

"I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER"

—An Interview Series with John Capps—

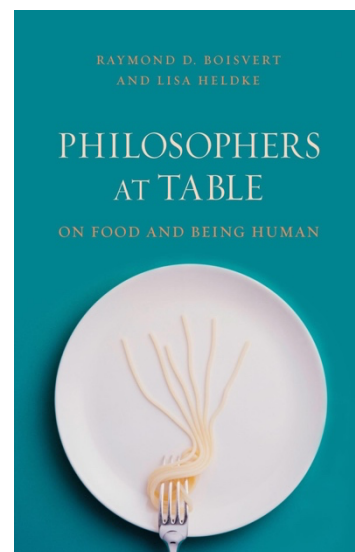


LISA HELDKE is Professor of Philosophy at Gustavus Adolphus College where she also directs the annual Nobel Conference. She is the author, coauthor, or coeditor of several books including *Philosophers at Table: On Food and Being Human* (2016), *The Atkins Diet and Philosophy* (2006), *Exotic Appetites: Ruminations of a Food Adventurer* (2003), *Oppression, Privilege and Resistance: Theoretical Readings on Racism, Sexism and Heterosexism* (2003), and *Cooking, Eating, Thinking: Transformative Philosophies of Food* (1992). She works in philosophy of food, American philosophy, and feminist philosophy. In 2022 she was awarded the John Dewey Society Award for Outstanding Achievement.

What does American philosophy mean to you?

It's August, and I am (yet again) revising the syllabus for my course in nineteenth and twentieth century philosophies written by people living in the geographic boundaries of what is now the United States. That awkward, wordy description is intentional; each time I set out to write a syllabus for this course—the course that transformed me as a student, the course then called "American Philosophy" in the catalog—I confront the fact that I don't know what American philosophy means or should mean. I've changed the name of that very same course (I teach at my alma mater—it's *literally* the same course, at least on some solutions to the Ship of Theseus paradox) to "Philosophy Looks at the U.S." I advertise it as a course in which we explore how philosophers within this geographic area have reflected on some of the moments and movements from the 19th and early 20th centuries that have defined the country: settler colonialism, enslavement, immigration, urbanization, rural life.

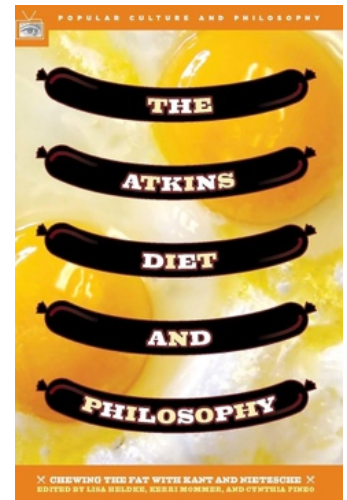
For a long time, I thought American philosophy was (by definition? by decree??) pragmatism, and a very narrow slice of pragmatism at that: Peirce, James, Dewey and the guys they influenced. That very short list expanded when Charlene Haddock Seigfried began publishing on feminist pragmatism and introduced me to Addams; it expanded



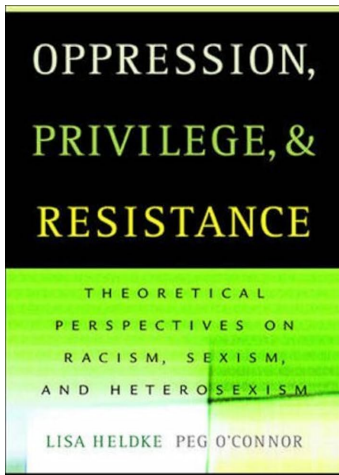
again when I encountered Leonard Harris's work on Alain Locke. And again when Scott Pratt introduced me to the work of Indigenous thinkers. With each expansion, I was left feeling embarrassed by the limitedness and naivete of my previous understanding. Why did I not notice the absence of so many thinkers? And it leaves me, as I face this question, asking: which entire groups of thinkers who are also American philosophers am I not noticing right now?

How did you become an American philosopher?

As an undergraduate, I changed my mind weekly about who I believed was absolutely right about everything. Before too much time elapsed, though, I settled into the conviction that it was either Plato or Kant; my first conference paper was a fierce defense of Kant's categorical imperative. I had been admitted to graduate school at Northwestern (where I was all lined up to work with Reginald Allen on a thesis on Plato), when I took a class in American philosophy. And everything I thought I knew fell apart. It was like that old Roz Chast cartoon from the *New Yorker*, "A Street in the Philosophy District." I was shopping in the store that advertises "Have your beliefs shattered for \$1."



