

Novel Ideas: U.S. Feminist Literary Pragmatism

by

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Abstract

Novel Ideas: U.S. Feminist Literary Pragmatism is a literary history that seeks to recover the significance of female fiction writers in the intellectual history of American pragmatism. This dissertation argues that women writers did pragmatist public philosophy in the form of literary art, especially the novel, in the early 20th century United States, investing in epistemic inquiry, social reform, and aesthetic production as joint endeavors. It establishes feminist literary pragmatism as a framework to integrate and center women, especially women of color, in literary pragmatist studies and offer a fruitful angle of approach to writers who fit uneasily into existing literary historical narratives. To feminist pragmatist scholarship, it suggests new avenues for recovery by illuminating contexts for pragmatism's established canon, suggesting figures to consider for inclusion, and offering new sites from which further work may begin.

At the cross-disciplinary juncture of feminist and literary pragmatist studies, with a grounding in John Dewey's social and aesthetic theory, *Novel Ideas* argues that feminist literary pragmatists used literature as a tool to mediate between lived and learned experiences and especially to elevate female perspectives that might unsettle the received patriarchal "wisdom" of their day. It proposes that defining themes of this movement include: interest in reintegrating gendered binaries of rationality and affect; consideration of how to balance the relationship between individualism and communitarianism; commitment to literature as an important agent for social change paired with defense of the aesthetic potential of socially engaged art; and effort to motivate informed, independent thinking in readers by modeling experiences of self-reflective

thought, staging discussion of social issues, and scrutinizing the psychological conditions and processes involved in changing one's mind. Formally, it finds that feminist literary pragmatism is a multi-genre phenomenon with a weight toward prose narrative.

Chapter One begins with Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a consensus figure in feminist pragmatism with abundant writing in both theory-as-such and literature-as-theory, to set the stage for approaching other writers. It examines a series of articles published between 1908 and 1915 and two utopian novels, *Moving the Mountain* (1911) and *Herland* (1915), to distill Gilman's theoretical defense of literary pluralism, provide a model of feminist literary praxis, and establish interest in processes of social change as mental change as a jumping off point. Chapter Two reconsiders Jewish American writer Anzia Yeziarska's well-known relationship with John Dewey by examining their writings side-by-side. It argues that Dewey's poems suggest Yeziarska's influence on his thinking about affect and literature; elucidates the intellectual substance of her engagement of Dewey's ideas in *All I Could Never Be* (1932), "Prophets of Democracy" (1920), "America and I" (1922) and "A Thousand Pages of Research" (1963); and introduces the new context of a previously unstudied poetic connection through Robert Browning's "Rabbi Ben Ezra." Chapter Three stakes a claim for Jessie Redmon Fauset as a Black feminist pragmatist public intellectual, considering her relationships with Anna Julia Cooper and W.E.B. Du Bois, and defining her aesthetic of literary empiricism by way of her critical exchange with sociologist Edward B. Reuter regarding his study *The Mulatto in the United States* (1918). Chapter Four offers a feminist literary pragmatist reading of Fauset's best-known novel, arguing that *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1929) models an amoral personal transformation and demonstrates the political significance of a mutually reinforcing relationship between ethics and aesthetics.

Introduction: Aesthetic Thinking

“But you see already how democratic she is. [Pragmatism’s] manners are as various and flexible, her resources as rich and endless, and her conclusions as friendly as those of mother nature.”

-William James, *Pragmatism* (1907)

“All art is a process of making the world a different place in which to live.”

-John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (1925)

“In the ordinary use of the word a philosopher is one who thinks largely about life, and formulates his theories from heavy books,” feminist writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman observed in 1915. But she found that ordinary use of the word to be narrow: “We constantly use...simple philosophical processes, without calling them that,” she said, and “frequently find in common life, and even among children, that quality of mind which marks the philosopher.” Understanding philosophy as an essential tool for everyday living, she defined it as simply “[t]he ability to reason about life...just as common a thing as the ability to count—and quite as useful.” She proposed that, like arithmetic, “practical philosophy” be widely taught. If it were, she said, “Stories...would be the natural line of approach in this study.” To Gilman there was no difference in kind, “only a difference in degree between Kant, Comte, Locke, Bergson, and their impressive brotherhood, and those who make such simple generalizations as ‘boys will be boys’” (“Teaching Practical Philosophy” 109-110). One group has been more extensively trained; both have come to their conclusions from male-dominated literature and culture. She imagined the world could be much better with even just a little more philosophy in it, and with a lot more female influence.

“Women have as yet made little contribution to philosophy,” pragmatist philosopher John Dewey wrote in 1919, “but when women who are not mere students of other persons' philosophy set out to write it, we cannot conceive that it will be the same in viewpoint or tenor as that composed from the standpoint of the different masculine experience of things” (“Philosophy and Democracy” 73). He shared Gilman’s basic beliefs that philosophical and other institutions needed democratizing and that women’s points of view were not yet heard enough. The reason women’s contributions would be unique, he said, is the same reason any individual or group of people might notice different things and reach different insights from any other: a distinct set of life experiences, shaped by a particular position within a particular cultural system during a particular historical moment. What you encounter in the world and how you’re treated within it both affect what you are well-positioned to notice—or not. And, past experience influences how you might react differently than another person to the exact same thing. “Institutions, customs of life,” Dewey continued, “breed certain systematized predilections and aversions” (73).

Predilection and aversion are striking words: they frame structures of thought or habits of mind as matters of attraction and repulsion, desire and disdain, with a doubly valanced vocabulary. Paired with “breed” and “systematized,” the words feel scientific, evoking behavioral conditioning as studied in labs—Ivan Pavlov’s drooling dogs and, later, B.F. Skinner’s reward-and-punish rat boxes. Read with a slightly different eye, however, Dewey’s language of preference in everyday life describes psychology in terms that are more cultural than clinical. The mysterious female species might not be understood yet, but Dewey doesn’t imagine woman as the object of investigation, rather women as authors of their own perspectives. What someone has a draw toward, an affinity for, a dislike of—that’s a definition of *taste*. “Compose” is an

artistic verb. Dewey imagines women's future philosophical contributions in social and psychological terms that are, at a fundamental level, aesthetic.

Dewey elsewhere draws out this implicit aestheticism in his psychology explicitly. "Thinking goes on in trains of ideas [that are] much more than what an analytic psychology calls ideas. They are phases, emotionally and practically distinguished, of a developing underlying quality...subtle shadings of a pervading and developing hue," he writes in his major aesthetic treatise, *Art as Experience* (1934) (39). This subtle shifting flow of color complements to a better-known pragmatist metaphor of thought as flow: the stream of consciousness, a psychological idea popularized by William James that rocked early 20th century literature, directly inspiring famous narrative experiments in representing thought from writers like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein. James extends his naturalistic metaphor to the flight of a bird: identifying a thought from the stream is like perching on a branch for a moment (*Principles of Psychology* 243). The painterly tinge to Dewey's language develops toward this statement of thought as not just naturalistic, but also fundamentally aesthetic: "*an* experience of thinking has its own esthetic quality" (39, italics original). In *Experience and Nature* (1925) he writes that "thinking is pre-eminently an art," sculpted and composed: "knowledge and propositions which are the products of thinking, are works of art, as much so as statuary and symphonies" (qtd. Browne 3).

