The Politics of Survival
Lara Trout

Published by Fordham University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/14670

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=454574
I use the philosophy of classical American pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce to teach my students about unintentional racism. Many of these students, almost all of whom are Euro-American white, report a transformation—from not believing in the possibility of unintentional racism to fully acknowledging this phenomenon. The type of racism I focus on in class—and in this book—is white racism against people of color, which includes denying or restricting, based on race, a person or group’s access to societal recognition, respect, resources, and protection. Racism in this sense can take on both everyday forms (such as rudeness) and systemic forms (such as denial of equal access to education). By unintentional racism, I mean racist behavior—or behavior that supports racism—that is not consciously willed.

Traditional Peirce scholars may wonder how Peirce can be so pedagogically effective for this social critical consciousness-raising. Scholars in social criticism may also have this question coupled with
curiosity about the specifics of Peirce’s philosophy. I would answer that Peirce’s work provides nuanced descriptive and prescriptive resources for grasping societal ills that often elude the understanding of those belonging to socio-politically dominant groups, such as Euro-American whites, the economic middle class, men, heterosexuals, and others. I use “socio-political” and its derivatives to signify a relation to institutional power dynamics that influence how humans treat each other within communities, including factors such as societal recognition and respect, as well as the distribution of resources, legal rights, and citizenship.

The Politics of Survival: Peirce, Affectivity, and Social Criticism details these Peircean resources in the context of a provocative engagement with the affective dimensions of Peirce’s philosophy. This engagement lends itself to a demonstration of the rich compatibilities between Peirce’s thought and social criticism. By “social criticism” I mean any type of critique, such as feminism and race theory (my foci in this book), that acknowledges the reality of oppression, as well as the theoretical and practical mechanisms by which oppression can be perpetuated. I understand social justice to be the ultimate goal of social criticism. Social justice includes, without being limited to, a society’s giving fair and dignified treatment, as well as rendering its resources, opportunities, and protections concretely available, to all groups.

I do not pretend that Peirce himself—a Euro-American white man who lived from 1839 to 1914 and was born into the socio-economic elite of Cambridge and Boston—intended his thought to be feminist or conducive to race critique (Brent 1998, 26). He certainly was not a social reformer on these fronts. Although he was a Northerner who was of age to fight in the Civil War, Peirce was not interested in fighting and was relieved to be exempted because of his work with the U.S. Coastal Survey. He was not against slavery either (Brent 1998, 61–62; Menand 2001, 161). And he was also against women’s suffrage (Brent 1998, 319).

I also do not intend to somehow vindicate Peirce on a personal level by showing how his philosophy can be used to promote social
justice. Nonetheless, it is significant to note that in his later years Peirce experienced poverty, which in many respects removed him from the high-society circles in which he had formerly moved. His later writings, such as his essay “Evolutionary Love” (1893), suggest a corresponding sensitivity to the perspective of the poor. In a letter to his good friend William James, dated March 13, 1897, Peirce notes that “a new world of which I knew nothing, and of which I cannot find that anybody who has written has really known much, has been disclosed to me, the world of misery” (quoted in Brent 1998, 259–60; cf. 261–62). While Peirce’s sensitivity to misery did not extend to the plight of people of color and women in the United States, it did give him footing from which to give philosophical voice to those considered “weak” by society.

Moreover, Peirce was a fallibilist who was committed to the evolution of his ideas. He valued self-critique and self-correction as indispensable qualities of human reason and actively sought out critical feedback from his contemporaries. He also realized that he was immersed enough in his culture to be blind to some of his own prejudices, saying that “[t]ruly to paint the ground where we ourselves are standing is an impossible problem in historical perspective . . .” (CP 4.32). My guess is that Peirce expected and hoped that after he died his work would go on living and growing. My project engages his ideas in this spirit.

Taking an infinitely inclusive community of inquiry as its ideal, Peircean science requires social justice. As ideally practiced, it also demonstrates fallibilism, self-control, and agapic love, whereby it embraces new ideas as sources for ongoing growth and self-critique, even and especially when these ideas challenge existing beliefs. It follows, therefore, that the Peircean community of inquiry eschews exclusionary prejudice. Moreover, Peirce’s epistemological doctrine of Critical Common-sensism (CCS) calls humans to expand self-control over their common-sense beliefs and provides conceptual tools to address gaps that exist between his communal ideal and the concrete realities of heterosexism, racism, sexism, and other social ills, which undermine actual inquiry and growth in flesh-and-blood communities.
My style of argument in this book reflects Peirce’s injunction that philosophical reasoning “should not form a chain which is no stronger than its weakest link, but a cable whose fibers may be ever so slender, provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected” (W 2:213). I articulate a Peircean, social critical narrative within and by means of an argument by demonstration. Regarding the latter, I argue that the affective dimensions of Peirce’s philosophy point to compatibilities between his thought and social criticism. I present many fibers, or what Doug Anderson would call “strands,” of Peircean thought in dialogue with thinkers who help draw out its social critical potential. These strands are, indeed, “numerous and intimately connected.”

