Philosophy Americana

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America does not think much of its philosophers. Philosophy lives a ghostly life or, often, one of mistaken identity. We do not teach philosophy in our high schools. A majority in America have no idea what philosophy is about or why it might be interesting, if not important. Folks commonly think philosophers are psychological counselors. This may seem strange or simply false to those whose lives have been rooted in academic or professional settings, but it is a commonplace in rural, laboring, underclass, and unschooled settings. This should not be surprising, since our bookstore chains usually fill their “Philosophy” sections with a smattering of Hegel and Locke and a large dose of California Zen, self-help, and spirituality books. We professional philosophers joke about this phenomenon but don’t take seriously enough what it says about our own invisibility.

Most philosophers in America, for better or worse, are also teachers. It is important, therefore, to notice also that teachers, like philosophers, have been shifted toward the edge of our culture. In the
schools and universities, teachers have “achieved” the status of day laborers whose routines are administered more often than not by those who cannot teach well and who have no experiential sense of the art of or the importance of teaching. We have established a hierarchical structure that buries teachers beneath principals, department chairpersons, superintendents, local school boards, state school boards, college vice presidents, and state and federal mandates. We have completely lost sight of John Dewey’s warning: “Too rarely is the individual teacher so free from the dictation of authoritative supervisor, textbook on methods, prescribed course of study, etc., that he can let his mind come to close quarters with the pupil’s mind and the subject matter” (MW, 9:116). Whenever lip service administrators give to teaching is systematically and routinely withdrawn by our institutional structures. Except for the moments when, despite the bureaucratic constraints, it “works” in the classroom, the life of teaching in America is becoming a life of “quiet desperation.”

Even within the culture of university intellectuals, philosophers and teachers have no great standing. Philosophers have been all but excommunicated from fields in which they have historically made a significant difference: economics, politics, and education. This has been accomplished on the assumption that all the basic questions in these disciplines have been settled once and for all. All that is left to do in these fields is to conduct quantitative analyses of behavior; their humanistic features have for the most part been eliminated. Moreover, in higher education, teaching is steadily becoming the necessary evil tied to the life of research and scholarship. One gets release time from teaching as a reward for research production, but one does not get release time from research for excellence in teaching. Indeed, some teaching awards come with release time from teaching. Teaching, furthermore, is presently used in universities as a “punishment” for a drop in research production. Excellence in teaching is a bonus for the university, but is no longer the essence of its work despite the fact that it is nominally what the university’s “consumers”—that is, its undergraduate students—are paying for.
When I think about the fact of philosophy’s invisibility, I wonder where philosophers in America come from. We do hire extensively from other regions of the world (Europe, England, Canada, and Australia), but the rest come from the United States—from the East, South, Midwest; from cities, towns, and even farms. In one sense, philosophers in the United States come from everywhere—from all geographical areas and from a variety of backgrounds, though white, male, and upper-middle-class remain dominant traits. What brings us to philosophy seems to be largely accidental. We have religious, political, or social interests that find a voice in philosophical history and discourse. And so we take it up, some of us because the agonistic argumentation is exciting, some because of the mathematical pleasures of analysis, some because philosophy helps us make cases for our beliefs, some for the pursuit of truth or persuasion, and some because philosophy seems to have some bearing on the conduct of life. And some encounter philosophy purely by accident, as did one student at Texas A & M University. He and a friend signed up for a course labeled INTELHIST, thinking it was a course dealing with the history of intelligence agencies such as the CIA and KGB. When they found out the course was a philosophically oriented course in intellectual history, the friend dropped out and the student was on his way to a life of philosophy. I suspect the tychistic element in this story is familiar to many of us. Philosophy draws innately intelligent people—those with high SAT and GRE scores, skilled writers and mathematicians, and many who are artistically inclined. Philosophers in America are thus peculiar creatures: bright, strong-willed, occasionally arrogant, often insecure, often well-intentioned, and quite often extremely productive as writers and teachers. Yet, because they produce little or nothing that speaks directly to the souls or material needs of ordinary Americans, they are almost always unrecognized and underappreciated. As Emerson put it in his essay “History,” “It seems as if heaven had sent its insane angels into our world as to an asylum and here they will break out in their native music and utter at intervals the words they have heard in heaven; then the mad fit returns and they mope and wallow like dogs” (CW, 1:273). We phi-
philosophers do say a great deal, and we are passionate in our beliefs; occasionally we speak with insight and a musical freedom. But ultimately we, too, mope and wallow simply because we have no audience. We blame the audience for their inattention, and we are partially justified in this. But it is a two-way street. We have to worry when, as John McDermott notes, we are considered unphilosophical by our colleagues if we happen to be understood by our own culture. But, as McDermott then points out, being understood doesn’t entail being intellectually shallow. Instead, it is precisely the quest for human depth and breadth that we philosophers hope to communicate and to inspire.