In this dissertation, I turn my attention toward thinking that is aesthetic: public philosophy in the form of literary art, especially the novel. This project argues that women fiction writers who were not merely "students of other persons' philosophy" were already making original intellectual contributions to pragmatist thought in the early 20th century United States—right under John Dewey's nose!—in a tenor that he and other philosophers did not conceive as

philosophical (“Philosophy and Democracy” 73). I hold that the intellectual and aesthetic significance of certain women novelists has gone underappreciated, even as they have been recognized as significant recorders of historical experience. These women include African American writer Jessie Redmon Fauset and Jewish American writer Anzia Yezierska, both deeply underestimated thinker-artists, in addition to Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whose intellectual significance as a feminist and a pragmatist is recognized but whose art remains thorny to deal with. I believe their contributions can be better placed in the cultural history of American ideas if we understand them as pragmatist thinkers and not just as atomized pragmatists, but as networked pragmatists, creating a diverse but cohesive movement that I call *feminist literary pragmatism*.

In making my case for feminist literary pragmatism’s existence and significance, I integrate several approaches. I identify resonance between literary writings and philosophical ones, reinterpret major biographical connections in the lives of several remarkable literary women, and integrate contemporary scholarly approaches to pragmatism emerging from feminist philosophy and from literary studies. In closely reading both the literature and the philosophy, I take interest in form, content, and form *as* content, in agreement with philosopher Martha Nussbaum that “[l]iterary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is, itself, a part of content—an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth” (3). Form matters especially for some thinkers: as William James said of Ralph Waldo Emerson, “his truth had to be clad in the right verbal garment [and] the form of the garment was so vital...it is impossible to separate it from the matter” (qtd. Grimstad 120). Feminists, pragmatists, and literary artists and critics alike share a conviction that particulars are inescapable, that they *matter*, and that they have just as much to show and to say as generalizations...sometimes quite a bit more.

The women I study—Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Anzia Yezierska, and Jessie Fauset—did intellectual work through literature by choice as well as by force of circumstance. Academia's rampant underrepresentation and active exclusion of anyone but affluent white men near the turn of the 20th century is alone a compelling reason to look for theoretical insights from women, and especially women of color, elsewhere.¹ Lack of educational and professional opportunity is a major reason women didn't "write philosophy" (and do lots of other things) who might have otherwise. Gilman, Yezierska, and Fauset all fought tooth and nail for access to higher education at institutions that didn't welcome them readily; each had already faced challenges at the primary and secondary levels, too, due to varying forces of finances, racism, language difference, and gender discrimination. But, these tenacious women didn't back off easily from challenges, and they also felt drawn to literary writing as a calling from early in their intellectual development. They intentionally worked in narrative and imaginative forms that they found publicly impactful, personally satisfying, and, critically, intellectually effective to their aims. Their choices offered advantages and tradeoffs in the kinds of insight they achieved and the kinds of recognition they attained. As Charlene Haddock Seigfried has suggested of Gilman, "her unintended marginality created the conditions that allowed her to develop her feminist theories without having to compromise with the dominant, and conservative, academic forces," though at the price of neglect by the philosophical establishment ("Can a 'Man-Hating' Feminist Also Be a Pragmatist?" 75). Yezierska and Fauset, too, reached unique and significant insights not just from marginal positions, but by virtue of them—also at the price of academic marginality.

This feminist literary-intellectual history extends existing work to recover a wide spread of what might be loosely called "non-traditional classical era pragmatisms." This large bucket

¹ For a pair of important histories, one general and one female-focused, see John R. Thelin's *A History of American Higher Education* (2004) and Barbara Miller Solomon's *In the Company of Educated Women* (1985).

encompasses pragmatist thought that developed simultaneously with the work of “classical pragmatist” philosophers Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey around the turn of the 20th century, but largely outside the confines of academic philosophy. This list of thinkers who didn’t self-identify as pragmatist philosophers, but who have since been recognized in the thought tradition includes major figures like Nobel Peace Prize Winner Jane Addams, African American civil rights giant W.E.B. Du Bois, and Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes—all direct, close associates of James and Dewey.² Feminist pragmatist intellectual history has surfaced lesser known women from within these men’s networks, especially Dewey’s, including Elsie Ripley Clapp, Alice Chipman Dewey, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Jessie Taft, and Ella Flagg Young.³ Scholars have also worked to recover marginalized thinkers of color and construct broader genealogies for pragmatist thought, including Leonard Harris’s recovery of Alain Locke’s “critical pragmatism,” excavation by Vivian May and others of Anna Julia Cooper’s Black feminist pragmatism, and Scott Pratt’s account of a long tradition of pragmatism in Indigenous thought in North America.⁴ And, starting at about the same time as

² Louis Menand’s bestselling intellectual history *The Metaphysical Club* (2001) argues that pragmatism was born in an informal intellectual social group of this name, including Peirce, James, and Holmes, that met in 1872 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. For profiles on Peirce, James, Dewey, Addams, and others, along with essays on a wide array of topics in contemporary and classical pragmatism, see *A Companion to Pragmatism* (2006), eds. John R. Shook and Joseph Margolis. For an introduction through primary sources, Talisse and Aikin’s *The Pragmatism Reader: From Peirce through the Present* (2011) is an excellent resource.

³ Charlene Haddock Seigfried led the field-establishing call for recovering the connections in intellectual history between pragmatism and feminism, and her article “Where Are All the Pragmatist Feminists?” (1991) and book *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* (1996) are foundational texts. Seigfried also edited a special issue of the feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia* in Spring 1993; Jane Duran’s “The Intersection of Pragmatism and Feminism” emerged as a particularly notable article in the collection. Rosalind Rosenberg’s *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* (1982) is an important preceding text in feminist intellectual history.

⁴ For a diverse history of American philosophy, grounded in a Deweyan approach and threaded with pragmatism throughout, see *American Philosophy: From Wounded Knee to the Present* (2015), eds. Erin McKenna and Scott L. Pratt. For these three recoveries specifically, see Leonard Harris’s *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* (1989) and *The Critical Pragmatism of Alain Locke* (1999, ed.), Vivian May’s *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction* (2007), and Pratt’s *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy* (2002), respectively.

these other recovery projects, the field of literary studies has considered further genealogies for pragmatism's multifaceted life in artistic manifestations.

Before I get to the critical work of clarifying my terms and laying out my account of who Gilman, Yeziarska, and Fauset were, what interests me in what they wrote, and why I think feminist literary pragmatism is a useful rubric for reading them together, I want to start with the origin and standpoint of my own thinking and writing. I think it matters, in particular, that I write as a white, millennial, American woman; as a scholar who has intended from the outset of designing this dissertation to leave academia after finishing it and who has kept a foothold in publicly engaged work on the side throughout grad school; and as a person whose world was rocked in the middle of research by the COVID-19 pandemic, with all it transformed, highlighted, and complicated at the largest societal and smallest personal scales. These perspectives have fundamentally shaped my view of things. I also write as someone who has loved reading stories, especially novels, ever since I learned how to. That particular predilection is what landed me in a PhD program in English Language and Literature, and learning about philosophical pragmatism late in my graduate coursework was a stroke of good luck. It felt like a breath of fresh air to me in so many ways.