My demonstration calls on the contemporary neuroscientific work of Antonio Damasio, as well as the philosophical, social critical work of thinkers including Linda Alcoff, Susan Babbitt, Lorraine Code, Marilyn Frye, bell hooks, María Lugones, Peggy McIntosh, Charles Mills, Shannon Sullivan, Nancy Tuana, Patricia Williams, and others. I use Damasio’s work to give voice to the latent embodiment and post-Darwinian themes in Peirce’s work. This in turn highlights the inescapable bias that characterizes human cognition. By “bias” I mean “perspective” in its various inflections, such as embodied, personal, socio-political, etc. For Peirce the bias in human cognition points to the need for a communal inquiry into reality and knowledge, in conjunction with scientific testing. A solitary Cartesian knower simply will not do. I use work in social criticism to draw out the social critical implications of Peirce’s communal epistemology and metaphysics.

These implications form the strands of my Peircean narrative, which traces affective, social critical themes, chronologically, through three of Peirce’s major published essay series and his writings on association: the Cognition Series, published in the Journal of Speculative Philosophy in the late 1860s; the Illustrations of the Logic of Science series, published in Popular Science Monthly in the late 1870s; and the Monist “Cosmology Series” and association writings, from the 1890s.
It culminates in a study of Peirce’s mature doctrine of Critical Common-sensism, which he articulated in the 1900s.

The narrative begins with the uniquely embodied human organism. It acknowledges, as Peirce does, that humans begin life as children whose habits are shaped by the social, and by implication socio-political, habits of their caretakers and society in general. This means that children, dependent and vulnerable as they are, can internalize oppression-perpetuating beliefs (or habits) before they are old enough to examine them critically. By “internalization” I mean the incorporation, by means of reinforcement or trauma, of a belief into one’s personal comportment and worldview, such that the belief is difficult to eradicate rationally. In hegemonic societies, this internalization can be continually reinforced through messages that portray a privileged experience as a societal norm. By “privilege” and its derivatives, I mean the increased advantages, opportunities, and resources available to those who are members of socio-politically dominant groups in society, such as the economically middle class, Euro-American whites, heterosexuals, men, and so on. By “hegemonic,” I mean reflective of a closed circle of power representing and enforcing only self-interested perspectives. In hegemonic societies, mainstream societal habits are imposed by those in power and leave out non-hegemonic perspectives. Historically in the West, societies have been hegemonic to the extent that they have limited social inquiry to Euro-American white, propertied males, who were also Christian and heterosexual. Historically non-hegemonic perspectives have included people of color, the poor, and women, as well as non-Christians and GLBTQs. In conjunction with this societal hegemony, children who belong to groups privileged by race, sex, economic security, and/or other factors can grow into adults who perpetuate oppressive social structures—such as racism, sexism, and discrimination against the poor and/or other groups—without intending to. This is because children’s vulnerability and dependency on others makes their internalization of discriminatory beliefs likely. Such internalized beliefs can become so deeply rooted that they function undetected in
adulthood. Peirce has resources to address these social critical concerns. In addition to its inclusive and agapic ideals, the Peircean community of inquiry abides by the doctrine of Critical Commonsensism, whereby it calls into question its background or commonsense beliefs, which is where nonconscious discriminatory beliefs can dwell.

My project takes up Charlene Seigfried’s invitation, in her book *Pragmatism and Feminism*, to embrace the compatibilities between these two domains of philosophical discourse, namely pragmatism and feminism (1996, 4). It is “pragmatist-feminist” in this regard. Like Seigfried, however, I do not wish to be limited by this description, placed into a box (9). Pragmatist-feminism describes a sensibility that deeply informs my work, even as my project extends into neuroscience and social criticism broadly construed. Regarding its feminist sensibilities, in addition to the description of social criticism just given, my work more specifically acknowledges the oppression of women and the significance of gender categories (femininity and masculinity) for both men and women in the West. In addition my work takes on the mantle of feminist or liberatory epistemology, by critiquing modernist epistemological assumptions as a means of promoting social justice. I prefer the term “liberatory epistemology” to “feminist epistemology” because the former is broader, just as I prefer the term “social criticism” to simply “feminism” because I prefer to envision the axes of social reform—such as economic class, race, sex, sexuality, and so on—as interweaving.

Regarding its pragmatist sensibilities, let me note that classical American pragmatism, which I call “pragmatism” for short, is significantly different from everyday understandings of “pragmatism” as a narrow, “what’s in it for me,” utilitarian outlook. Pragmatism as the philosophy practiced by Jane Addams, John Dewey, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, William James, Alain Locke, George Herbert Mead, and Peirce himself is rooted in the union of thought and practice. Experience is the learning and testing ground for our ideas. Peirce’s pragmatic maxim instructs that the meaning of a belief is found in
the patterns of effects, or habits, to which the belief leads. For example, my belief in the importance of eradicating racism in the United States results in habits including (but not limited to) incorporating the work of people of color into my course syllabi and working to unlearn my unintentional racism. For the pragmatists our beliefs are habits. And our habits inform all our behavior, in contrast to the narrower colloquial understanding of habits as including only repetitive or annoying activity, such as brushing one’s teeth before bed or talking too loudly on one’s cell phone. Habits are enacted not only by human individuals but also by human communities and, for Peirce, by nature itself (insofar as nature is external to humans). Through the large-scale habits of society and nature, individual habits are inescapably shaped. In human habits body and mind come together, and so do emotion and reason, individual and society, and self and others, as well as the personal and the political.