“Philosophy in America,” as most philosophers know, is not the same as “American philosophy.” And, though I am ultimately interested in both, it is the latter with which I am primarily concerned in this book. American philosophy is a history—perhaps a natural history—of ideas, persons, and actions that begins, roughly speaking, with the writings of the Mathers and Jonathan Edwards and runs through to the present. It is “American” not for jingoistic reasons, but because it is autochthonous—it grows out of the New World environment and experience. It is “American” in part because it is not native. As Scott Pratt and others are now showing, American Indian thought is both complex and philosophical, but in origin it is pre–Vespucci and thus pre–American. Such native philosophy plays no overt role in this text, but it should be kept in mind as an important indigenous forerunner of and influence on what I am calling “American philosophy.” The various thinkers in the tradition marked as American philosophy do not agree on everything, but there is nevertheless, as McDermott puts it, a “take” that they share—a general outlook regarding the importance of looking forward, the significance of the aesthetic dimensions of experience, the dialectical yet spontaneous interplay of individual and community, the possibility of perceiving meaning and relations and not just discrete atoms of experience, and the fundamental importance of finding and creating the extraordinary in the ordinary. Many philosophers in America nei-
ther share nor appreciate this “take”; for better or worse, they are not American philosophers in the sense I propose.

Part of the outlook of American philosophy is the belief that philosophy can be democratic in a rough-and-ready sense. That is, American culture can be brought to philosophy if we philosophers will meet it halfway. Jefferson and Franklin both spoke philosophically while remaining fully engaged politically and practically. Emerson wrote “American Scholar” not only to emancipate our thought from Continental dominance but also to show that the scholar can be both more and less than a scholar. He worried about the scholar in “the degenerate state, when the victim of society; he tends to become a mere thinker, or still worse, the parrot of other men’s thinking.”

Under this rough sense of democracy, philosophical practice is not limited to white males. Margaret Fuller, a founder of New England Transcendentalism and long neglected as a philosopher, gave articulate voice to the already experienced philosophical abilities of women. At the same time, she indicated that these same abilities were resident in Native American and African American cultures. Later the pragmatists—especially James and Dewey—took the Emersonian democratic directive seriously and sought to have American philosophy deal with the everyday experiences from which its questions emerged. They tried to keep philosophy alive beyond its academic setting. James openly proclaimed essays in “popular philosophy,” adopting a rubric that he knew would provoke a negative response from other philosophers. And Dewey, whose democratic outlook led him to seek the possibilities in each person through education, both early and late in his career described democracy not as an abstract political discourse but as a personal attitude and way of life. Despite the successes of this democratic take on things, American philosophy has lived with residual and recalcitrant blindesses. As Fuller noted, it is men—even when they try to help—who have left feminism with a much too long gestation period in American culture. The same must be said for all the other neglected intellectual and artistic cultures that flourish within and around the United States.
Because of its basic democratic outlook—now extended to include thinkers from all cultural backgrounds—American philosophy is implicitly interested in where we, all of us, come from. As American feminist and critic bell hooks makes abundantly clear in *Yearning*, we all arrive at philosophy or intellectual life with a history, some sort of on-the-way identity, together with interests, aims, hopes, aversions, and resentments. Her essays impress us with their autobiographical self-awareness in the absence of self-engrossment or narcissism. For her, philosophy does not mean leaving experience behind to enter a mathematical or linguistic world, nor does it mean donning the clothing, style, and accoutrements of a European intellectual. Philosophy must develop through one’s experiences. It is therefore refreshing when, in “Representing Whiteness,” hooks proclaims that her initial response to Wim Wenders’s “Wings of Desire” was to want to laugh. She is an intellectual at home in her world—even when that world is most threatening, unsettling, and recalcitrant. To accomplish this, she attends to her experiential origins as closely as she does to her sources of scholarship.

