Philosophy Americana
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Although the classical American philosophers published books, the great majority of these were collections of essays. Indeed, with the exception of Royce, who worked in a variety of ways, the American philosophical tradition is a tradition of essays, talks, and lectures collected into single volumes. Philosophy Americana is written with this tradition in mind. Nevertheless, a book of essays has its own kind of economy. Though I hope that each essay can stand alone, I also hope that they work together to provide a landscape or at least a horizon of my own philosophical outlook. The one generic theme I might venture as unifying the essays is the relationship between American philosophy and other features of American culture. I am interested in how philosophers work in this culture. I employ the term “Americana” to draw a rough analogy to the musical genre of the same name. Americana music is twice “American.” It is rooted in the traditional musical practices of the immigrants to the United States: blues, gospel, Celtic, folk, country, Tex-Mex, swing, bluegrass, old-time, rock and roll, reggae, and, I would add, more recently, rap and hip-hop. No doubt there are some category mistakes in this list, but part of the import of “Americana music” is precisely its indeterminateness, and thus its openness to new and innovative musical styles. At the same time, Americana music, especially in its lyrical content, tells us much about our American culture—about ourselves. In Philosophy Americana I aim at doing something similar, drawing on the philosophical practices of American thinkers and addressing issues that arise in popular culture.
My overall concern is what it means to think philosophically in the United States and under the influence of its particular history. To get at this, I have aligned my essays somewhat thematically. The first and last essays consider features of pragmatism in its origin and in its future import. Between these bookends, the chapters focus on several issues in serial order: the impact of our experiences of itinerancy and wilderness on philosophical practice; the question of practical wisdom in our political actions; the retrieval of religiosity from outside the bounds of religions; the question of the relationship between philosophy and teaching; and finally, in a reflexive way, the question of how philosophy, given the long-standing quarrel between the poets and the philosophers, might find itself entangled with American poetic and literary practices. Throughout the work, I am also interested in our experiences of risk, loss, possibility, failure, and hope. I am well aware that I have let some tensions stand instead of bringing the whole to a consummatory unity. Attentive readers will surely note the ambivalence in my reading of the work of John Dewey. I have not made up my mind on all the issues at hand, and I actually find myself confronting myself on various interpretations of history and philosophy. Believing in Emerson’s claim that a foolish consistency is a “hobgoblin,” I have opted simply to say what I think and to allow the tensions their own transitory existence.

Though I am perhaps coining the phrase “philosophy Americana,” I certainly do not lay claim to creating this way of philosophizing. Emerson, Fuller, and Thoreau stand out as early exemplars of the kind of philosophical writing and attitude I have in mind. William James, Thomas Davidson, and John Dewey occasionally wrote in a similar vein. More recently, a number of writers have worked this field and influenced my own way of doing things. Among these are two thinkers who are not so well known outside of a small circle: Henry Bugbee and my former teacher and colleague, John Anderson. Both openly worked against the grain of Anglo-American analytic thought from the 1950s through the 1970s. In the present generation, a variety of well-known thinkers who are, strictly speaking, not within the fold of American philosophy, have made a difference to my work.
Among these I would include Gloria Anzaldúa, Stanley Cavell, Annie Dillard, bell hooks, Norman Maclean, and Robert Pirsig. Each brings a unique voice and literary approach to the kinds of questions that lovers of wisdom have always asked. From within the American tradition I am indebted to John E. Smith’s writings on experience and religion; to Bruce Wilshire’s discussions of education, addiction, and theater; and to my good friend Crispin Sartwell’s various works on popular music, race, and aesthetics. Finally, in both style and content, my deepest debt is to the essay writing of John J. McDermott. McDermott brings passion to philosophical inquiry with no loss of intellectual integrity and with the finest attention to what William James called the thickness of experience. All of the above—and many whom I have not mentioned—I include in what I take to be the natural history of philosophy Americana.

Before turning to the project at hand, two important caveats are in order. First, I am well aware that “America” means more than the United States. Nevertheless, because I focus on what has come to be called “American philosophy,” I employ the terms “America” and “American” in these essays in their narrower sense. Second, I recognize that the essays at hand focus closely on the male, white version of American philosophy—in part this is done simply to make a presentation of my own history and angle of vision. However, I take this approach also because I have in mind a second volume that will deal with philosophical voices and traditions in the Americas that have been marginalized or simply neglected—in short, I have in mind a much broader scope for philosophy Americana. It is my hope that the present book will define a place from which I can enter into conversations with those whose histories, affinities, and commitments will ask questions of my own philosophical take on things. I am aware that much has been and is being done to bring visibility to these other perspectives and histories, and I anticipate drawing on that work when the time comes.