This brings us to several points where pragmatism and feminism, as well as other forms of social criticism, often converge, via challenging the traditional dichotomies erected by modern philosophy and the Cartesian confidence that an individual thinker can achieve certain knowledge, as long as she fully transcends all sources of bias, such as her body and emotions. Pragmatism embraces inclusively communal, scientifically grounded, fallibilist pursuits of knowledge that compensate for and celebrate the fact that individuals are inescapably situated. It is here that pragmatism can offer epistemological and metaphysical insights to feminism and social criticism. At the same time feminism and social criticism offer to pragmatism insights about the socio-political blind spots—regarding economic class, race, religion, sex, sexuality, and other factors—that can undermine the inclusiveness of pragmatism’s ideal for communal, scientific inquiry into knowledge and reality (cf. Seigfried 1996, 9–10).

In addition to responding to Seigfried’s pragmatist-feminist invitation, I also issue an invitation of my own, for a continued expansion of the road of inquiry into both Peircean affectivity and Peircean social criticism. In many respects, my book only scratches the surface. Regarding Peirce’s works, I stay to the beaten path of his published
works. While this approach is aimed at helping introduce many of Peirce’s major essays to a larger audience, it also leaves to one side the infinitely fertile ground of Peirce’s unpublished manuscripts. Even as I am excited to present innovative interpretations of Peirce’s work to readers of various stripes, I am aware that there is much more to be done beyond the work I offer here.

On the social criticism front, first of all, I limit my primary focus to the unintentional perpetuation of racism and, to a lesser extent, sexism. Below I will explain my specific treatment of unintentional discrimination. Here I want to stress that limiting my framework to unintentional racism and sexism is not meant to imply that other types of oppression are less prevalent or less important. Rather, I engage this narrower focus because it enables me to go into more depth than I would be able to otherwise. This depth allows me to show some of the complexities that are involved in any particular kind of oppression, such as racism, and how these complexities relate to unintentional discrimination. Were I to try to address as many types of oppression (and corresponding unintentional “isms”) as possible, I would need to sacrifice depth in order to keep my project within bounds in terms of length and clarity of presentation. I invite the reader, throughout the chapters that follow, to extrapolate from my presentations of racism and sexism, in order to find similarities and differences regarding the complexities involved in other types of oppression. For my part, I continually gesture beyond racism and sexism, to remind the reader to engage in this extrapolation.

Second, my treatment of thinkers from feminism and race theory is selective and insight focused. It is selective in that I do not pretend to give a full panorama of work being done in feminism and race theory that can relate to Peirce’s thought. I invite others fill in gaps I have left behind. My incorporation of specific thinkers is insight focused in that I target specific, circumscribed points of connection between a given thinker and Peirce’s work. For example, in Chapter 2, I describe Charles Mills’s conception of “subpersonhood,” which he
explains in his book *The Racial Contract*, to help foreground the social critical insight latent in a reference Peirce makes to the power of testimony to convince someone she is “mad” (W 2:202; Mills 1997, 53–62). I do not, however, explicitly engage the larger project of *The Racial Contract*, despite my agreement with its argumentation. Proceeding in this insight-based way is intended to create a narrative that balances introducing (for those who need it) many voices from feminism and race theory with giving a manageable presentation of Peirce’s ideas.

My audience includes both Peircean and social critical scholars, whom I want to introduce to each other properly. I have met few social criticism scholars who are aware of the potential of Peirce’s work for social critical ends. I have also met few Peirce scholars who are familiar with work in social criticism. I would like for all these scholars to get to know each other better. My audience also includes those readers interested in the intersection of Antonio Damasio’s work and philosophy, as well as nonspecialists who are willing to brave the technical discussions to follow. I provide many concrete examples in order to make my presentation approachable. I beg the patience of each of these audiences as, throughout the book, I explain concepts basic to various specialists, in order to keep all my audiences on the same page.

The narrower, scholarly genealogy of my project begins, quite simply, with my interest in two dimensions of Peircean scholarship that are underdeveloped: the latent post-Darwinian affective themes in Peirce’s work and the compatibility between Peirce’s work and social criticism. By “affectivity” I mean the ongoing body-minded communication between the human organism and her or his individual, social, and external environments, for the promotion of survival and growth. This communication is shaped by biological, individual, semiotic, social, and other factors. My treatment of Peircean affectivity includes feelings, emotion, instinct, interest, sentiment, sympathy, and agapic love, as well as belief, doubt, and habit.

There is a tendency within Peircean scholarship to underemphasize, or overlook altogether, the post-Darwinian and embodiment
themes that inform Peirce’s writings. Even studies of Peircean emotion and sentiment neglect them. Moreover, so do studies of Peirce’s account of the agapastic evolution of the universe (that is, evolution by means of agapic love). Yet Peirce viewed the human person as an *animal organism* whose survival depends on the successful navigation of an environment outside of her or his control. He makes regular reference to post-Darwinian and/or embodiment themes throughout his work. Moreover, Peirce is aware of the *uniqueness* of the human organism’s body, a uniqueness that goes hand in hand with the inescapable bias and resource found in an individual human’s cognition.