As hooks both suggests and illustrates, within the trajectory of thinking in the United States, American philosophers all have their own takes, their idiosyncratic insane angelness, as they make their accidental and fated encounters with philosophy. In Emersonian language, each of us has an angle of vision. My own take within the broader outlook of American philosophy is that we should not abandon our angles of vision and our histories as we apprentice to the philosophical trade. This is certainly not a novel idea within the American tradition. Interestingly, within the pragmatic tradition, it was Charles Peirce, whose work is most traditionally oriented, who explicitly defended the claim that philosophers should describe themselves to their readers. “The reader,” he said, “has a right to know how the author’s opinions were formed” (CP, 1:3). For Peirce, philosophy is a historical conversation, and a key piece of this semiotic process is understanding the place from which one speaks (see MS 842). Thus, if one has grown up with Beethoven and Aaron Copland, one should maintain their acquaintance. So, too, if one has grown up
on the Ramones and Blondie, on the Temptations and the Shirelles, on R.E.M. and Matchbox 20, or on Thelonius Monk and Charlie Parker. These are not to be abandoned at the doorstep of philosophy. We need to keep them with us to inform, instruct, and be transformed by our philosophical lives. All of these features of our experiences help constitute the very language of outlooks on the world. As Gloria Anzaldúa drives home to us time and again in *Borderlands*, our experiential language, which both transforms and is transformed, is a kind of home for each of us. This is more apparent to her than to those of us in the dominant culture precisely because of her other “homelessness” as “*mestiza chicana*”:

I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for “talking back” to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. If you want to be American, speak “American.” If you don’t like it, go back to Mexico where you belong.  

This maintenance of our experiential home, it seems to me, is a sort of baseline for what I am calling philosophy Americana. For those of us in dominant sectors of this culture, such maintenance is reasonably easy but needs to be undertaken precisely because we often forget that ours is only one dimension of “America.” For those like Anzaldúa who are not in the dominant sectors, such maintenance is always a difficult and politically oppositional task, but a task the rest of us, through listening, can come to make easier:

I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent’s tongue—my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence.  

Philosophy Americana will thrive only insofar as there is a genuine conversation among our philosophical outlooks, a conversation in which we listen closely not only to each other’s arguments, but also to the stories we tell about and from the perspectives of our experiential homes.
In the opening paragraph of “Nominalist and Realist,” Emerson spoke an experiential truth: “I cannot often enough say, that a man is only a relative and representative nature. Each is a hint of the truth, but far enough from being that truth, which he [or she] yet quite newly and inevitably suggests to us” (CW, 3133). If we embrace our inheritances individually, American philosophy will continue to re-awaken itself. It will both imbibe and express, from our representative angles of vision, the richness of our own history and culture, the depth of our despairs and the wealth of our expectations. Margaret Fuller’s Woman in the Nineteenth Century met with ridicule and resistance in professional philosophical circles. But it was spoken directly from her experience and it spoke honestly of her own possibilities. As Donna Dickenson points out, Emerson’s “Nature (1836) took seven years to clear an edition of 500 copies. Fuller’s Woman in the Nineteenth Century sold out an edition twice that size in one week.”11 It was popular philosophy because it captured and expressed experiences lived by many women of the nineteenth century, and for the same reasons it has become important philosophy. We now take Fuller’s awakening call seriously across the culture, even if we do not yet read her work as often as we should, or meet her demands.

As noted earlier, American philosophers and philosophers in America, just as the culture at large, have been blind to a variety of representative perspectives and have left a number of needs unattended. Only recently have we really begun to believe that American philosophy north of Mexico speaks Spanish. In 1980 Spanish was not recognized in most graduate programs in philosophy in the United States as a legitimate philosophical language. Only Greek, Latin, German, and French were acceptable. Fond as I am of these languages and their philosophical importance, the exclusion of Spanish, especially in our culture, was more sin than mistake. Not only did we overlook the significant work of Unamuno and Ortega y Gasset, but we completely ignored and, for the most part, continue to ignore a wealth of aesthetic and political writings from Central and South
America. Moreover, a large part of Hispanic thought and experience in the United States was rendered invisible to philosophy in America. For philosophy Americana, Spanish must become a required subject. We need to learn Spanish just as we need to learn rural and urban vernacular speech to grasp more of the breadth and depth of our cultural outlooks—our various autochthonous responses to this land. We learn these languages, again, because someone lives in them and is at home in them—they are the bearers of experience even if language itself is not fully adequate to experience. “By the end of this [the twentieth] century, Spanish speakers will comprise the biggest minority group in the U.S.,” says Anzaldúa, “a country whose students in high schools and colleges are encouraged to take French classes because French is considered more ‘cultured.’”12 The force of Anzaldúa’s argument is grounded in the experiences she has suffered.