Pragmatism is a different kind of theory than most: it's interested in the process of learning and application more than in landing on an answer. Opposed to dogma, it treats truths as plural and provisional. Rather than prescribing specific ideas, it wants to think about how to continue reaching better ideas—ideas that are best suited to meet the needs of specific situations in a world whose leading constant is, arguably and ironically, change. It's centrally oriented toward the practical development, application, and evaluation of ideas in everyday life. As Dewey distilled it, “nothing is really known till it operates in the common life” and therefore

“one is obliged, as William James was always saying, to get down from noble aloofness into the muddy stream of concrete things” (“Pragmatic America” 30). As a thought tradition that is more outwardly focused than most, it encourages theory and criticism as starting points to *go do something*, with and for other people, and it has historically made good on that value in practice more than many other schools of philosophical thought. Joan Richardson has described its “signal, if implicit, motive” as “the realization of thinking as a life form, subject to the same processes of growth and change as other life forms” (*A Natural History of Pragmatism* 1). In the mode of what Paul Saint-Amour has called “weak theory,” pragmatism builds in intellectual humility and contingency, understanding all knowledge as shaped by knowers’ individual and socio-historically situated points of view (“Weak Theory, Weak Modernism”). As law professor Margaret Jane Radin put it, the “best critical spirit of pragmatism recommends that we take our present descriptions with humility and openness, and accept their institutional embodiments as provisional and incompletely entrenched” (1726). It acknowledges the fact that individual perspectives are powerful, but inevitably limited and biased, and that phenomena are too complex to be encapsulated in any one model or view of things. But it does these things without then throwing up its hands at the idea of moving toward meaningful collective knowledge that can guide action.

I set out originally to write a dissertation on pragmatism and social change, working from the perspective of literary studies and with the resources of my disciplinary expertise in literary modernisms and mid-19th to mid-20th century U.S. literature and its contexts. I imagined chapters as case studies pairing authors with social issues: environment, immigration, and race. With those thematic interests in mind, I set out to brainstorm writers I knew and locate writers I didn’t who met three simple parameters. To fit the project, an author had to be: (1) writing

literary fiction, (2) engaged in meaningful activism in the form of movement work and/or activist discourse with issue-specific commentary on a given chapter's topic, and (3) working within an arguably pragmatist paradigm. Many of the central claims of this project run in the vein of elaborating identifications of pragmatism in literature that are open to debate. At various turns, I seek to demonstrate *that* my authors are working in a pragmatist paradigm, to deepen existing discussions of *how* they are doing so, and to broaden the field of view for *why* it matters to cultural history—literary and intellectual—to say that they are.

At the earliest stage, I was largely exploring to find language that resembled or resonated with John Dewey's, using terms parallel to or compatible with his to express similar or complementary social values and intellectual frameworks. What I found surprised me and changed the shape of my study. When I went looking for socially engaged fiction writers at the turn of the 20th century whose work looked pragmatist to me, I saw women. But when I looked at literary criticism focused on pragmatism, I found few. Just as significantly, I found they were scattered far between, more often included as token female representatives in what presented as a predominantly masculine tradition of pragmatism in literature, rather than being treated together as exemplars of a pragmatist tradition in women's writing as well. This puzzled me. Affinities of thought between feminism and pragmatism were well documented in philosophy and sociology, and so were robust historical connections between established feminist and pragmatist intellectuals. Scholars in my field had traced an array of relationships between pragmatist philosophers and literary writers, identifying many iterations of pragmatism in fiction and poetry. In what remains one of pragmatism's most famous and rhetorically striking definitions, William James had even characterized pragmatism as an inherently female concept. Was there truly so little substantial overlap or interaction between feminist pragmatism and literary pragmatism?

Charlene Haddock Seigfried posed the question to philosophers in 1991 “Where are all the feminist pragmatists?” (“Where Are All the Feminist Pragmatists?”). Thirty-some years later, having spotted a glint of the answer before I was able to formulate the question, I stumbled into asking “Where are all the feminist *literary* pragmatists?”

It is the mission of this feminist intellectual history project to highlight that they have been here since this school of philosophy began to emerge and coalesce: they exerted meaningful influence both as interlocutors who influenced canonical pragmatist thinkers (in addition to drawing influence from them) and as public intellectuals in their own right, invested in social reform and aesthetic theory as joint endeavors. I engage pragmatist thinking in Progressive Era feminist fiction and literary criticism, examining the eclectic ways American pragmatism played out in the early 20th century as an inspiration to aesthetic philosophy and as a rubric for several intersecting, institutionally driven Progressive Era reform movements. I am interested in pragmatism’s potential to illuminate correspondence between modernist literature and feminist efforts at social change. How do pragmatist ideas suffuse action-oriented art in this period? Why did women reformers find pragmatist thinking and fiction writing useful in combination? What might the lens of feminist pragmatism offer to literary history? What feminist contributions to pragmatist philosophy emerge in their literature?

Pragmatism’s engagements with literature and social reform grew increasingly apart as scholars built out the implications of first principles into full schools of thought. But these intellectual wings have had more to say to one another than existing scholarship reflects, and in the heyday of the thinkers now known as the classical pragmatists, the divisions weren’t as wide. As John Dewey wrote, “All art is a process of making the world a different place in which to live” (*Experience and Nature* 363). My investigation hopes to offer new angles of interpretation

for literary texts rarely considered pragmatist (though their rhetorical strategies and societal portraits may indeed be recognized as highly pragmatic in common use of the term). It seeks to draw an intellectual through-line connecting novels that are rarely considered as a group, even as the field of modernist studies has loosened its boundaries and widened its purview. And, perhaps most significantly, it aims to recover a coherent literary phenomenon of fiction writers engaged in theory and activism in the vein of feminist pragmatism. Historical and scholarly archives offer many threads to pick out and to follow, but to borrow a term from feminist pragmatist Charlene Haddock Seigfried's field-defining work, they need reweaving. This is a start.