I still trotted off to graduate school thinking I was going to write about Plato. There, I encountered two teachers who changed that. Feminist philosopher Sandra Bartky was "on loan" from UIC to teach a seminar on feminist philosophy. Sandy introduced me to the work of Alison Jaggar, who had just published *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*; and Sandra Harding, who had just coedited *Discovering Reality*. Philosopher of science Arthur Fine introduced me to "NOA," his natural ontological attitude and to Hilary Putnam's *Reason Truth and History*, which advanced "internal realism." The harmonic convergence of those two sets of ideas was (after much flailing and self doubt) a dissertation, "Coresponsible Inquiry: Objectivity from Dewey to Feminist Epistemology."



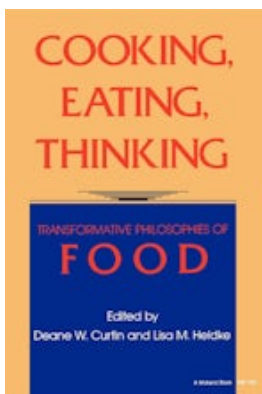
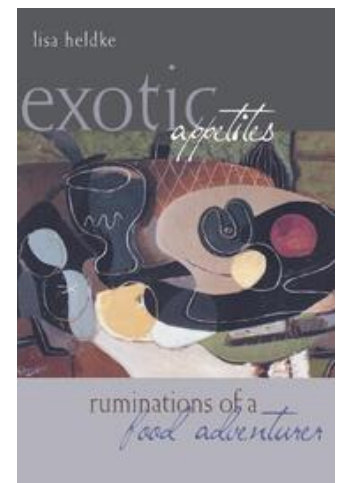
I went on the job market as a...well, yes, what was I? Having Arthur as my advisor left people with the mistaken impression that I did philosophy of science, which is how I landed my first job (in philosophy of science) and how I spent my first two years pretending to know anything whatsoever about what I was teaching (and sneaking off to my office to sob after class). But in another way I was grounded; I understood myself to be a pragmatist feminist philosopher. And when Charlene Haddock Seigfried showed up at a Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP) conference, I felt like I could begin to think of myself as part of a community of thinkers.

How would you describe your current research?

I'm a pragmatist feminist philosopher of food and eating. I work on questions in epistemology, ontology, aesthetics and ethics, by thinking about food. I'm presently completing a book that I'm stubbornly calling *It's Chomping All The Way Down*, but which the publisher informs me will be called something more strait-laced, like *Parasitic Personhood and the Ontology of Eating*.

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

I like to think that I'm always doing American philosophy, because I am trying to cultivate an understanding of philosophy that finds it manifested in all sorts of activities, and because I try to approach life as Deweyan inquiry. In that spirit, a bit about how I live in the summer. For three months of the year, I live in a yurt about half a mile from the coast in Maine. I have minimal electricity and no running water. My house is a vinyl tent, twenty feet in diameter. Living in this space as a pragmatist philosopher, every single activity of daily life becomes an opportunity for inquiry, because nothing about daily life is the least bit ordinary. How do I fit square furniture into a cylindrical structure? How can I most efficiently and safely reuse the water I haul out of the ground with a bucket—and how many times can I use it before it is only fit for washing out the latrine? How does my understanding of hospitality have to “flex” in order to enable me to feed dinner guests using only my rudimentary kitchen?



This summer, my neighbor, a brilliant artisan mason, is nearing the completion of an exquisite brick bread oven on my property. It will be a community resource; I will bake bread for the neighborhood, and I'll tell my neighbors when I fire it, so they can bring their dough to be baked.

In the winter, my passion is skijoring, which is dog-assisted cross country skiing. My husky and I ski every day that there's snow, and we spend a week together in the Boundary Waters of northern Minnesota on a dogsled trip. We sleep under the stars, cook on a fire, and ski and dogsled all day long. Figuring out how to stay at the right temperature is an engrossing inquiry activity.

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

The work in American philosophy that awoke me from my dogmatic slumbers was (unoriginally enough) *Experience and Nature*. Later, I read *The Quest for Certainty*, and it

probably supplanted Ex and Na in my heart. But to be honest, neither of these works lies by my bedside.

Given my current work, the books I keep telling people to read are *I Contain Multitudes*, by science writer Ed Yong (his *An Immense World* is also astonishing), and *The Mushroom At The End Of The World*, by anthropologist Anna Tsing.

Two other works that have reconstructed my world in fundamental ways are the novel *The Known World*, by Edward P. Jones and *Eager: The Surprising, Secret Life of Beavers and Why They Matter*, by Ben Goldfarb.

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