal how their experiences were mediated and shaped by, and enacted within, a patriarchal social order. In consequence, there was no way around the earnest self-blaming, self-improvement cycle that so easily holds women ensnared. They could invoke only ‘personal differences’, insufficient individual effort, to explain their ongoing underlabourer status. Politically, appeals to, affirmations of, experience are still blunt instruments when they have to be uttered into rhetorical spaces insufficiently attuned to acknowledge them. Without social-political uptake, women’s ‘assertive agency’ alone (recalling West) is not enough.

The point connects with issues about individualism and community. Throughout the book, Seigfried claims that experience in pragmatist philosophy is not just individual but communal, community-based.36 That basis enables pragmatists to distance themselves from working with the model of the isolated individual who is the epistemic agent in Anglo-American philosophy, embodying abstract masculinity, and claiming single occupancy of the epistemic terrain. Seigfried offers evidence, throughout the text, to support her contention that pragmatism undercuts individualism. Thus for Dewey, the ‘social development of the self’ as Seigfried presents it is not confined to childhood but extends throughout human lives and environmentally responsive practices to subvert ‘the essentialism of Enlightenment models of human nature’.37

I wonder, however, how far that subversion goes. For Seigfried appears at the same time to commend Dewey’s appeal to a ‘common humanity’; and she worries that ‘the more women are differentiated as women, the less they embody the characteristics of humanity’.38 In these instances, as elsewhere in the text, she makes more claims on a definable, specifiable ‘humanity’ homogenized beneath its differences than I think post-individualistic feminism can bear. The politics of ‘we-saying’ are pertinent here. Dewey refers to how ‘we’ live (as in ‘we live forward’; in the ‘obstacles that confront us’; he refers also to ‘the progress of the race’39). In so doing he is, as elsewhere, writing within the idiom of his time, for which, as I have suggested, it is difficult to fault him. Seigfried is indeed aware of the problems that attend efforts to include women ‘in the seemingly inclusive we’ of Dewey’s prose. Yet her references to ‘we’ also prompt questions about who we are, with the same urgency, as for example in her allusion to ‘the goals we take to be most desirable’ in a passage that reinvokes the dislocated transparent self integral to a too-easily-assumed ‘common humanity’ that is indeed American and affluent, after all.40 The idea of experience as something ‘we’ – whoever we are – readily understand and to which we have direct access as a privileged source of knowledge, indeed the very possibility of uttering that uncontestable ‘we’, cannot be taken for granted. Thus on matters of the relations among experience, knowledge and subjectivity I am left with the worry that the pragmatism Seigfried serves up is conceptually too narrow to offer what I, at least, would want from it. Here an elaborated ontology of the subject is conspicuous in its absence.

Seigfried’s endorsement of Deweyian reconstructions of ‘experience’ also raises questions for me about the pull between a tyranny of ‘experientialism’ immune to discussion and the persistent tyrannies of incredulity, denigration and distrust that too often discount women’s testimonial accounts of their ‘own’ experiences.41 Seigfried rightly applauds Dewey’s rejection of ‘the subjectification of primary experience’; but in reading this rejection as an argument for ‘acknowledging the reality of the material conditions, the objectivity, of women’s experience’ I think she grants Dewey too much.42 The tension here is not just of Seigfried’s making, for it runs through feminist debates of the 1990s, about how to take women’s experiences seriously – very seriously – yet how respectfully, responsibly, to affirm their contestability by engaging interrogatively with them. It is about how not to be drawn into assuming that, because of age-old patterns of incredulity, women’s experiences have to be taken at face value, as sacrosanct, objective, answerable to interpretation only at the expense of doing violence. Arguing that women’s experiences are objective, or that they are at once subjective and knowledgeable, could indeed count as a step toward breaking this tension; but a full acknowledgement of the mediation, all the way down, of social-cultural-economic-racial-material structures requires a more nuanced and indeed radical conceptual move than a substitution of ‘subjectivity’ for ‘objectivity’ can allow. Both terms are so heavily laden with theoretical baggage that even the move of locating experience (still singular) within historical process does not go far enough in showing how experiences, experiencing organic selves, are materially, socially constituted – and yet not deterministically. Thus I am also more wary than Seigfried is about the
Who needs who?