Herding Sheep and Goats: Pragmatist Affinities

Pragmatism, like modernism, stirred much definitional debate from the outset. One editorialist took a saucy shot at both in *The Public: A National Journal of Fundamental Democracy & A Weekly Narrative of History in the Making* in 1909: "'What is 'modernism'?' asks a puzzled correspondent. The best concise answer we are able to as yet secure is that 'modernism' is Roman Catholic 'pragmatism.' And what, then, is 'pragmatism'? That seems to depend very much upon the pragmatist" ("Modernism' and 'Pragmatism'" 51). Charles Peirce coined the term in the 1870s, but by 1905, he tried to rebrand his line of work under the banner "pragmaticism," deeming the new term "ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers" ("What Pragmatism Is" 166). Dewey shifted his terms over time as well, preferring calling his own school of thought "instrumentalism" and then, with less traction, "cultural naturalism," and he expressed hesitation over "pragmatism" quietly much earlier (Hildebrand). In May 1906, John Dewey would write to his associate Frank Manny to suggest a few of James' essays as the best statements of pragmatism, along with a few other reading leads on the topic, but added,

“Personally I don’t think there is a philosophy called pragmatism, tho there are pragmatic tendencies which in the end, in my opinion, will give a new type of empiricism in which the objections with older empiricism will be removed” (letter to Frank Manny, May 16, 1906). In 1907, William James published a series of his lectures in the volume *Pragmatism*, offering what remains one of the most important accounts of the term that he called in his subtitle simply *A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. Personifying pragmatism as female, he said she is less a theory than “a mediator and reconciler” who “unstiffens our theories” (522). She is inherently pluralistic and flexible—a way of thinking who embraces change as a feature of existence; who encourages experimentation; and who seeks and accepts new evidence, information, and experience of all kinds, from all corners.

Many of pragmatism’s critics regarded its language of empiricism with skepticism. Though Dewey didn’t specify the objections he had in mind to existing models for a view of the world centered on documentary evidence, some of the most vocal came from aesthetically and spiritually-minded critics, who did not, in fact, find pragmatism to offer a less objectionable empiricism—or even necessarily a clear alternative to the old one. Literary critic Van Wyck Brooks in 1918 denounced pragmatism for having “attempted to fill the place that only a national poetry can fill” and prioritizing “the intelligence which merely sees” over “the imagination which sees and feels” (qtd. Gaskill “What Difference Can Pragmatism Make for Literary Study?” 374). Critics from another direction thought pragmatism was not too rigidly scientific, but too loosely relativistic. *They* had a field day deploring pragmatism’s pluralism as inconsistency, lacking rigor at best and deplorably incoherent at worst. Arthur Lovejoy in *The Thirteen Pragmatisms* (1908), says “it is perhaps not too much to ask that contemporary philosophers should agree to attach some single and stable meaning to the term” before sniping

that a “complete enumeration of the metamorphoses of so protean an entity is, indeed, perhaps too much to expect” from an “unassorted commingling of doctrinal sheep and doctrinal goats” (5-6).⁵

It’s true that there is no single pragmatism, just as there is no single feminism or modernism. Pragmatists, as a matter of principle, welcome and encourage debate and discussion among diverse perspectives within the fold, and over the span of more than a century, the sheep and goats have only proliferated. The more one reads, the more diverse the various proponents’ explanations become. Sometimes—often—they disagree. Bruce Kuklick says that “alternative species of doctoral training have predisposed academics to size up pragmatism with a variety of incompatible approaches” across philosophy, intellectual history, and cultural studies (mostly American) (565). As pragmatism and literature specialist Nicholas Gaskill has observed, to “answer the question of what pragmatism *is*” is in some ways “a very un-pragmatist thing to do;” nonetheless, a functional discussion requires some level of definition (“What Difference Can Pragmatism Make” 386). So, I’ll highlight some of the key stances and characteristics that persist across many iterations (caprine family resemblances, if you will) and flag some of my major choices in what elements to emphasize and elevate and which conversations to join.

For coherence and focus, I anchor my work in Deweyan pragmatism. Dewey offers by far the most developed aesthetic theory of the canonical classical pragmatists as well as a deeply articulated social theory of democracy. Among major classical pragmatists, his applied commitments to social reform are among the strongest; today, Dewey is usually best remembered as an educator, and as a highly visible public intellectual, he was hailed in his

⁵ Joan Richardson opens her book *Pragmatism and American Experience* (2014) with a chapter title that riffs both on Lovejoy’s title and on Wallace Stevens’ famous poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (1917): “Thirteen Ways of Looking at Pragmatism.”

lifetime as America's foremost philosopher (*New York Times*, June 2, 1952). Both through his direct engagement with reform movements and by way of his stature as a public intellectual, he was highly attuned to and influential in the implementation of pragmatist philosophical ideals in social, institutional, and political change efforts. And, especially through the influence of his first wife Alice and his close working relationship with Jane Addams, as well as his female students, he was exposed to and influenced by feminist pragmatists in his circle. Much of his educational work was done in collaboration with female teachers, scholars, and school administrators. Many feminist pragmatist scholars position Dewey as a central thought partner for fruitful contemporary theorizing and as a major figure around whom to organize historical recovery, and I similarly find that Dewey's thinking and his professional network alike open important access points. For my literary purposes, his work unites social and aesthetic theory and praxis with unique depth.

As pragmatism evolved in its early years, John Dewey cemented its relevance to cultural criticism and established some of the guiding values of pragmatist aesthetics as a theoretical practice. Dewey places personal experience at the heart of artistic value, beginning *Art as Experience* (1934) not with art but with experience. He seeks to correct the limitations of an early 20th century field of art criticism that was predominantly characterized by narrow focus on a canon of classic works, elevated to remoteness. He takes aim at "conventions that get in the way of fresh insight" and renderings of the fine art object as "isolated from the human conditions under which it was brought into being and from the human consequences it engenders in actual life-experience" (1). He criticizes art theory for treating aesthetic experience as separate from the rest of lived experience, thereby neglecting both valuable historical context and diminishing the present experiential value of both consecrated, pedestalyzed museum art and "the arts which

today have the most vitality for the average person...for instance, the movie [or] jazzed music”

(4). Taking a pragmatist sensibility of use-value, Dewey considers it art’s purpose to highlight and intensify the experience of everyday life. Its enemies “are neither the practical nor the intellectual. They are the humdrum; slackness of loose ends; submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure” (*Art as Experience* 42). Art does not remove us from our experience into some transcendental or ideal realm; rather, art’s value is that it helps us see life more clearly, feel it more strongly, and appreciate it more thoroughly in curated distilled form. It *moves* an experiencer, and this makes art socially and morally consequential.

Dewey suggested that philosophy and literature function as two closely related branches in a single critical project of trying to understand the world better: one offers the strength of method and the other the strength of emotional immediacy. I am interested in the place on the pragmatist tree trunk where the branches touch. Of philosophy Dewey wrote: “Philosophic discourse partakes both of scientific and literary discourse. Like literature, it is a comment on nature and life in the interest of a more intense and just appreciation of the meanings present in experience. (“Existence, Value and Criticism” 89). And of literature he said (in the same essay in which he made his comment on women’s future philosophical contributions): “The art of literature catches men unaware and employs a charm to bring them to a spot whence they see vividly and intimately some picture which embodies life in a meaning” (“Philosophy and Democracy” 74). While the philosophical writer “proceeds prosaically,” Dewey says, the literary writer has “freer office to perform—to perpetuate, enhance and vivify in imagination the natural goods” (“Philosophy and Democracy” 74, “Existence, Value and Criticism” 89). Blurring the philosopher/artist divide, I explore what insights women writers were able to develop through a “freer office” and its power to vivify and personalize ideas.