Bringing one’s own experience into philosophical reflection nevertheless bears several dangers. It can easily become self-engrossed, self-serving, or even maudlin. It can distract our focus from argumentation and structure in such a way as to become merely descriptive, to be uninstructive. Moreover, as we know, it can become exclusionary, suggesting that the personal version of experience has a corner on the market of ideal experiences. Such were common complaints against pragmatism at the outset of the twentieth century. What those who complained failed to recognize was the cultural embeddedness of and their personal commitment to their own versions of philosophy. As Dewey notes, “It is an old story that philosophers, in common with theologians and social theorists, are as sure that personal habits and interests shape their opponents’ doctrines as they are that their own beliefs are ‘absolutely’ universal and objective in quality” (MW, 4:113). Personal experience does not validate or invalidate beliefs, but it is the place from which they arise and the place to which they return. Though I hope to avoid these failures of hubris and reductionism, I remain fallible and fallibilistic. My hope is to build out from experience; to be inclusive, not exclusive. But inclusion itself must be launched from somewhere—to try to be neutral or to try to repress one’s experiential origins strikes me as an exercise in bad
faith, the very thing that will undermine any philosophical outlook. No particular experience can include all other experiences, but in establishing one’s angle of vision, one establishes the premises for reaching out toward others’ experiences, for creating communication. Not a casual conversation but a thick exchange of thought and feeling. Again, it seems to me that it is precisely bell hooks’s forwardness in establishing both her take and her cultural place that makes her work accessible to such a wide range of readers. Her reader cannot help but engage in a conversation with the text.

I begin, then, with a sketch of my own inheritance as a way of opening a conversation. My particular angle of vision might best be described as that of a Northern “good ole boy.” Mine is a white “masculine” or “male” outlook, though I have for a long time been experientially persuaded of the truth of Fuller’s claim that

Male and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But, in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman.13

This masculine outlook, for me, bears with it what I would call a reasonable guilt that keeps me alive to self-aversive thinking and to the need to listen. My inheritance is a place from which to launch conversations that bring me to the lives and inheritances of others—it is transient and growing, not a fixed locale from which to dictate a world. It is at best representative.

Though rooted in the cultural Calvinism of late twentieth-century New England, I find an affinity between my experience and country singer Don Williams’s version of Bob McDill’s paean to Southern-boy life, “Good Ole Boys like Me”:

Nothing makes the sound in the night like the wind does
But you ain’t afraid if you’re washed in the blood like I was
The smell of cape jasmine through the window screen
John R. and the Wolfman kept me company
By the light of the radio by my bed
With Thomas Wolfe whispering in my head.
(Chorus) I can still hear the soft southern winds in the live oak trees
And those Williams boys they still mean a lot to me,
Hank and Tennessee,
I guess we’re all gonna be what we’re gonna be,
So what do you do with good ole boys like me?

When I was in school I ran with the kid down the street
But I watched him burn himself up on bourbon and speed
But I was smarter than most and I could choose,
Learned to talk like the man on the six o’clock news,
When I was eighteen, Lord, I hit the road
But it really doesn’t matter how far I go.\(^{14}\)

