

"I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER"



[Erin McKenna](#) is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Oregon. Among many books and articles she is the author of [Living with Animals: Rights, Responsibilities, and Respect](#) (2020), [Livestock: Food, Fiber, and Friends](#) (2018), [American Philosophy: From Wounded Knee to the Present](#), (with Scott L. Pratt 2015), [Pets, People, and Pragmatism](#) (2013), and co-editor (with Lee McBride) of [Pragmatist Feminism and the Work of Charlene Haddock Seigfried](#) (2022). She is a Past President of SAAP.

What does American philosophy mean to you?

It means a situated approach to philosophy that is context sensitive, experimental, and fallibilist. This approach encourages a pluralistic attitude as it is important to encounter and try to understand many different perspectives on any given situation or problem

that one might want to try to address and ameliorate.

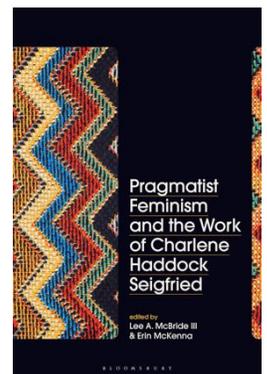
This approach encourages open-mindedness and humility and finds intellectual dogmas and moral absolutes to be among the biggest obstacles to ongoing critical inquiry.

It means substantive and sympathetic engagement with one's environment and the various beings within that environment.

How did you become an American philosopher?

I didn't officially "find" American philosophy until graduate school. Being pushed by peers at Purdue to "choose a side"—analytic or continental philosophy—I found I was at home in neither world. I felt more at home in some feminist theory classes outside the department. Then Charlene Haddock Seigfried offered a course team taught with a professor in American Studies. I found the material engaging and familiar.

Then I remembered some of the courses I had taken with John K. Roth as an undergraduate. I looked again at the syllabus for his course titled "The





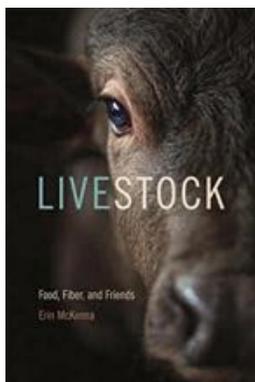
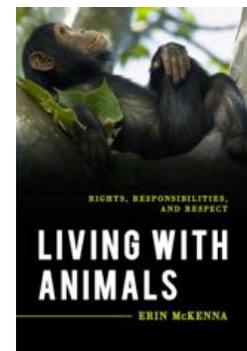
American Dream.” There they were: William James, John Dewey, Josiah Royce, James Baldwin, and others. He had never named pragmatism or American philosophy as a philosophical school of thought, but he had always taught as a pragmatist. He brought philosophy to bear on real problems in the world. Then I realized Roth had been a student of John E. Smith. (I later met Smith at several conferences and benefited from his comments on my work.)

So, it turned out I had been being educated by people who came in a straight line from Dewey himself! At that point I decided to write a dissertation on feminism and pragmatism (with Seigfried) as they seemed to have so much in common. I was told by one professor that I couldn’t go on the job market as a pragmatist and a feminist, but I did. It’s worked out so far.

How would you describe your current research?

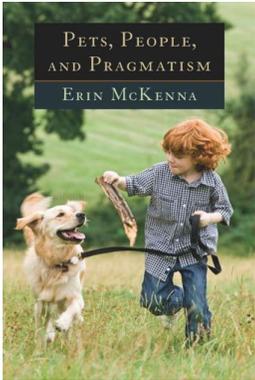
My current research continues my focus on other than human animal beings. I am currently working on a book on a pragmatist ecofeminist wildlife ethics with Tess Varner (Concordia College) and Mary Trachsel (University of Iowa). We want to promote awareness of humanity’s practical and conceptual interconnectedness with “wild” animal lives and encourage critical inquiry into our formulations of “wild” existence.

We examine sites of human interface with wildlife: national parks, educational centers, sanctuaries, holding facilities, hunting and fishing areas, and rural public lands. Many of these sites have arisen in response to human conflicts with other animal beings. Our observations and analyses help us understand these conflicts and shape our search for strategies to ameliorate damages imposed on the rest of nature by human-centered reasoning. Ultimately, our goal is to find and create productive ways to inhabit our humanity.



This project is “pragmatist” because it is informed by authors working in the American pragmatist tradition and because we situate our inquiry in the real world and ask what does or doesn’t work within this reality. Within this framework, we draw upon ontological, ethical, and ecological theories found in environmental and animal studies and examine their operation in wildlife policies and practices at sites where human and other animal beings interface. With interviews and questionnaires, we also seek to understand the lived experience of people who work with “wild” animals at these sites. Through a method that might be called philosophical field work, we want to formulate responses to human-wildlife

conflicts that are informed by the ways people respond to these conflicts in their everyday lives, even as we challenge some of these approaches.

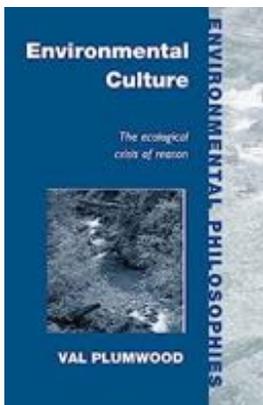
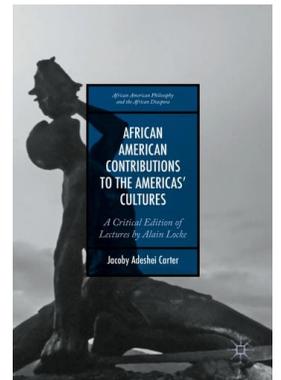


What do you do when you're not doing American philosophy?

I live with three dogs (Australian shepherds)—Kira, Scully, and Dolly. Keeping them busy and entertained helps keep me in shape. I also ride and compete in dressage with two Morgan horses—Hank and Mack. Hank is now twenty-three and we are competing at fourth level. Mack will turn seven soon and we are competing at first level. I also spend a lot of time in my yard. I live among a lot trees in Oregon and I work to have a wildlife friendly space that is not too much of a fire danger to my house given the increasing threats of draught.

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

I wish more people would read the work of Alain Locke. His commitment to pluralism is deep but also conditioned by demands for respect and reciprocity—something we need more of today. That said, I think it is more important to read as an American philosopher than to focus on reading within American philosophy. That means reading sympathetically, with an eye to understanding an author's interests and purposes and not imposing one's own projects onto their work. It also means reading things from a wide array of fields with an eye to how they inform the project of living out a pluralistic, fallibilistic, experimental philosophy that engages with problems and issues we encounter in our lives.



That said, I never get tired of reading and teaching Val Plumwood's *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. While not explicitly part of the American tradition, she is influenced by Peirce and Dewey and her work clearly embodies the spirit of American philosophy. Her ecofeminism is a big influence on my own work as she calls for contextual responses to questions of how best to live with other animal beings, humans included. Her attention to how interlocking systems of oppression work against nature, nonhuman animals, women, indigenous peoples, people of color, and the economically disadvantaged pushes beyond the more common attention to race, class, and gender. Her call (like Locke's) for a critical pluralism is an important resource for many issues we face today.