As I noted earlier, my work bridges feminist pragmatist approaches and literary pragmatist ones, both in its methodology and in its selection of whose work chiefly informs my understanding of pragmatism, historical and contemporary. I'll get to those shortly. But this sheep/goat hybrid approach, in Kuklick's taxonomy, places me somewhere between "American studies pragmatism," which he says "extrapolate[s] from individual artifacts to a wider culture" and has "a poetic cast," and "American intellectual history pragmatism," which has "grabbed onto those protagonists of pragmatism who made the doctrine socially relevant" and "grafted" on other protagonists with "pragmatic tinges," an approach he describes as "more political" (576, 581). Regardless, whether the lean is poetic or political, toward feminist theory or women's history, each of these major traditions, in its own way, "orients itself around the topic of experience," which is a guiding theme in my work (570).

In my view, if pragmatism had to be reduced to one key term, it would be *experience*.⁶ Models of experience—as simultaneously individual and interactive, natural and cultural, intellectual and affective—serve as a foundation for the rest of much of what pragmatism attempts to reconstruct. They inform Dewey's aesthetic and ethical theories, as well as applications of theory in social practice. Experience is also the term that offers, to my mind, the strongest link between many of the major concerns of pragmatist and feminist theorization, as well as a key term for the value and function of literary art. It is certainly a critical term for Dewey and his aesthetics, as evidenced by his major titles including *Experience and Nature* and

⁶ In my research, I found "experience" to be by far the most reliable shibboleth for identifying pragmatist scholarship that didn't label itself as such in its title or abstract, but scholars have very productively weighted key terms such as habit (Lisi Schoenbach), transition (Colin Koopman), contingency (Paul Jay), vagueness (Megan Quigley), innocence (Kristen Renzi), invention (Kim Savelson), and a variety of other concepts—including variety (Carrie Bramen).

Art as Experience. Some of pragmatism's key orientations around experience, which I define briefly through Dewey, include:

(1) *A foundational emphasis on experience as a source of knowledge, premised in an understanding of experience as always socially situated:* Dewey writes, "Knowledge is not something separate and self-sufficing, but is involved in the process by which life is sustained and evolved" and "[t]hings come to him [the learner] clothed in language, not in physical nakedness, and this garb of communication makes him a sharer in the beliefs of those about him" (*Reconstruction in Philosophy* 83, 86-7)

(2) *A practical orientation toward improving experience:* Dewey proclaims that "[n]othing but the best, the richest and fullest experience possible, is good enough for man. The attainment of such experience is not to be conceived as the specific problem of 'reformers' but as the common purpose of men," and in this endeavor, "the prime function of philosophy is that of rationalizing the possibilities of experience, especially collective human experience" ("Existence, Value and Criticism" 91, *Reconstruction* 106)

(3) *An instrumental, organically developmental conception of truth that underlies the embrace of pluralism of many kinds (epistemic, moral, social, aesthetic, etc.):* As Dewey distills it, the "pragmatic rule" says that "in order to discover the meaning of an idea ask for its consequences" (*Reconstruction* 132). Because consequences vary across situations and times, "[s]earch for a single, inclusive good is doomed to failure; by contrast, "[p]luralism...leaves room for contingency, liberty, novelty, and gives complete liberty

of action to the empirical method...It accepts unity where it finds it, but it does not attempt to force the vast diversity of events and things into a single rational mold.”

(“What I Believe” 25, “The Development of American Pragmatism” 6).

(4) *A democratic commitment to unite radical vision with gradual reform, premised on meliorism*: Dewey defines meliorism as “the belief that specific conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively good or comparatively bad, in any event may be bettered” and holds that the purpose of every social institution “is to set free and develop the capacities of human individuals without respect to race, sex, class or economic status” (*Reconstruction* 1142, 147).

(5) *Conceptions of subjectivity that help negotiate a balanced relationship between individualism and communitarianism*: Although Dewey argues that “democratic equality may be construed as individuality,” he condemns “[o]ne-sided and egoistic individualism in American life” (“Philosophy and Democracy” 78, “The Development of American Pragmatism” 12). “We exaggerate the independence of adult life from intimacy of contacts and communication with others,” he writes, and often misunderstand the meaning of the latter (*Reconstruction* 147). Contacts with the world aren’t interactions between discrete and fixed entities; they are “transactions” that constitute selves.

(6) *A dialectical, anti-dualistic mindset that puts contrasting concepts into productive tension in order to break down existing binaries (e.g. individual/collective, nature/culture, theory/practice, rationality/emotion) and reach a more truthful and*

holistic understanding. For example, Dewey writes, “There are no intrinsic psychological divisions between the intellectual and the sensory aspects; the emotional and ideational; the imaginative and the practical phases of human nature” (*Art as Experience* 258). In life as actually experienced, some of these dimensions emerge as more salient than others at given moments, but they all always coexist simultaneously.

These open-ended orientations allow pragmatism to combine with other modes of thinking. For example, where the pragmatist observes the long legacy of Enlightenment Era bifurcation between thinking and feeling, the feminist tracks the cultural gendering of feeling as female. And at that same juncture, literature takes a keen interest in exploring the texture of felt life by exploring human experience in pluralistic ways, using different kinds of perspective and form. Feminist pragmatists and literary pragmatists seize on the ways pragmatism’s interests and orientations complement, enrich, challenge, and inform those of feminism and literature, and vice versa. These fields of work are complex and diverse, but I will here establish working syntheses of feminist pragmatism and literary pragmatism to explain my methodology and build toward my definition of feminist literary pragmatism.

What Is Feminist Pragmatism?

In their edited collection *Contemporary Feminist Pragmatism*, Maurice Hamington and Celia Bardwell-Jones distill the heart of multiple feminist pragmatisms today as a combination of the way “pragmatism values the primary of practice, the importance of experience, and an acceptance of fallibilism” with the way feminism “views women’s lives as important sites of

knowledge and seeks to transform society toward social justice” (2).⁷ The collection represents some of the range of feminist pragmatist study today, including discussions on rap music and John Dewey (James), critical multicultural transnational feminisms (Banerjee), sustainability and community gardening (Whipps, Heldke), Buddhism and feminist ethics of care (Bailey), and an animal studies reading of Charlotte Perkins Gilman (McKenna). Feminist pragmatists are engaging in pluralistic conversation, often placing theoretical resources from the past in conversation with concrete issues of the present to work toward frameworks for the future. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*’s definition adds to Hamington and Bardwell-Jones’ distillation of values a contextualization of the scholarly field and its major methodologies:

Pragmatist feminism is a developing field of philosophy that emerged in the 1990s as a new approach to feminist philosophy. It utilizes and integrates core concepts of pragmatism, including its emphasis on pluralism, lived experience and public philosophy, with feminist theory and practice with a focus on social change. Pragmatist feminist philosophers have been addressing several different projects over the past decades, including a) the recovery of women who were influential in the development of American pragmatism but whose work subsequently all but disappeared in the history of philosophy, b) a rereading of the “canon” of pragmatist philosophers, analyzing their writing in light of their philosophies and attitudes about women, and c) the utilization of