As a child of rural America when country music first began to mix
with rock and roll, I find myself well attuned to this story. My smells
were firs and spruces, my wind sang through white pines, and I saw
more than one friend lost to alcohol and drugs—even some who had
learned to talk like the person on the news. The rest of McDill’s story
fits pretty much as is. Though I cherish, as many of us do, much of
my past, the song serves as a reflection of a kind of fact, not as a
romantic assertion of any superiority of any fashion. The song’s cen-
tral interrogative mood best suits the philosophical outlook toward
both past and future; it repeats an ongoing openness, a questioning
that has a home, but a home that remains in transition. Radio DJs
and the music they send out into the night have always been close
companions for me, and this is a widely experienced phenomenon in
American cultures. In my experience, alcohol and religion ran to-
gether in ways that made sense of the Greek affinities for both Apollo
and Dionysius; and it did not strike me as odd when, on my first trip
to Florida, I noted the constant companionship of cinder block bars
and churches. Moreover, it is a simple demographic fact that those of
us in the 1960s and 1970s who \textit{could} leave our small, economically
depressed, laboring towns did so, and we left behind some who died
while dying to get out. The fact is that Thomas Wolfe, Jack Kerouac,
and Emily Dickinson stood close in my mind to Hank Williams,
Emmy Lou Harris, Janis Joplin, and the Flying Burrito Brothers. Like
many of the time, I was on the road at seventeen, and I didn’t know
what one did with “good ole boys like me.” The answer, eventually, was philosophy—and teaching philosophy—specifically, Greek and American philosophy. These somehow together provided a background within which I could keep trying to make sense of all the other things.

Having made my way to “journeyman” plumber working on Ramada Inns in northern New Hampshire, I faced several options: plumbing, logging, law school, or philosophy. The most socially implausible of these, philosophy, also made the most sense to me, if not to others. Philosophy—unlike logging, to which I lost my good friend Paul Loucks in his nineteenth year—posed no risk of mortal danger. But its absence posed the, in some ways, more imposing risk of living in the absence of my own humanity. As William James put it: “A man with no philosophy in him is the most inauspicious and unprofitable of all social mates.”

Unquestionably, choosing philosophy involved a romance—a deep, fascinating romance and one that was wide-ranging.

Studying the Greeks and Romans provided a sense of adventure, what Whitehead called an adventure of ideas. Studying logic was satisfying, a project with purpose, clarity, and some closure. But only American philosophy, or what I will now call philosophy Americana, felt like fresh air and on-the-road living. “Everything good is on the highway,” Emerson wrote in “Experience” (CW, 2:36). And from Thoreau the simple gesture: “Life consists in wildness. The most alive is the wildest.” I occasionally had trouble distinguishing Thoreau from Warren Zevon or Jerry Garcia. In the ordinary sense of vocation in the United States, choosing philosophy was a risky business. No one was hiring philosophers, especially not American philosophers, who, according to most mainstream philosophers in America, were not philosophers—it was not a good bet for getting work. The Transcendentalists are often considered to be merely literary figures. Peirce was mostly forgotten until the 1970s. James, having been dismissed by the British early on, was left behind when Harvard turned to critical realism and then to analysis. Susanne Langer labored away in anonymity. John Dewey lingered into the middle of the twentieth
century until he, too, was set aside. Choosing American philosophy risked choosing intellectual isolation and a life of Nietzschean resentment.

But central to the take of philosophy Americana was precisely the taking of such risks when they seemed important—this is one Romantic element that never evaded American thinkers, even the most systematic such as Royce and Peirce. Peirce eventually gambled his life away in pursuit of his philosophical thought. His human failures were immense, as the letters from his second wife, Juliette, to Alice James fully reveal, detailing his ineptitude as a spouse. After all, the world as we find it is precarious. Risk was the ground not only of failure but also of the possibility of success—the awakening of T. S. Eliot’s Prufrock to this fact is what makes his ruminations so deeply pathetic: “Do I dare?” he asks. As James put it:

Not a victory is gained, not a deed of faithfulness or courage is done, except upon a maybe; not a service, not a sally of generosity, not a scientific exploration or experiment or textbook, that may not be a mistake. It is only by risking our persons from one hour to another that we live at all. And often enough our faith beforehand in an uncertified result is the only thing that makes the result come true.¹⁸

This kind of thinking made sense to me. As in the farming around which I grew up, shit happens and there’s work to be done. If risk isn’t to be avoided, it may as well be embraced as a source of life. Besides, risking obscurity in life as a teacher of philosophy seemed in many ways relatively tame when friends were lost to drugs, cars, wars, business, and depression. Moreover, Dewey’s follow-up to James’s words spoke directly to the environment in which I found myself:

We have heaped up riches and means of comfort between ourselves and the risks of the world. We have professionalized amusement as an agency of escape and forgetfulness. But when all is said and done, the fundamentally hazardous character of the world is not seriously modified, much less eliminated. (LW, 1:45)

