

## "I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER"



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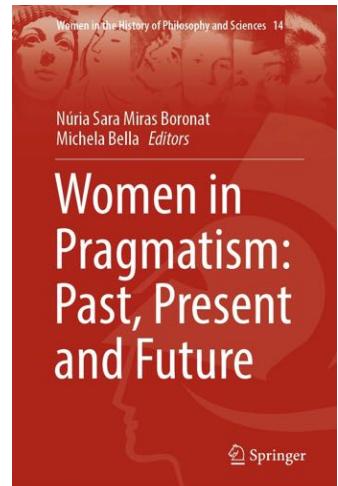
### What does American philosophy mean to you?

In many ways, this particular approach to philosophy is a way of life. It requires that we use the tools of philosophy to improve our own and others' lives. I appreciate pragmatism's emphasis on relationships and praxis, focusing on questions, problems, and social issues that affect our ability as individuals and as communities to lead flourishing lives. As Dewey argued, our inquiries must be "inherently forward-looking." Pragmatists also insist that inquiry is done with others and that we must, as Addams put it, come together on that "thronged and common road where all must turn out for one another, and at least see the size of one another's burdens." She also argued that "the processes of life are as important as its aims," highlighting that how we approach problems is as important as what we end up doing.

I find all this compelling and I'm persuaded by the importance pragmatists place on how we choose our experiences and on how we value the progressive development and expansion of our circles of experience and influence. Addams insisted that we must choose these experiences wisely. I embrace this as a core idea and strive to make choices in my personal and professional life that reflect this insight.

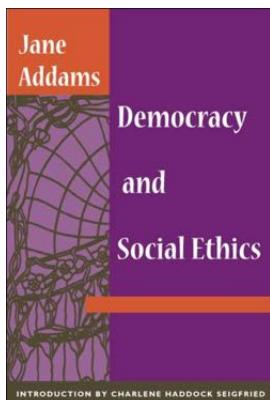
### How did you become an American philosopher?

As the youngest of six in a family of modest means, I wasn't sure that I would make it to college, but once I did, I was determined to make the most of it. After first focusing on other fields, I found philosophy and really dug in. Perhaps because all my siblings were



gifted in trade professions (e.g. electricians, carpenters, and car mechanics), I was always looking for the pragmatic implications of my studies and this drew me, eventually, to American philosophy. Even though it took me until my doctoral program to find it, it makes sense that I would eventually call pragmatism and, more particularly, feminist pragmatism my philosophical home.

My mentors played an important role in finding this path. I try to keep this in mind when connecting with students. You never know how any particular interaction may influence a student's life choices.



My first philosophical mentor was my professor and advisor at St. Lawrence University, Grant Cornwell. He introduced philosophy as something to improve our individual and collective lives. He also offered a model for how being a teacher and an administrator could be a kind of public philosophy and I found this compelling. My work with him was instrumental for seeing myself as a professor of philosophy.

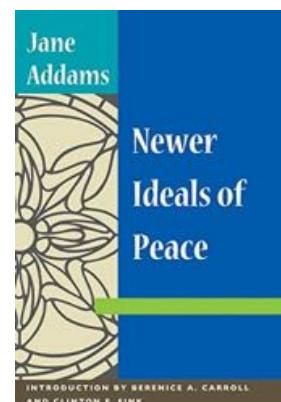
That led me to graduate school at American University where I studied with Patricia Huntington. My work with her and her mentorship helped me find both feminist philosophy and American philosophy. As I researched doctoral programs, she pointed me to Fordham (her alma mater) and to Margaret Urban Walker and Judith Green as potential connections. Patricia helped expand the range of philosophical communities I could see as possible homes.

At Fordham, both Judith and Margaret helped me find my place within philosophy. Although Margaret soon moved to Marquette, my work with her left an impression, sharpening my thinking, my writing, and my feminist, relational, and care-based approach to philosophy. And of course, I am deeply indebted to Judith. She introduced me to American philosophy and the SAAP community, and played a pivotal role in expanding my circle of mentors and colleagues within this community, a community that I have come to embrace as my own.