⁷ Like Hamington and Bardwell-Jones, in this project I take a big tent view of feminism as an umbrella term for a vast array of approaches to the fundamental idea that women’s experiences matter, can be learned from, and deserve to be improved through structural change to unjust institutions and social norms. The feminisms of the authors I discuss are distinct and at times contradictory on major questions of gender and justice, but each writer in her own way worked to elevate the public visibility of female lived experience and pushed the envelope of domestic and professional strictures that limited women’s self-determination and access to full and equal participation in the public sphere.

pragmatist philosophies as a resource for contemporary feminist philosophy and activism.
(Whipps and Lake)

My work belongs in the first project bucket, with methodology following in the footsteps of previous feminist pragmatist recovery, largely as established in Charlene Haddock Seigfreid's field-founding work in *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* (1996). Haddock's method is iterative and dialogical, and it involves teasing out not only who feminist pragmatists *are* but also what feminist pragmatism *is* through an interplay of textual and biographical findings. She starts with traditionally designated figures and a working hypothesis of what pragmatism is. From those starting points, she extends the original group of pragmatists by tracing direct mutual influence, then using the extended group's work to interrogate the original working understanding of pragmatism: in Dewey's terms, it's a process of reconstruction. To describe this process in more concrete terms, a first-line research question might be: Who were Dewey's female colleagues and students, and which of them did work that fits in a provisional pragmatist paradigm? Once you've identified those figures, then a second-line question would be: what do these women add or revise to the existing pragmatist equation? Then, with a new working definition of pragmatism, you can go looking again. Over time, you end up with a wider web of pragmatists and with a new definition of pragmatism that increasingly includes the insights of women.

It is a core aim of this project to elevate female writers as pragmatist thinkers, and placing them in personal and intellectual reference to the heart of pragmatism's canon helps to ground the warrant for my claims while also recovering the nature of their influence. The interaction I see between Dewey and the female authors I discuss is multidirectional. This isn't a

project that lays out a genealogy of descent in which Dewey's ideas flow down to and through female authors who receive it. Rather, I seek to surface intellectual interrelationship and mutual influence, direct and indirect. I also draw together existing, but separate, threads of research on of feminist pragmatism, literary pragmatism, and literary studies at large (particularly author-focused studies, studies on ethnic modernisms, and studies on Progressive Era women's writing in the U.S.) to situate as yet unestablished feminist pragmatists with reference to established pragmatists beyond Dewey. Jane Addams is a connective figure who recurs frequently, if briefly, across my study, and Anna Julia Cooper plays a highly significant role in my discussion of Jessie Fauset, bringing Black feminist pragmatism (especially as articulated by Patricia Hill Collins and V. Denise James) as a nascent field of academic study and a deep-rooted thought tradition into the conversation around literary pragmatism's feminist iterations.⁸

Across many iterations, feminist pragmatism has always been a highly socially engaged school of thought. "From the beginning, pragmatism appealed to women thinkers and activists who found in it a movement through which they could work for a new intellectual and social order," writes Seigfried (*Pragmatism and Feminism* 19). In their definition, Mary Jo Deegan and Christopher Podeschi emphasize this historical beginning and offer a more formal definition of principles:⁹

⁸ For a discussion of Anna Julia Cooper's recovery and important critical takes on her work, see Beverly Guy-Sheftall's "Black Feminist Studies: The Case of Anna Julia Cooper" (2009). See also Linda McClain's "Experimental Meets Intersectional: Visionary Black Feminist Pragmatism and Practicing Constitutional Democracy" (2022) for a recent discussion on melding classical pragmatism and feminism that centers Black feminism (including major theorists Deva Woodly, Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins, and V. Denise James) and puts it in conversation with the 1990s "renaissance" of pragmatism in feminist legal theory (Radin, Matsuda, Bartlett, and Rorty's feminist interlocutors). This recent article is valuable for the wide range and unique set of sources it draws together in a single conversation.

⁹ Feminist pragmatist sociologist Mary Jo Deegan's important historical recovery work popped up repeatedly during my research and has been invaluable: she has traced the Hull House network widely, and her writing includes discussion of Addams' relationship with W.E.B. DuBois, Fannie Barrier Williams' pragmatist conception of the New Negro Woman, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman as an ecofeminist. I will be excited to see who surfaces in her

More formally, “feminist pragmatism” is an American theory that unites liberal values and belief in a rational public with a cooperative, nurturing, and liberating model of the self, the other, and the community. This model emerges from women’s experience and culture, but is a learned and not a biological process. Feminist pragmatism emphasizes education and democracy as significant mechanisms to organize and improve society. This sociological theory was developed by dozens of women associated with the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago and the social settlement Hull House. Their writings resulted in thousands of books and articles. (4)

I cast a slightly wider net in telling my story of pragmatist feminism’s literary origins, also finding significant institutional hubs in New York City and, in the case of Black feminist pragmatism, Washington, D.C. But there is no doubt that the sociological imagination and work of women in Chicago—Jane Addams and her Hull House collaborators; the students, colleagues, and collaborators of John Dewey and George Herbert Mead at the University of Chicago—was the center of the academic feminist pragmatist universe at its big bang moment. “Pragmatism is in the air and I do not know how I will escape its influence” wrote Virginia Robinson to a former classmate not long after her arrival at the University of Chicago in 1908 (*Pragmatism and Feminism* 67). Addams’s work had deep connections, not just through John Dewey, to each of my figures. Gilman was a close friend of Addams who even lived at Hull House for a time. Anzia Yezierska gave a reading there in 1920 and before that, in a very different capacity, lived at Hull House-modeled settlement homes in New York City after she left her patriarchal family

new book forthcoming from Cambria Press, *Gender at Hull-House and the University of Chicago: The Origins and Influence of Feminist Pragmatism, 1889-2010*.

home; they were critical in her journey to independence, and she had much to say about their failings in understanding and respecting immigrant women. And, as Deegan has traced, Addams had meaningful ties with W.E.B. Du Bois as they both worked in extra-academic sociological study and with African American female civil rights leaders including Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Fannie Barrier Williams, and Mary Church Terrell, with whom Jessie Fauset was a close collaborator.

My understanding of feminist pragmatism draws on all these definitions of the intellectual movement, conceptual and historical, as I will continue to explain as I build my definition of feminist literary pragmatism. But before I move on to the literary component, a brief note on terminology: some scholars treat “pragmatist feminism” and “feminist pragmatism” as functional synonyms and fully interchangeable. Others find the differences in emphasis meaningful. V. Denise James writes, “the feminist pragmatist, for the most part, engages with the methods, claims, and conversations of pragmatism from a feminist standpoint. While the pragmatist feminist might use the methods and basic insights of pragmatism, they see their main orientation as feminist, drawing from a wide range of resources in the history of feminist theory and activism.” (James, “Feminist Pragmatism” 133). As examples, she cites Charlotte Perkins Gilman as a pragmatist feminist and Jane Addams as a feminist pragmatist. While I think that my authors are more readily identifiable as feminists in whom we can identify pragmatism, rather than primarily pragmatists with secondary feminist orientations, I nonetheless find “feminist literary pragmatism” to be the clearest descriptor of what I am trying to elevate in their texts, which is pragmatism, and a clearer signal of my disciplinary home field in literary pragmatism. For those who wish to be very precise, I’d say that Gilman, Yeziarska, and Fauset are pragmatist feminists who do feminist literary pragmatism.

