

“I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER”
—A Series of Interviews with John Capps—



[Bonnie Sheehey](#) is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Montana State University. Her areas of research span Philosophy of Technology, Social & Political Philosophy, Philosophy of Race, Continental Philosophy and American Philosophy, among others. She has published on William James’s ethical and political thought, the work of Foucault and Latour, and on the role of algorithms in policing, sentencing and incarceration. Her essay [“Technologies of Incarceration, COVID-19, and the Racial Politics of Death”](#) recently appeared on the Blog of the APA.

What does American philosophy mean to you?

I tend to think of American philosophy as a style of critical inquiry engaged with problems emanating from but not necessarily exclusive to America. This style of inquiry is attentive to action both as the test of difference among concepts and as what makes a difference to the problems faced in this place. Given this attentiveness to **action** it is perhaps not surprising that an affect of hope guides American philosophical practice, though as thinkers like William James and W.E.B. Du Bois remind us, this hope is distinct from optimism. As practiced, this style of philosophy does not always obey disciplinary boundaries but blurs and weaves them together to historicize, contextualize, observe, and analyze some problem in order to better address it.

American philosophy contends with multiple problems:

- The search for renewed agency in the face of despair and indecision
- The settling of Indigenous lands by white colonists and the ongoing attempts by white Americans to thwart Indigenous resistance
- The struggle for emancipation in the midst and aftermath of slavery
- The growing suicide rate among adolescents and young adults
- The increasing polarization among Americans that social media facilitates
- The routine police killings of Black cis and trans men and women

- The attempt to build a Thirty Meter Telescope on a dormant volcano held sacred by Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians)
- The political, social, and psychological alienation suffered by a prison population that is second largest in the world
- The disruption and destruction of ecosystems, environments, and cultures brought on by climate change.

How did you become an American philosopher?

My affinity for American philosophy began as a high school student reading the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville in an English class. It deepened as an undergraduate in a Pragmatism class devoted to William James, John Dewey, and Jane Addams. But it matured as I took graduate classes at the University of Oregon. These classes pluralized the resources of American philosophy beyond pragmatism by engaging with figures on the edges of or distant from that tradition, figures like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary Parker Follett, W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, James Baldwin, Vine Deloria Jr., Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Hill Collins, and Angela Davis.

I should add that my connection to American philosophy is enriched by my reading of and drawing on other philosophical traditions like genealogy, deconstruction, Frankfurt School critical theory, actor-network-theory, and post-colonial theory. I like the flexible and open nature of American philosophy—the kind of toolbox vision of critical inquiry which necessitates being adept at more than one school, method, or discipline, which requires a bit of infidelity to tradition(s).

How would you describe your current research?

I have two current research projects that are separable yet connected. The first draws on resources from genealogy, philosophy of race, affect theory, and pragmatism to show how technologies deployed in the U.S. carceral system exacerbate and reinforce patterns of racial discrimination and injustice historically entrenched in this system.

A centerpiece of this research has been the recent use of predictive algorithms in policing and determinations about early-release. Informed by an affect of hope, my critical inquiries into these technologies not only track how they exercise a racializing power, but also address the efforts of resistance on the part of the incarcerated and their networks of support (including, for instance, groups like Carceral Tech Resistance Network, Stop LAPD Spying Coalition, and #BlackLivesMatter).

A second line of research addresses hope as a critical affect. A critical form of hope is one disentangled from optimism and modified by the loss and grief from which it is born. Unlike the type of hope often attached to notions of “progress” which turn away from the past and towards the future, critical hope turns to the past and the present as the time for activating the dreams of another time. To articulate this form of hope, I have relied on the work of William James, Walter Benjamin, W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, and Jesmyn Ward.

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

I enjoy spending time outdoors—whether that’s running, walking my dog, or hiking—and reading poetry and novels (both modern and contemporary).

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

This is a tough question. I’m fond of William James’s *Principles of Psychology*, W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Philadelphia Negro*, and Jesmyn Ward’s *Men We Reaped*.

(November 2023)