It is understandable that Peircean scholarship has consistently overlooked embodiment and survival themes in Peirce’s work. After all, he does not engage in extended discussions of these issues, often making only abbreviated or implicit references. It can seem that he backgrounds these themes because they are not important. I would argue, however, that Peirce considers them to be too obvious to require his attention. Those who know anything of Peirce’s life know that he was—to put it mildly—a brilliant, focused, and impatient man who had little tolerance for spelling things out to slow or stubborn interlocutors. He was loath to make connections for his readers that they could make for themselves (EP 2:301). This tendency is unfortunate in the present case, given that his audience was (and often still is) steeped in modernist habits of thought and composed of formally educated, economically advantaged persons. It would have been (and still can be) all too easy for them to forget that embodiment and survival issues affect all humans. Even persons with assured access to food, shelter, and physical protection are vulnerable, embodied organisms who must interact successfully with their environment in order to survive. My reading of Peirce is therefore a proactive one, which foregrounds the individualized human embodiment and survival concerns of the human organism. This approach provides a richer account of Peircean affectivity, which flows naturally into social justice issues, because human affective engagement involves encountering not only natural large-scale habits, such as gravity, but
also socio-political large-scale habits, such as those informing heterosexism, racism, sexism, and other social ills.

My reading of Peirce is also proactive regarding the social critical implications I continually highlight in his work. On this front, the contributions of classical American pragmatism to contemporary discussions of addressing and ameliorating concrete oppressive conditions are readily acknowledged by many scholars in this field. Peirce, however, tends to be sidelined in these discussions, noted as the founder of pragmatism yet given little more than superficial acknowledgment. The reasons for this are not difficult to hypothesize. First of all, Peirce was no social reformer, as noted earlier regarding his racist and sexist views. Moreover, Peirce can be perceived as an elitist scientist whose level of technicality forecloses dialogue regarding social concerns (Seigfried 1996, 22, 281 n. 20). In all fairness, Peirce’s personal track record is indisputably dubious, and his writing style and level of technicality can, at times, be elitist and off-putting. Nonetheless, Peirce’s ideas do support social inclusiveness and critique.

Peirce’s philosophy provides significant resources to add to contemporary discussions of social criticism. The broad strokes of his explicitly antimodern epistemology and metaphysics are compatible with efforts to grasp (while avoiding postmodern extremes) the socio-political dimensions of “reality,” which structure our beliefs, concepts, and habits. For Peirce, humans are not equipped with an immediate epistemic grasp of their world. Instead, they are dependent on communal scientific inquiry, whereby they pool the resources of their perspectives. Knowledge and articulations of reality are products of this ongoing communal venture, whereby hypotheses are continually tested against the external world. Ideal scientific inquiry, as noted above, involves an infinitely large community of inquiry that extends over an indefinite period of time. This breadth of scope is required so that humans may have the best grasp possible of the habits of nature, which are infinitely complex, grow, and elude capture in absolute natural laws. Scientific inquiry is not a finite endeavor. Any particular articulation of reality is fallible and thus subject to further revision. Therefore it is a reflection of immaturity for
an individual person or a finite community to decide that they have a lock on truth. Such hubris would be in violation of Peirce’s oft-repeated admonition: “Do not block the way of inquiry” (EP 2:48).

In “Fixation of Belief” (1877), Peirce’s discussion of the authority method is, in fact, a portrayal of a hegemonic society in which inquiry is blocked. Peirce was aware that communal articulations of inquiry can be usurped to oppressive ends by those in power. When this occurs, exclusionary societal habits are enforced and preemptive measures are taken to forestall growth. These measures involve educating children and the public against questioning the status quo. His later writings reassert his attunement to this danger, calling for an inclusive communal inquiry that does not shun society’s “weak” but embraces them as integral to an agapic community whose growth depends on the sympathetic continuity of all its members.

Beyond these broad affinities to social justice, Peircean thought makes at least three contributions. First of all, the sophistication of Peirce’s phenomenology provides conceptual tools to articulate how socio-political factors are integral to a person’s experience. I will be calling on his category of secondness, by which he means environmental resistance to one’s movement in the world. Secondness, in a socio-political inflection that I introduce, allows us to describe how, for example, people of color in the United States often encounter racism-based obstacles that Euro-Americans do not experience. There can also be secondness as a result of economic classism, sexism, heterosexism, and so on. Since U.S. mainstream culture tends to represent the Euro-American white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, Christian, etc., experience as a neutral view of “human experience” in general, people in any of the corresponding hegemonic groups can internalize a concept of “human experience” that does not involve racial obstacles, or obstacles because of sexism, economic classism, heterosexism, or religious beliefs. This perpetuates racism (and other “isms”) by failing to acknowledge the contemporary reality of racial (and other forms of) discrimination in the United States.