What Is Literary Pragmatism?

“Literary pragmatism” will have two uses in this dissertation, which should be reliably distinguishable by context. At the most fundamental level, by “literary pragmatism,” I simply mean the place where literature and pragmatism converge: pragmatism in literature, or literature as pragmatism. When I refer to Gilman’s or Yeziarska’s or Fauset’s “literary pragmatism,” I am referring to their philosophical beliefs and values, developed and delivered literarily, as I understand and interpret them. The question of understanding and interpretation is significant for any author who didn’t self-identify as a philosophical pragmatist and define their pragmatism as such, especially working outside of academic philosophy’s professional structures and genre norms. As I rely on existing scholarly frameworks in my interpretive work, I also refer to the heterogeneous body of scholarship on pragmatism and/in literature as the disciplinary field of “literary pragmatism.” So, first and foremost, this dissertation is about literary pragmatism as a cultural-intellectual phenomenon in literature.¹⁰ As a piece of scholarship, this dissertation also participates in literary pragmatism as a mode of study.

The subject and the methodology are related, and I’ll use two authors who use the term “literary pragmatism” prominently in their work as a starting point to characterize the literary critical conversation I enter. Paul Grimstad doesn’t define it directly in *Experience and Experimental Writing: Literary Pragmatism from Emerson to the Jameses* (2013), but the book embodies some of the field’s major orientations. Literary pragmatism tends to approach experience with an eye toward cultural history, noting how developments in science and modern

¹⁰ Much of the genealogy focuses on U.S. literature, though there is increasing—I think positive and accurate—movement to unsettle the portrait of pragmatism as “America’s” national philosophy. See e.g. Jeffrey Lawrence’s *Anxieties of Experience: The Literatures of the Americas from Whitman to Bolaño* (2018) for a hemispheric take.

technology were dramatically changing the way experience was understood and how literature recorded and worked through those changes. The naturalistic and experimental mindsets of empirical study, along with the evolutionary logic of Darwinian evolutionary theory, figure particularly prominently.¹¹ Literary pragmatists are also, unsurprisingly, highly interested in pragmatism's ideas about how language and culture shape experience (but take interest in language in quite separate directions from the analytic tradition that developed in academic philosophy through W.V.O. Quine and others). Uniting empiricism's experimental mindset with language, literary pragmatism often attends to formal experimentation in fiction and poetry; some of this work seeks to unsettle narratives of experimentalism as revolution, however, instead tracing threads of continuity and noting phases of transition between literary and cognitive paradigms.¹²

Like Grimstad, literary pragmatists usually embrace a genealogy of pragmatism that prominently places Ralph Waldo Emerson as a pivotal influence on James, Dewey, and others who represents a major inflection point in the trajectory of American thought.¹³ This genealogy often secondarily includes Henry David Thoreau and notes James' and Dewey's love for the

¹¹ Joan Richardson offers a particularly robust, interdisciplinary account in *A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein* (2007).

¹² Frameworks like Jessica Feldman's "Victorian modernism" and Lisi Schoenbach's "pragmatic modernism" aim squarely at literary periodization's in-betweens. Those like Jane Thraill's "affective realism" re-read existing literary historical categories with an eye toward breaking down other boundaries, such as the contrasts in emotional tone traditionally associated the literary sentimentality, realism, and modernism (see also Melanie Dawson, e.g.). A few critics have proposed more radical reframings: Sāmi Ludwig has even gone so far as to argue that philosophical pragmatism "implies" literary realism, in a notable argument with which I disagree (216).

¹³ Richard Poirier's *Poetry and Pragmatism* (1992) is one important Emersonian narrative, as is Jonathan Levin's *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, and American Literary Modernism* (1999). Philosopher Stanley Cavell offers a prominent dissent ("What's the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?"). One of the most significant original endorsements and uses is Cornel West's to develop the African American branch of the American pragmatist tree in *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (1989).

work of Walt Whitman (the “Poet of Democracy” to Dewey’s “Philosopher of Democracy”).¹⁴ Emerson offers a prominent precedent for doing philosophy in a literary modality, and the Emersonian tradition brings threads of literary romanticism and transcendentalism into pragmatism’s naturalistic fold. Like feminist pragmatist intellectual historians, literary historians of pragmatism often rely on genealogies to build pragmatism outward, looking at the writers in pragmatist circles. Some of the most discussed literary figures include Henry James (as well as and in conversation with his brother William), Wallace Stevens, and Gertrude Stein. I believe an over-emphasis on certain kinds of formal experimentalism from this canon has occluded feminist literary pragmatists from view (just as models of experimental rupture long occluded many women from modernism’s view), but I draw grounding from these studies and work within these fundamental paradigms of the field, even as I focus on a different-looking set of authors.

Representing another angle of approach, Gregory Phipps defines his literary pragmatism directly and primarily as a methodology. He usefully describes literary pragmatism as “a series of reading practices that track long threads that run across diverse forms of writing—a method of exploration that does not actively blur disciplinary boundaries so much as it seeks instances of blurring, opposition, influence, and synthesis in the narratives that wind through the works of authors, philosophers, essayists, and activists” (4). “[L]iterary elements,” he argues, “ultimately emerge as the aesthetic shapes of pragmatist principles” (10). Phipps’ version of literary pragmatism is emblematic of approaches to literature and pragmatism that treat pragmatism as a reading method and/or cultural context that might valuably be brought to bear on a wide range of

¹⁴Nicholas Gaskill writes, for one particularly forceful example: “It may be that the pragmatists learned everything they knew about literature from Walt Whitman. James adored him and envied his “once born” soul; Dewey anointed him the prophet of the Great Community; Mead cited him as the paragon of aesthetic enjoyment. Surely he is the poet laureate of pragmatism” (“Experience and Signs: Toward a Pragmatist Literary Criticism” 174).

texts and that sheds especially bright light on some. I emphasize different recurring themes but follow a fundamentally similar method of tracing a set of “long threads...across diverse forms of writing,” with reliance on Phipps’ work, specifically, in my approach to Jessie Fauset (4).

However, I seek to go a half-step further in my claims. I argue that the works of literature I study do not only represent “the aesthetic shapes of pragmatist principles,” but also theorize those principles in original forms themselves in aesthetic shapes that influenced the philosophical shape of pragmatist principles within the traditional canon (10). Based on content and on the historical circumstances of their composition, I’m arguing that the feminist literary texts I study don’t just channel pragmatism, but create it in more ways than one.

