

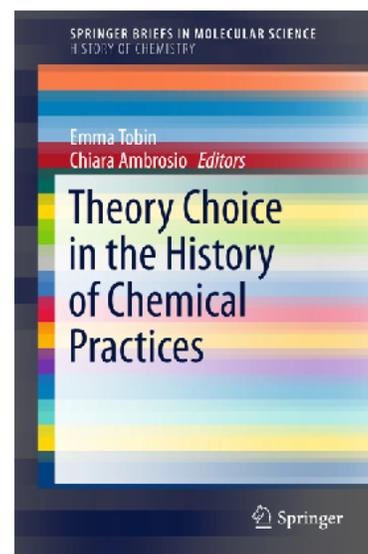
"I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER"



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What does American philosophy mean to you?

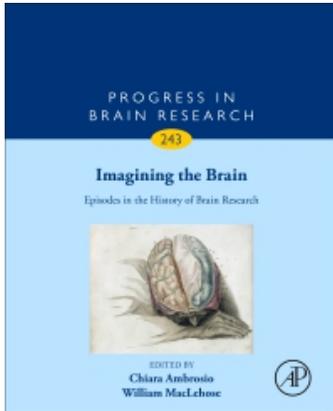
I am a historian and philosopher of science, and to me American philosophy primarily means the pragmatist tradition and its connections with the sciences. I am also known as the academic who decided it would be a good idea to have a career as a Peirce scholar in Britain, but my work proves it was not such a crazy idea after all. As a historian and philosopher and as a Peirce scholar, Pragmatism to me is a window on nineteenth-century science: the crossovers between America and Europe, the influences of Germany and Britain in the setting up of American laboratories and institutions, and especially the debates about methods, expertise, and scientific identity that unfolded in that exciting time. As a movement that was itself characterized—as Vincent Colapietro aptly described it—by a distinctive “historical thickness,” Pragmatism is the ideal philosophy for those who do not rest content with an analysis of concepts as an end in itself, but want instead to ask questions about contexts, contingency, practices, and the choices we make in adopting certain conceptions, values, and habits of action.



How did you become an American philosopher?

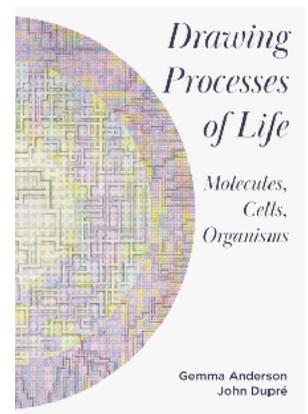
Ha! I always thought of myself as a European, Italian-born philosopher living and working in the UK. But I suppose working on Pragmatism for so long has now earned me the status of honorary American philosopher! My first encounter with Pragmatism

was through a course in semiotics I took when I was nineteen years old, in the second semester of my first year at university. The course included a brief section on Peirce's conception of iconicity. It was love at first sight! In the Italian system at the time we had a lot of flexibility when it came to course choices, so I managed (demanded?) to do two more elective courses in semiotics, with personalized programmes which included a lot of Peirce and secondary literature on Peirce. Reading Rossella Fabbrichesi's *La Polemica sull'Iconismo* (1983) was a transformative experience at the time, as it gave me an exciting glimpse into the possible combinations of breadth and depth that could be achieved when doing philosophy in a pragmatist spirit. When I moved to London for my PhD, it was Hasok Chang who encouraged me to give shape to and cultivate the interdisciplinary outlook I had developed through my training in semiotics, and to place it right at the core of my research agenda in history and philosophy of science.



How would you describe your current research?

I always liked doing old-fashioned, scholarly, exegetic work on Peirce's texts, but I soon realized that what I find most rewarding about that kind of work is the historical and philosophical vistas it opens on scientific practice. Over the summer I completed a chapter for the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of C. S. Peirce* (ed. Cornelis De Waal), which looks at Peirce's work on and with diagrams and places it in the historiographical context of the "moral economy" of nineteenth century science. In that chapter, I argue that diagrams and diagrammatic practices, as they emerged and consolidated throughout Peirce's lifetime, were the shared common ground over which an ever-expanding community of scientists negotiated their reasonings, and that debates over validity, rigor, perspicuity and communicability were as much about issues of reliable representation as they were about the reliability and standing of scientists themselves.



But Peirce also keeps taking me to unusual places, especially when it comes to thinking about visual culture in an interdisciplinary way. Some of my work covers the relationship between science and art: I am particularly interested in investigating areas where artistic and scientific practice join forces, either toward common representational goals, or in asking questions that science or art alone may not consider at all. I have a forthcoming chapter in the interdisciplinary anthology [Drawing Processes of Life](#) (ed. Gemma Anderson and John Dupré, 2023), where I invite philosophers of science to take the practice of drawing seriously on pragmatist grounds: drawing—in science as well as in art—is after all a mode of inquiry, performed with pencil or pen on paper, in which one formulates visual hypotheses and

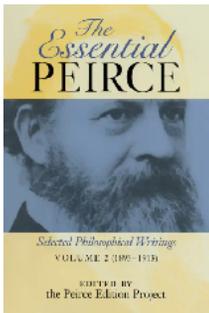
experiments with the possible consequences of adopting certain ideas or conceptions, or with the consequences of seeing phenomena in a certain way.

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

My work on science and art naturally leads me to spend a lot of time with artists interested in incorporating philosophical and scientific ideas in their practice. I am quite theoretically-minded, so interacting with art practitioners and performers keeps me grounded and reminds me that, grand aesthetic theories notwithstanding, practical constraints often prompt the kind of creativity and ingenuity behind those works of art or performances that genuinely ask new questions, and serve as catalysts for new experiences. But I am cheating here: Pragmatism is very much at the forefront of my interactions with artists too, so I don't really stop doing American philosophy in those instances!

I am also a very stereotypical Italian, so I am obnoxiously opinionated about food. I grew up in a matriarchal family with a strong culinary tradition, and replicating my grandmothers' recipes is a way of connecting with my family history—and disconnecting from the history and philosophy of science, at least for a bit.

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



One of my favorite pieces from Peirce is a short essay written as a prospective (but never published) book chapter titled "What is a Sign?" (1893-1895), reproduced in Volume 2 of [The Essential Peirce](#). It contains a clear and helpful discussion of the three semiotic categories of icon-index-symbol, but I love that essay because Peirce explicitly draws a comparison between art and science in his discussion of iconicity, and engages in a lovely piece of drawing to set his ideas and arguments into motion.

And obviously as a devoted Peirce scholar I believe we should all read Peirce all the time—though I appreciate he is not everyone's philosophical cup of tea! More realistically, perhaps: we are about to begin a year of strikes here in academia in the UK, and my feeling at the moment is that on this side of the Atlantic we would all hugely benefit from reading (or re-reading) Jane Addams, particularly the chapter on industrial amelioration in *Democracy and Social Ethics*. That book is probably one of the greatest gifts Addams left to humanity!