Second, Peirce’s account of human cognition lends unique support to the social critical position that no one can achieve a “god’s-eye”
view on the world. Any point of view is a situated one. For Peirce, cognition is embodied and therefore inescapably affective. This affectivity is semiotic in nature, as each of us naturally makes personal signs out of the objects in our world, according to our experience of them. Thus the flow of a person’s cognition is informed by a deeply personalized attunement to the world outside of her, a unique attunement that makes each individual an epistemological resource to her community, even as her perspective reflects inescapable bias. It is by means of communal inquiry that humans pool the resources of their varied epistemological perspectives, discovering points of rational or intellectual communion in the midst of their idiosyncratic bodily orientations toward the world. This approach reflects the metaphor of the blind people standing stationary at different points around an elephant, who pool their perspectives (tail, legs, ears, trunk, and so on) to achieve the best description possible of the elephant, given their limitations in perspective. Communal inquiry, then, does not eliminate bias but reflects the best efforts of the inescapably biased individuals who undertake it. Any communal agreement about how reality is best articulated (in light of scientific testing) reflects the situatedness of the inquirers and is amenable to future critique and growth.

Third, Peirce articulates the nonconscious influence that our habits can have on our reasoning process. Since our habits are shaped from childhood by socio-political factors, this means that oppressive societal habits can find their way unnoticed into a person’s habitual orientation toward the world. In this respect, Peirce’s ideas on habit-taking and reality enable a nuanced articulation of how individuals come to embody socio-political bias by means of internalized habits. This brings us back to Peirce’s doctrine of Critical Common-sensism, which calls for the engagement and enhancement of human self-control, by requiring an epistemological, communal self-critique. In this self-critique, community members work to bring nonconscious exclusionary beliefs to light, such as those that perpetuate economic classism, heterosexism, racism, sexism, and other social ills. I argue that members of oppressed groups, such as the poor, GLBTQs, people
of color, and women, play pivotal roles in this respect, since the beliefs in question may not be detectible to those who are privileged by them (the economically secure, heterosexuals, Euro-American whites, and men). The various types of socio-political secondness encountered by those in oppressed groups are experiential evidence that discriminatory beliefs are still in play.

A further point to address in the context of Peirce's contributions to social criticism is that his conceptions of the terms “intellect,” “rationality,” “objectivity,” and “reasonableness” do not lend support to the racist and sexist bias so prevalent in the traditional Western philosophical canon, a canon that often portrays people of color and women as incapable of fully exercising or achieving what these terms have represented. Peirce is explicit that all humans possess the rational/intellectual capacity to grasp the regularities of the world around them and to form aims for their own conduct (W 3:285; EP 2:348). This capacity is linked to natural selection and survival. It unifies humans, rather than dividing them into those who can be rational and those who cannot. Objectivity, for Peirce, reflects the extent to which knowledge is endorsed by the community as a whole. This precludes a limited community of inquiry from proclaiming that their research results are “objectively” true, come what may. Peirce—who admonishes us not to block the road of inquiry—would frown on epistemological procedures that result in objective-as-infallible knowledge. Peircan objectivity implies that communal endorsement has been achieved, not seen as unnecessary (W 2:270–71; CP 7.259, 266).34

Finally, Peircan reason involves growth in diversification (EP 2:254–55, 343–44; CP 1.174; EP 1:310). At the level of human thought and behavior, reasonableness manifests as our beliefs/habits grow in complexity, which can fruitfully be applied to social critical issues. To use racism as an example: When I was younger I thought racism no longer existed in the United States, except in an individual here or there. I believed the civil rights movement in the 1960s had brought an end to institutional racism in this country. This belief was unreasonable in its extreme lack of diversity, reflecting my very limited white, middle-class, suburban experience. As my consciousness was
raised by my work as a teacher with African American students, my belief about the existence of racism grew in reasonableness to embrace experience outside of my own—thus becoming more diverse, by accounting for both my white experience and the experience of many African Americans. It was still unreasonable in that my view of racism was only a black-white paradigm, which assumed only African Americans experienced racism. More reasonableness has been achieved as I have rendered more sophisticated my understanding of racism to apply to many more types, such as white racism against Asian Americans, Latino Americans, and Native Americans. There is still much more reasonableness for me to achieve, as I learn about the diversity within the classification Asian American, for example, as well as issues that arise for those of mixed race.  

That Peirce himself was not sensitized to reform regarding race (or women’s) issues underscores the significant contribution social criticism can make to Peirce’s work. Social criticism offers insight in identifying socio-political blind spots, in order that his infinitely inclusive agapic and scientific ideals are not undermined by nonconscious racism, sexism, or other exclusionary beliefs. It is, thus, a two-way street. Peirce’s ideas are fortified by, even as they make contributions to, contemporary scholarship in social criticism. The following epistemological-metaphysical questions are common to both: Whose perspectives are reflected in how reality is articulated? Whose perspectives are left out? How can articulations of reality perpetuate oppression? Social criticism helps Peirce’s philosophy extend its reach by extending its inclusive ideals beyond the borders of an imagination limited by hegemonic viewpoints that are circumscribed by whiteness, maleness, economical security, heterosexuality, and so on (cf. Code 2001). In other words, social criticism helps Peirce be more Peircean.