The larger questions that my engagement with Seigfried’s book occasion are about how to read masculinist/androcentred philosophy toward a radical feminist future: about why one would do it, what the benefits are, how important it is for feminist projects to locate themselves in relation to canonical philosophy. It is intuitively obvious that the relationship cannot merely be one of entering on its own terms a lineage which is still, largely, ‘of the fathers’. Yet it is a commonplace that philosophy is made and remade by its history, hence that in entering these debates ‘as philosophers’ feminists claim a place within a mode of inquiry that is, in a significant sense, its history. Debates are generated and framed in relation to older debates; innovative proposals establish their credentials by rehearsing their relation to earlier questions, or questions from elsewhere; critique takes issue with inquiries that have gone awry, by the standards of the new, in the parts of the old that create the spaces that make critical-constructive debate possible. Thus feminist philosophy of the second wave began in interrogations of a tradition whose hitherto invisible androcentricity, and inhospitability to women, feminists have continued to expose as they peel away layer after layer of the philosophical onion. At stake in the lineage which is still, largely, ʻof the fathers’. Yet it is a commonplace that philosophy is made and remade by its history, hence that in entering these debates ‘as philosophers’ feminists claim a place within a mode of inquiry that is, in a significant sense, its history. Debates are generated and framed in relation to older debates; innovative proposals establish their credentials by rehearsing their relation to earlier questions, or questions from elsewhere; critique takes issue with inquiries that have gone awry, by the standards of the new, in the parts of the old that create the spaces that make critical-constructive debate possible. Thus feminist philosophy of the second wave began in interrogations of a tradition whose hitherto invisible androcentricity, and inhospitability to women, feminists have continued to expose as they peel away layer after layer of the philosophical onion. At stake in the inventive parts of successor projects is developing a conceptual apparatus with sufficient explanatory power to enable understanding, revision, transformation. Working with and through kindred modes of inquiry opens out new conceptual spaces, shows where already-tried innovations and positional shifts have led, enables discussion across and not just within established commitments, showing how insights that do not stretch to account for matters salient in successor projects can sometimes be taken in different directions, discarded, rethought. Practitioners thus avoid reinventing a wheel that is well turned and able to bear the weight it has to carry forward. Such conversations across theoretical commitments can reveal by analogy and disanalogy what – in this case – a feminist philosopher as ‘woman the gatherer’ can take should she decide to go further into the conceptual-theoretical spaces that pragmatism opens out. (Here ‘woman the gatherer’ contrasts with ‘man the hunter’, ironically cast as the principal actor in adversarial practices of engaging with philosophical positions principally to attack and discredit them.) As always, there are dangers: this time of claiming a place in a male intellectual genealogy when the female builders of that same legacy are so thoroughly occluded in those of its forms that have survived the test of time. Such cautionary recognitions perpetuate the tensions I mention earlier, suggesting that it could be better for women to remain on the borders, as gatherers adding their gleanings to a growing feminist store out of which they are already well advanced in concocting innovative, transformative theory and practice. They urge an ongoing healthy scepticism within and in relation to feminist-pragmatist projects.

What position, then, could feminists – I as a feminist – occupy in relation to pragmatism? These are large questions to which I can offer only tentative responses here. To ‘pragmatism as such’ for ‘feminists as such’ there is no ready answer. It is from aspects of Dewey’s philosophy, and from Gilman and Du Bois, that feminist affinities worth gathering emerge for me from Seigfried’s book, as feminists such as Lynn Nelson, Nellie MacKay, Phyllis Rooney, Lisa Heldke and Margaret Radin also have claimed. Dewey locates knowing within human lives, takes for granted connections between knowledge and ethics, art as experience, epistemic communities, education; Gilman insists on the political force of the economic and public/private implications of feminist inquiry and activism; Du Bois opens a point of entry to questions of racial difference pertinent still, and more urgently, at the end of this century.

Yet there are some less desirable leftovers. Prominent among them is instrumentality: a contestable issue both for pragmatists and for would-be pragmatist sympathizers who are looking for renewed conceptual tools for thinking about reason and rationality,
knowledge and informed practice. (Seigfried notes that ‘Pragmatists explain … pluralism in points of view as evidence that all theories are instrumental. They are cognitive means of handling experiences satisfactorily for our purposes.’) Such appeals to instrumental outcomes have to be reinterpreted with a large measure of feminist scepticism in view of the alignments of ‘instrumental reason’ with specific readings of affluent masculinity, amply documented by Nancy Hartsock and Genevieve Lloyd. Evelyn Fox Keller details the effects of an instrumentality in physical science that yields a mechanistic, power-infused working picture of the natural and social world that is reductive and oppressive in its allegiance to a scientism to which pragmatists ought, *ex hypothesi*, to take exception.

The issues of power invoked here are not just about power as West refers to it, where it is someone’s/some group’s ‘possession’ (= males in patriarchal America) but a more ubiquitous, Foucauldian power, dispersed throughout the social order, reinforcing patterns of acknowledging and silencing the very experience to which Dewey appeals: of public credibility and private invisibility that cannot be erased by democratic resolve alone. Uneven distributions of epistemic authority even in the alleged democracy of the process remain insufficiently addressed in these readings of pragmatism. For my work I need a sense that the social emancipatory message is more than, and markedly different from, an argument for equal, democratically distributed places and possibilities for everyone in a march toward homogeneous self-realization within a social order where the pieces may indeed be moved around to make space for the hitherto ‘excluded’: I need evidence that those spaces and the ‘goods’ available within them are radically reconceived. The specificities of radically different subjectivities have to be addressed, and too-hasty applause for pragmatist commitments to communal inquiry withheld until it becomes clear that this community is indeed significantly more than the sum of its individual, self-actualizing parts.