### How would you describe your current research?

My current research focuses on some key questions that I explore through the lens of feminist pragmatism. These questions include: How can pragmatism inform our approach to contemporary problems today? What implications does the pragmatist understanding of the self as relational and interconnected have for how we approach perplexing social issues? How can we cultivate empathetic understanding and care in our increasingly polarized society? How can community-based and local initiatives bridge the divisions that fuel tribalism?

I have been fortunate to participate in some wonderful recent projects including two forthcoming Oxford Handbooks: *The Oxford Handbook of Jane Addams* and, with my co-author Jennifer Kiefer Fenton, *The Oxford*



*Handbook of American and British Women Philosophers in the Nineteenth Century*. I've also co-authored (with Marilyn Fischer) the introductory chapter to *Women in Pragmatism: Past, Present and Future*. Finally, I recently co-authored an applied pedagogical piece on contested monument removal with my colleague Jill Swiencicki.

More recently, I have been thinking about what the journalist Eyal Press calls "dirty work"—work that causes moral injury to those who do it even while our social practices, politics, and institutions require it. I'm curious about implications this work has for democracy and am exploring this with a feminist pragmatist lens. I'm also working on a piece considering if, when, and how we should return to places and spaces that are the home to past oppressive practices. I offer a feminist pragmatist analysis of this question and argue that returning to these places is necessary—but feminist pragmatism helps us see that how we return matters.

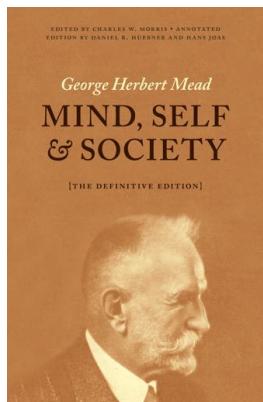
### What do you do when you're not doing American philosophy?

When I'm not writing or researching pragmatist philosophy, I'm usually parenting, preparing to teach, teaching, or, when I'm lucky, doing something active outside with family and friends.

I am a spouse, a parent, a daughter, a sister, a cousin, a friend, an educator, and a feminist pragmatist scholar. I work to engage in all these roles as fully as I can and with the feminist pragmatist orientation in mind. When all is going well, this orientation ties my various roles together.

My partner and I enjoy the company of our two terrific kids and they (mostly) enjoy our company too! Brendon (21) is a senior in college and Carol (14) will be entering high school in the fall. We enjoy traveling, camping, and playing cards, sometimes managing to combine all three in various adventures. When I have time, I enjoy reading and being outdoors. I am happiest when I have managed to squeeze some hiking, biking, or swimming into my day.

### What's your favorite work in American philosophy? What should we all be reading?



This is a hard question! Like many, the various chapters of my philosophical career have been marked by focused attention on a particular theorist's works. Mead's *Mind, Self, and Society* piqued my early interest in pragmatism. Pairing his work with that of María Lugones (*Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*) helped me find my way to feminist pragmatism. I would certainly recommend both of these.

Mead and Lugones understand human beings as relational and capable of progressive, creative, and interconnected change. They encourage us to consider how we engage with others as well as what we do. When I later immersed myself in the work of Jane Addams (*Democracy and Social Ethics, Twenty Years at Hull*

*House, Newer Ideals of Peace), I found renewed inspiration and support for thinking and living in these ways. Addams's rhetorical skills of explanation, application, and community leadership bubble up throughout her writing and bring to life inspiring examples of how we all might (and should) live the philosophical commitments that we embrace.*

When teaching, I start with Addams since she shows what it means to do philosophy while also living it. Her writing is also quite accessible, offering students examples of what it looks like to do philosophy in real life.

I would also recommend literature. I'm thinking about stories that facilitate or at least approximate what Lugones calls "'world'-traveling"—and that help cultivate the empathetic understanding that Mead and Addams also embrace. I've found the writing of Octavia Butler (e.g., *The Parable of the Sower*), Nadine Gordimer (e.g., *The Pickup*), and Iris Murdoch (e.g., *The Bell*) helpful in pushing my own imagination to new places and have found this to be true for my students as well.