As a means of ongoing synthesis and illustration of the interrelationships between the affective and social critical elements of Peirce’s thought, I will examine issues of racism and (to a lesser extent) sexism in the United States. As I said above, I do not pretend to give a thoroughgoing analysis or the final word as to how Peirce’s ideas can
be applied in this context. Rather, I use U.S. history and mainstream culture as an extended concrete example of social problems that Peirce’s ideas can help detect and address. Cornel West comments on the distinct failure of classical American thinkers, like Peirce, to address issues of race in the United States, even as these issues were undeniably part of the fabric of U.S. society when they were writing: “If a Martian were to come down to America and look at the American pragmatist tradition, they would never know that there was slavery, Jim Crow, lynching, discrimination, segregation in the history of America. This is a major indictment” (2004, 225; cf. 1989, 5). My efforts in this book retroactively address this lacuna with regard to Peirce.

The connections I draw in this respect are oriented toward a specific problematic. Within the United States, an actual agapic and inclusive community of inquiry is especially difficult to achieve because of the nonconscious influence of internalized, exclusionary habits that are shared among well-intentioned whites (and/or others in hegemonic groups). By “well-intentioned” whites (and/or others in hegemonic groups), I mean people who repudiate racism (and/or other forms of discrimination). I do not mean to imply that all whites repudiate racism; this would be naive. Many white people, however, think that racism is abhorrent yet can inadvertently perpetuate racism because of the influence of nonconscious racist habits. The same scenario applies to men and sexism, heterosexuals and heterosexism, and so on. Coupled with the historical exploitation and underrepresentation of people of color, women, GLBTQs, and so on, these nonconscious habits promote the continued marginalization of these groups.

In fact, this same group of well-intentioned white people is my primary audience, insofar as I think Peirce’s ideas can truly help white people, including myself, raise our consciousness about the prevalence of racism in the United States. Peirce’s ideas can also foster consciousness-raising for men about sexism and for others in hegemonic groups regarding other forms of discrimination. This is not to imply that conscious racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other social
ills no longer exist. The critiques presented in the following chapters are easily extended to such bigotry. Rather, for rhetorical purposes, I wish to focus on nonconscious habits of exclusion, in order to challenge a folk assumption common among Euro-American whites (and others) living in the United States—namely, that prejudices such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc., are only a matter of conscious intent. According to this assumption, if I am not consciously racist, sexist, heterosexist, etc., then I cannot act or think in a racist, sexist, heterosexist, etc., fashion. Linda Alcoff puts it this way, addressing racism: “[I]t is commonly believed that for one to be a racist one must be able to access in consciousness some racist belief, and that if introspection fails to produce such a belief then one is simply not racist” (2006, 188). This naive yet prevalent attitude undermines a sensitivity, among whites (and others in hegemonic groups), to the current racist (as well as sexist, heterosexist, and other discriminatory) structures that continue to inform U.S. society (cf. Bernasconi 2001, esp. 287, 295). Also undermining that sensitivity is the fact that, according to mainstream U.S. discourse, both racism and sexism have been largely eradicated in the United States, as a result of the civil rights and women’s movements. In this respect, racism and sexism are different from heterosexism and prejudice against non-Christians, the latter prejudices still finding significant numbers of supporters in mainstream U.S. society.

In the chapters to follow, I address elements of Peirce’s thought that help explain how this naïveté about racism and sexism comes about, and also how it might be addressed epistemologically through a synthesis of his ideals of infinite inclusiveness and agapic love operating in conjunction with his doctrine of Critical Common-sensism. In Peirce’s system, there is hope amid the most indurate of habits, because there is always room for spontaneity and self-control. In concrete communities of inquiry in the United States, this spontaneity may take the form of an individual or group of community members who can identify racist and/or sexist beliefs that other community members cannot see. The majority members in such communities are called to exercise self-control by resisting the temptation to
reject this testimony about racism and/or sexism, in order to embrace it as a legitimate hypothesis and potential source of communal growth past limiting, nonconscious beliefs.

In Chapter 1, I introduce Peircean affectivity, within an explicitly post-Darwinian context, as the ongoing body-minded communication between the human organism and her or his individual, social, and external environments, for the promotion of survival and growth. This communication is shaped by biological, individual, semiotic, social, and other factors. I use Antonio Damasio’s work to give voice to the latent affective and post-Darwinian themes in Peirce’s work. I also introduce Peirce’s phenomenology, including a socio-political inflection of his concept of secondness, or environmental resistance, which I apply to heterosexism, racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. Finally, I use this initial chapter to give the reader the Peircean background necessary for my chronological study of three of Peirce’s essay series, in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, respectively.

My work in these middle chapters shows that dialogue with social criticism both foregrounds the social criticism potential of Peirce’s ideas and pushes Peirce’s ideas to better address the very issues they help to describe and diagnose. Chapter 2 examines Peirce’s Cognition Series published in the Journal of Speculative Philosophy in the late 1860s. My starting point is the uniquely embodied human organism whose cognition is inescapably biased by both personal and social factors, which points to the need for a communal inquiry into knowledge and reality. I use work in social criticism to highlight the socio-political implications of Peirce’s communal epistemology and metaphysics, especially as these pertain to child development. Children, dependent and vulnerable as they are, can internalize discriminatory beliefs (or habits) from a young age, which can remain intact nonconsciously in adulthood.