Vietnam veterans who were “still in Saigon” after 1975 knew this.¹⁹ Jimi Hendrix, in touching letters to his father, showed that he knew.²⁰
African Americans of all walks of life knew. Indians living on what we oddly call “reservations” knew. Abused women and children knew. The “means of comfort” could indeed be enjoyable, but at the same time they created a surface beneath which the hazards openly resided. Ironically, in some cases, the comforts themselves actually constituted the hazards of life. Again, risking a romance with American philosophy seemed relatively trivial, even if to others it seemed a dead end compared with a law degree from the University of Pennsylvania. Besides, choosing philosophy led directly to a real good, though it initially seemed a secondary issue—that is, the choice led to teaching.

Choosing to be a philosopher in America is also choosing, initially at least, to be a teacher. Teaching seemed like more of a good bet than a mortal risk. I had two great-aunts who taught Greek and Latin in Vermont public schools—there was a heritage and at least a baseline of respectability to fall back on. Teaching also seemed to hold some possibility of making a difference, another theme of the American philosophical take. The possibility of “making a difference” was an easy trade-off for risking lostness in American culture. It would be an experiment; it would require a healthful attitude and humor; it promised the possibilities of awakenings—for me and for students. It meant accepting whatever failures and losses crossed my path. And it brought with it a peculiar set of demands—a passionate and confessional love affair with philosophical practice and a vital and abiding concern for students as persons. The payoff on that score has been tremendous. And so, after graduate school, I came to join the ranks of Emerson’s insane angels, teaching “logic to Lutherans” at a small liberal arts college in Ohio.

The Humanizing Task of Insane Angels

Angels in American culture play some peculiar roles. Kitty Wells sang powerfully of the lives of “honky-tonk angels” who had been led astray by men. Gram Parsons sang of the “Grievous Angel,” a cross-country “semi” rig questing the myth of the American West and try-
ing to come to grips with the demise of Elvis. And Bruce Springsteen sang of the “hot rod angels” looking for the “promised land” of which Chuck Berry had given all rockers a taste in the 1950s. Moreover, it was in the 1950s that Jack Kerouac had begun to describe his own Beat Generation as a host of “desolation angels.” In light of this subsequent history, Emerson’s allusion to American scholars as “insane angels” seems apropos. American scholars and philosophers are strange and culturally estranged. One need only attend a few philosophy conferences to experience this. But I don’t intend this claim pejoratively—our minds run in different grooves and highways, and that is a good thing. My most memorable picture of this estrangement came when a group of American philosophers, in full tweed, met for a conference in the Tropicana Hotel in Las Vegas. The juxtaposition of slot machines and craps tables with staid discussions of Dewey’s virtue ethics was, in an odd and striking way, a kind of American beauty in itself, at once funny and deadly serious.

Though it is sometimes overlooked, it is a widespread belief of philosophers working in the American tradition that they are engaged in a project to better their culture. The gambling hope that underwrites our pedagogical practices reaches well beyond the sites of formal education. Following James and Dewey, these American scholars are hard-core meliorists. We are attentive to the ills around us. We think about things; we are committed to goods as ends-in-view. Hence the appropriateness of the tag “insane angels.” We are utopian with our eyes open. That is, as Erin McKenna suggests, we seek to improve things along the way, not to construct some magic, fixed, end-state world. We are, one might say, working utopians. Our bringing of “heaven” to Earth is always a finite and fallible project, as Emerson recognizes when he points out that when not in our angelic modes, we easily become “moping dogs.”

Both our strangeness—our cultural insanity—and our angelic practices are underwritten by our passion for thinking, writing, and talking. We are practitioners of philosophy. This is not something I think we should deny or dismiss as unimportant. This is where our passions and our abilities lie. I have emphasized the fact that we are
teachers because it is a fact often obscured when we describe our profession. But this does not mean that we are not also philosophers and scholars with an angelic passion for some particular strains of literature, history, and reflective thought. We think and write with an eye toward transforming ourselves, each other, and our culture. And though I opened this chapter with a concern for our invisibility, I do not want to underestimate the impact we can have, even when we as individuals remain invisible to our culture. Almost all thinkers in the American tradition have been realists in the same way. This includes James, whom Dewey rightly identifies as a realist in this respect—that our ideas have real effects in the world, they make a difference. The transactions among ideas, actions, and habits constitute a natural process whose powers should not be underestimated. Philosophy understood this way is never “just talk.” Talking turns out to be an important medium of transformation. As countless oppositional thinkers of the late twentieth century have noted, talk is a central factor in identity construction, in communicative practices that can ameliorate difficult situations, and in simply “being heard,” as evidenced in the title of bell hooks’s book *Talking Back*.