Can twentieth-century feminists, then, count themselves among the progeny of classical pragmatism even if they refuse to behave as dutiful daughters, refuse to ignore pragmatist silences on issues of racial, gendered and class subordination? If they can enter a pragmatist frame only as rebellious inheritors of an ambivalently hospitable legacy against which they have frequently to rebel, then what have they to gain from the label? If pragmatism does not have these resources, many versions of feminism already have them in abundance: so perhaps the most significant conclusion that emerges from *Feminism and Pragmatism* is that pragmatism needs feminism even more than feminism needs pragmatism. Seigfried’s urgings that feminists profit from and build upon pragmatist-feminist continuities and commonalities go principally in one direction: from pragmatism to feminism. Although the thrust of her argument is indeed that twentieth-century feminists can (recalling West’s phrase) ‘reshape and revise pragmatism’, she devotes less space to showing how self-identified present-day male pragmatists such as Quine, Goodman, Putnam and Rorty could benefit from a constructive-critical engagement within the social emancipatory projects of feminist and other post-colonial philosophy. As I see it, the possibility of a radical future depends as much on two-way conversations, negotiations and constructive critiques as on intelligent, ecologically sensitive gathering expeditions.

### Notes


7. Of course there are influences beyond American’s shores: pragmatists have travelled, and Bertrand Russell’s engagement with William James’s Neutral Monism is well known. But I find these less noteworthy than pragmatism’s decidedly American flavour.


11. I allude to Michel Foucault’s comment: ‘My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do’ (in the interview ‘On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress’, in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd edn, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1983, p. 231).

15. The term is Sabina Lovibond’s in ‘The End of Morality?’, in Kathleen Lennon and Margaret Whitford, eds, Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology, Routledge, London, 1994. Lovibond claims that twentieth-century epistemology ‘works with a conception of reason that has been “irrevocably desublimated” … revealed … in all its historical and cultural particularity’ (p. 72).
18. See in this regard Jane S. Upin, ‘Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Instrumentalism beyond Dewey’, Hypatia, vol. 8, no. 2, Spring 1993, p. 59 n. 13, where she comments: ‘The history of philosophy would require some significant revision if someone could trace C.S. Peirce’s pragmatism, not just to his reading of Kant, but also to M.F. Peirce’s material feminism.’
22. Pragmatism and Feminism, p. 92.
23. The phrase is R.G. Collingwood’s, who writes: ‘An absolute presupposition is one which stands, relatively to all questions to which it is related, as a presupposition, never as an answer’ (An Essay on Metaphysics (1939), Gateway Edition, Chicago, 1972, p. 31; italics in original). Absolute presuppositions, which bear a distant resemblance to Foucauldian epistemes, are so deeply embedded as to be virtually inaccessible to those whose thought they shape. Collingwood argues that it is one of the tasks of philosophy to uncover them.
24. Pragmatism and Feminism, p. 102.
27. ‘The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy’, pp. 8–9, 6.
28. Ibid., p. 6.
29. Ibid., pp. 15, 7, 8.
30. Ibid., pp. 34, 39, 42, 45, 22.
31. Ibid., p. 62.
32. Lisa Heldke develops an impressive analysis of ‘thoughtful practice’ in her ‘Foodmaking as Thoughtful Practice’ cited in n. 19, above.
33. ‘The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy’, p. 22.
35. Pragmatism and Feminism, p. 62.
36. Ibid., e.g. p. 57.
37. Ibid., p. 91.
38. Ibid., pp. 91, 143.
40. Pragmatism and Feminism, pp. 150, 211.
41. I discuss examples of such tyrannies in ‘Incredulity, Experientialism, and the Politics of Knowledge’, in Rhetorical Spaces.
42. Pragmatism and Feminism, p. 154, my emphasis.
43. Ibid., p. 155.
44. Ibid., pp. 93, 98. See in this regard my essay ‘I Know Just How You Feel: Empathy and the Problem of Epistemic Authority’, in Rhetorical Spaces.
51. See p. 22, above.
53. I presented an earlier version of this paper in an ‘Author Meets Critics’ session on Feminism and Pragmatism at the American Philosophical Association Pacific Division conference in 1997. My thanks to Charlene Seigfried for her response on that occasion (in which she disagreed on several points with my reading of her position). I am grateful to Phyllis Rooney for valuable comments on a subsequent version of this essay, and to Lisa Heldke for a helpful communication.