In Chapter 3, I examine the Illustrations of the Logic of Science series published in Popular Science Monthly in the late 1870s, to address how communities can best avoid perpetuating the internalization danger just outlined. The scientific method is lauded by Peirce
in this series as a superior method for “fixing” (establishing) belief-habits. This is because of its grounding in an infinitely inclusive communal inquiry into truth and knowledge, where beliefs are not brutally imposed or arbitrarily adopted (as in the authority and a priori methods); rather, beliefs are tested against external reality. While Peirce’s infinitely inclusive communal ideal bodes well for social justice, social criticism concerns still push Peirce beyond his work in this Logic of Science series, because he does not address the nonconscious discriminatory background beliefs that can enter scientific method through the back door, leading to the rejection of feedback from non-hegemonic groups about discrimination occurring within the scientific community. Thus applying the scientific ideal in actual communities falls prey to nonconscious discrimination.

Chapter 4 takes up Peirce’s Monist “Cosmology Series” and association writings, from the 1890s, showcasing an additional communal ideal, one that can help mitigate a community’s rejection of input coming from perspectives that differ from the norm. Agape is this ideal; it is a love characterized by an embrace of the different, even and especially when this difference is threatening. This ideal can be especially helpful for those in hegemonic groups to adopt in relation to feedback about discrimination that they may not want to hear. Nonetheless, here, too, work in social criticism points to an analogous application problem. Agape, like scientific ideals, can be undermined in practice by the nonconscious functioning of exclusionary beliefs that can override the conscious intent of those in hegemonic groups.

My project culminates, in Chapter 5, in a study of Peirce’s mature doctrine of Critical Common-sensism, which he articulated in the 1900s. I show how Critical Common-sensism (CCS)—once pushed to its full potential through dialogue with social criticism—addresses the application problem plaguing the scientific method and agapic love, because CCS requires the scrutiny of individual and communal common-sense (or background) beliefs. CCS forms a synthesis with the infinitely inclusive ideal of the scientific method and the agapic
ideal, to create a richly textured ideal of reasonableness that takes seriously the deep influence of socialized instinctive beliefs, which can include heterosexist, racist, sexist, and other discriminatory beliefs. This synthesis does not completely solve the application problem by offering suggestions and/or strategies for structural change regarding heterosexism, racism, sexism, and other social ills. Peircean reasonableness does, however, promote consciousness-raising and concomitant openness among those in hegemonic groups who wish to unlearn unintentional discriminatory beliefs (or habits).

Before ending this introduction, I need to make a clarification and to address two objections to which my project gives rise. The clarification is that my choice of the term “people of color” to describe “nonwhite” people is intended to work against the grain of white-dominant United States discourse. I wish to invoke a chromatic metaphor in which white is considered lacking in color, not because white people are race-less, but because white-dominant ways of thinking are lacking in richness. As my work in the following chapters will show, Euro-American whiteness is a raced perspective that proclaims itself to be neutral and universal but is actually an exclusionary view limited to those who enjoy white privilege. Epistemologically and metaphysically, white-dominant discourse is deeply unreasonable in a Peircean sense to the extent that it fails to include and/or embrace the many, many perspectives on knowledge and reality that would allow for deep transformation of thinking and behavior within hegemonic societies. Such transformation involves not merely adding color to an artwork designed by and for whites but displacing this white self-absorption in order to allow for the creation of a tapestry whose genesis and growth are polychromatic. My work thus points beyond itself, as it focuses on consciousness-raising for whites and others in hegemonic groups. It provides conceptual tools to describe and diagnose problems, to promote opening the road of inquiry into epistemological, metaphysical, and social transformation. How this transformation might take shape is beyond the scope of my project.

The first of two objections I need to address is that I am not respecting the sharp line Peirce tended to draw between the formal
practice of science, on the one hand, and the everyday world on the other hand. There are several responses to make to this concern. First of all, the formal practice of science cannot be fully separated from political concerns that arise in the everyday world, since practicing scientists live in concrete societies and are vulnerable to carrying societal prejudices into their scientific practices. One of the purposes of this book is to demonstrate how easily, on Peircean terms, this can happen. Second, Peirce was quite open to the idea that humans can often informally practice the scientific method outside any laboratory. In “Fixation of Belief,” he observes, “Everybody uses the scientific method about a great many things, and only ceases to use it when he [sic] does not know how to apply it” (W 3:254). He is referring to the commonplace of testing one’s beliefs against external reality, to determine whether or not they measure up. This everyday practice of science happens in individual practice as well as in communities, whether these communities are filled with formally practicing scientists or not. In the chapters to follow, I will not take pains to make strict distinctions between “real” science and “everyday” science, because such distinctions can create barriers to understanding just how prevalent deep-seated prejudices can be in any community of inquiry. Finally, I acknowledge that my project may apply Peirce’s ideas beyond what he specifically had in mind about the boundaries between science and the everyday world. Yet Peirce was, after all, a synecchist who thus embraced continuity and criticized dichotomous thinking. So I would like to think that he would give me a fair hearing in my efforts to read his work continuously with social criticism, even though such a reading blurs a line he himself liked to draw between formal science and the everyday world.