It seems important, therefore, that we follow Dewey in avoiding the scholastic either/or traps of some analytic philosophy. We are not either theoreticians or practitioners; we are practicing theoreticians and theoretically oriented practitioners. Pragmatism in particular has always emphasized the continuities, the borderlands and frontiers of life and thought, and the messy dialectical structures of each of our lives. Deductive neatness and intellectual clarity make thought’s work easier, but for the most part miss the point that our thinking must attend to our lives and must therefore to some degree meet those lives on their own terms. When Dewey worried about “the problems of philosophers,” he was not abandoning metaphysical questions and moral theory. He was worried about philosophers who intentionally excommunicate themselves from the flow of ordinary experience and give themselves carte blanche to engage in an intellectually elitist activity that is bent more on keeping unlike minds out than on attending to the reflective needs of a culture. Metaphysics, ethics, and
aesthetics are quite natural functions of human experience. Problems
do not arise when we engage in these pursuits, but only when thought
does not return to primary experience and make a difference in how
we envision and confront our own futures. To use our philosophical
abilities in other ways is to neglect the responsibilities of intelligence.

Empedocles and Anaxagoras asked about the nature of the cosmos
and yet were thoroughly and intensely engaged in their social envi-
ronments. We see the same features in the development of American
philosophy. Jonathan Edwards’s concerns with freedom of the will
and the nature of religious affections were deeply existential ques-
tions. We see in his “Personal Narrative” and elsewhere the ongoing
self-trial of one who hopes he knows but measures his knowingness
against the backdrop of a genuine belief in original sin. The Transcen-
dentalists were a loose association of young folks in New England
who believed that the revolutions wrought by their parents and
grandparents had not gone sufficiently far. Emerson’s pointed quest
for his own religious life led him to a forced exile from Harvard Col-
lege for forty years. Margaret Fuller openly sought to create an intel-
lectual and political clearing in which women might think and work.
And Josiah Royce, as I will argue in a subsequent chapter, looked for
a vocation for his spectacular analytic and synthetic abilities—he not
only wrote metaphysics, he asked about its role in our culture and
about his own role as a thinker in human community.

In short, the American philosophers whom I read and about
whom I write are lovers of wisdom both practical and theoretical.
They are live-minded and passionate, politically committed, and
morally compassionate. Those of us who have apprenticed ourselves
to this tradition of Emersonian insane angels will find no role models
dispassion and indifference. Philosophy Americana deals in emo-
tions, feelings, and what Dewey came to call qualitative immediacies.
Its ideas are had as well as thought, and these ideas have consequences
with which we must live. Purveyors of these traits are likely not to fit
well in the entrepreneurial setting of the contemporary academy in
the United States. We are already engaged in a deep, though nearly
silent, struggle for ownership of our teaching and for the visibility of
our practices and ideas. When John McDermott asserts that to be human is to humanize, he well describes the task of the American scholar. In McDermott’s words, we are “called upon to create meaning, to engender truth. The activity places [us] at the center of the flow of experience.”

Considering some of the ways that some American philosophers have approached this humanizing task is the work of philosophy Americana. Exploring the ways, from my own limited angle of vision, that we might fit our own work into this ongoing project is the corollary concern of my writing. There needs to be a transaction between our inheritances and our possibilities and modes of creativity so that we can engage the battles at hand and think of fruitful ways into our own futures. The present volume involves an exploration of a philosophical inheritance in its connections with a wider culture of education, literature, religion, nature, and art. Moreover, as I noted in the Preface, I am attentive to the narrowness of my own perspective, and hope in a subsequent volume to expand these transactions to more directly engage some of the other philosophical voices I have mentioned, including mestiza chicana, Native American, African American, Asian American, and Latin American, among others. Philosophy cannot be effective if it merely tries to oversee culture. At some point it must come to close quarters with the other dimensions of culture if it hopes to become visible and to make any difference at all.