The second objection comes from Dwayne Tunstall, a classical American philosophy scholar and a race theorist, who has told me that my work is too easy on white people. I agree with his assessment, and I think that, by implication, my work is also too easy on anyone belonging to a hegemonic group, such as those who are economically secure, heterosexuals, men, and so on. I bend over backward to give these groups the benefit of the doubt, as I use Peirce’s
work to articulate the prevalence of the unintentional perpetuation of various types of discrimination. At the same time, my experience as a formerly oblivious white person, coupled with my experience of sexism, shows me that hegemonic conceptual framing can shape human thoughts, language, and behavior so thoroughly that blunt approaches to consciousness-raising can be ineffective for those in hegemonic groups. They can lead to such strong defensiveness that the discussion is blocked (cf. Alcoff 2006, 13). My gentle treatment of those in hegemonic groups is designed to keep the road of inquiry open. It is a fallibilist effort to use my own membership in privileged groups to undermine this very privilege, especially in regard to my being white.43

On this front, let me comment on the broader genealogy of this project, which began with my own white, middle-class experience. I was born in 1969. My elementary, high school, and college education did not include discussions of racism except as a phenomenon that used to be prevalent in U.S. society. As a result of the work of Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement, racism was a thing of the past, or so I learned. As a white person, I thought this made sense. After all, I saw no evidence of racism in my own experience, except the racist comments my grandfather made. But he was just old and set in his ways, just an individual who had not caught on to the newly nonracist society the United States had become. I was not taught to see as problematic that my high school graduating class of 480 was only 1 percent people of color. At the primarily white, middle-class college I attended, I went to an extracurricular talk that was a small exception to the school’s predominantly white, middle-class discourse. A panel of African American scholars spoke about the fruitfulness of identifying themselves as African American as opposed to simply “American.” I do not recall their specific arguments, but they included an appeal to the cultural and historical accuracy of “African American,” which “American” simply did not capture. I remember responding sincerely, respectfully, but naively by asking a question that missed the entire point. It went something like, “Why can’t we
all call ourselves ‘American,’ to underscore the unity of our all being U.S. citizens?”

I did not understand that the term “American” is normatively loaded. It is latently raced, sexed, economically classed, and so on. It refers primarily to white, middle-classed, heterosexual men. As George Lakoff puts it, “If I speak of a typical American, what comes to mind for many is an adult white male Protestant, who is native-born, speaks English natively, and so on” (2002, 9). I eventually learned this normative loadedness through my post-college experiences, beginning with a year spent in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps (JVC), from mid-1991 to mid-1992, teaching and living in an African American inner-city neighborhood in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. My students were primarily African American, and we talked a lot, inside and outside of class. They told me about the everyday prejudice they experienced from white people and how much this hurt their feelings. For example, one African American girl noted how sad it made her when, as she walked through a parking lot to enter a mall, white people who were in their cars would rush to lock their doors as she walked by. From 1991 to 1994, I also volunteered as a math tutor for inner-city children, who were also predominantly African American. I was shocked at how poor their math skills were for their respective grade levels. Having studied elementary education (in addition to philosophy) as an undergraduate, I saw clearly that these students were not receiving adequate public elementary education. They were not learning the skills they needed to build on. This was in stark contrast to my own suburban public education in the premier predominantly white, middle-class Millard school district in Omaha, Nebraska. My eyes had been opened. “American” did not tell the whole story after all.

My own experience with consciousness-raising about racism informs one of my objectives for this book: to help those in hegemonic groups see what a hegemonically loaded culture makes so difficult for them to see, namely, the prevalence of economic classism, heterosexism, racism, sexism, and other social ills. It is thus a contribution to work in epistemologies of ignorance, since it examines the “lack of
knowledge” of many in hegemonic groups and the mechanisms that promote this absence of knowing.46

To some scholars, my incorporation of personal biography may seem irrelevant at best. I respond that the philosophy we each do is grounded in our individual experience, whether we are aware of it or not and whether we acknowledge it or not. One’s experiences, as I argue in the chapters to follow, can provide inroads for understanding. In the absence of certain experiences—like being the target of economic classism, heterosexism, racism, or sexism (or other discrimination)—understanding can be harder to achieve. The inclusion of details from my life is a personal outreach that supplements my scholarship in this book. It may make the Peircean concepts easier to grasp, whether through comparison or contrast. It is also intended in a fallibilist spirit, to acknowledge where my own blind spots lie. As a woman, I belong to a non-hegemonic group. As a white, middle-class, heterosexual person who was raised as a Christian/Catholic, I belong to hegemonic groups in respect to people of color, the poor, GLBTQs, and those who practice religions or spirituality outside the Christian tradition. Moreover, I was born and raised and currently reside in the United States, a colonizing country whose standard of living among its privileged members perpetuates suffering for many within and beyond its borders. The middle-class standard of living that I enjoy, in stark contrast to many other people in the world, can be seen in the personal examples that I use to help illustrate Peirce’s ideas.

I expect and welcome criticisms regarding my blind spots. I have done my best to counter tendencies to speak from a falsely universalized perspective, that is, a perspective that takes my own experience as representative of everyone else’s experience(s). Nonetheless, I am a fallibilist in both a Peircean and a social critical sense, meaning that my very best efforts are always amenable to critique, revision, and growth.