The field of literary pragmatist studies has been very slow to diversify, especially in its recognition of women of color. As Phipps summarized in 2018: “Previous critics have examined the writings of black men and white women and white women in relationship to pragmatism, and literary pragmatism has emerged as a field unto itself” but “sorely missing...is a comprehensive literary pragmatist study of how African American women’s writing brings forth this narrative” (5). Indeed, Phipps’s book was the only full-length literary pragmatist treatment I could find focused on African American women. But more than that, it was the only volume I could find about women’s literary pragmatism at all. Foundational cultural and aesthetic studies like Richard Shusterman’s *Pragmatist Aesthetics* and Giles Gunn’s *Thinking Across the American Grain*—both published 1992, as Seigfried and others were sounding the call for feminist pragmatism in philosophy—barely mention women. And it would be easy to conclude from a cursory review of other major works across the next decade that Gertrude Stein, famously a

student of William James, was the sole female torch-bearer of literary pragmatism in fiction.¹⁵ If you looked in the right places, you'd also find Zora Neale Hurston, just as famously a student of anthropologist and Dewey collaborator Franz Boas: she was identified early and has begun to emerge more significantly in the broader pragmatist conversation.¹⁶ Charlotte Perkins Gilman's feminist pragmatism and literature are both abundantly discussed. But while her recovery was pathbreaking in feminist pragmatist studies, she is rarely given much attention in literary critical volumes devoted to pragmatism, nor is the narrative writing of Jane Addams.

My preliminary exploration in this project suggests that further investigation could yield a rich new set of conversations on pragmatism and women's literature, and there are hints in existing scholarship of a much broader tradition of women's literary pragmatism that hasn't yet been tapped. Sean Epstein-Corbin has suggested a linkage between women's fiction and pragmatist philosophy by way of 19th century literary sentimentality, "theoriz[ing] pragmatic subjectivity as a fundamentally feminist outgrowth of sentimental subjectivity" (222). Jane Addams' use of narrative in her writings has drawn attention.¹⁷ Literary women across several generations like 19th century novelist Augusta Evans, Harlem Renaissance novelist Nella Larsen, and modernist poet Marianne Moore have been read with reference to pragmatism, just not together. Scholars have noted the connection between John Dewey and Emma Goldman. Scott Pratt has made arguments for the pragmatism of the activist writer Lydia Maria Child and

¹⁵ She is the one woman to figure significantly in major works by Richard Poirier (*Poetry and Pragmatism* [1992]), Joan Richardson (*A Natural History of Pragmatism* [2007]), Lisi Schoenbach (*Pragmatic Modernism* [2012]), and Paul Grimstad (*Experience and Experimental Writing: Literary Pragmatism from Emerson to the Jameses* [2013]).

¹⁶ For example, Ross Posnock's *Color and Culture* (1998), an important text on Du Boisian pragmatism, identifies her and David Kadlec devotes a chapter to her in *Mosaic Modernism: Anarchism, Pragmatism, Culture* (2000). She was recently included in the call for papers for the 2024 Annual Meeting of the John Dewey Society, held this year in Portugal.

¹⁷ See for example Marilyn Fischer's *Jane Addams's Evolutionary Theorizing: Constructing "Democracy and Social Ethics"* (2019). On narrative and inquiry in feminist pragmatism more generally, see Shannon Dea.

of Jane Johnston Schoolcraft, the bilingual, biracial Anishinaabe poet, short story writer, and translator.¹⁸ Lee A. McBride has suggested that Zitkala-Sa deserves further study with a pragmatist angle.¹⁹ Also intriguingly, literary study shows up prominently in the backgrounds and careers of some of the foundational academic feminist pragmatists who worked and trained with Dewey, as Seigfried's study documents. Elsie Ripley Clapp's BA was in English, and as a graduate student, she took all the required courses not only for a PhD in Philosophy, but also in English. When Lucy Sprague Mitchell chose her home department as U.C. Berkeley's first Dean of Women, she picked English, despite holding her degree in philosophy. It's not that the connections between feminist pragmatism and literature aren't there to be found; it's that literary scholars have turned their attention elsewhere in their pragmatist investigations, by and large.

I suspect that one major factor in literary criticism not yet having developed a feminist literary pragmatism has to do with the huge weight of Richard Rorty's influence in anchoring conversation in literary pragmatism's moment of emergence as a field. As Mark Bauerlein put it in 1997, for quite some time "*pragmatism*" in the humanities signified "the *new pragmatism*, an intellectual movement deriving from Rorty, not Peirce, James, or Dewey" (x). Rorty's distinctive brand of neopragmatism imagines pragmatist feminists and has been of importance to some of them, but it does not, as I understand it, allow for a feminist pragmatism. Rorty unequivocally positioned pragmatism and feminism as separate and distinct vectors of thought: "Pragmatism—considered as a set of philosophical views about truth, knowledge, objectivity, and language—is neutral between feminism and masculinism. So if one wants specifically feminist doctrines about these topics, pragmatism will not provide them" ("Feminism, Ideology, and Deconstruction"

¹⁸ See *Native Pragmatism* and "Rebuilding Babylon: The Pluralism of Lydia Maria Child" (2004).

¹⁹ See "Pragmatism and Insurrectionist Philosophy" in *The Routledge Companion to Pragmatism* (2022).

101). He also positioned pragmatism as offering greater resources to feminism than vice versa, arguing that “pragmatist philosophy might be useful to feminist politics” as a guide to abandon claims that oppression of women is an inherent wrong (“Pragmatism and Feminism” 4). To Rorty, such claims inherently traffic in gender essentialism and moral dogma that are anti-pragmatist. For example, he writes, “I hope that feminists will continue to consider the possibility of dropping realism and universalism, dropping the notion that the subordination of women is intrinsically abominable, dropping the claim that there is something called 'right' or 'justice' or 'humanity' which has always been on their side, making their claims true.” (“Pragmatism and Feminism” 5).²⁰ I agree with some of Rorty’s arguments and disagree profoundly with others.²¹ More than anything, though, I work in a different pragmatist tradition altogether, both historically and theoretically.

Theoretically, I stand with those who consider pragmatism in the Deweyan vein to involve values as well as methods and who see alignment between feminist and pragmatist methods *and* values. “Dewey’s pragmatism, by method, attitude, and in practice required a belief in a democratic way of life that is not value neutral,” writes V. Denise James. She continues: “Perhaps we would not call Dewey a feminist after reading his few sparse lines on women’s rights, but he produced a body of work rich for feminist enlargement” (“Feminist Pragmatism” 135). Naming some of the shared values, Elizabeth Anderson writes, “Feminists and pragmatists are joined in holding that unjust social relations, such as those that constitute institutionalized

²⁰ Rortian neopragmatism is controversial in content and often deliberately provocative in tone, and its relationship with feminism is hotly contested (see Elizabeth Sperry for a discussion). Some feminists regard Rorty as an intellectual ally (see *Feminist Interpretations of Richard Rorty*, ed. Janack) while others regard his work as hostile to feminism’s most central values—a “death wish for feminism,” writes one respondent (Bacchi).

²¹ To take a fairly non-polemical example, he writes that “a pragmatist feminist will see herself as helping to create women rather than attempting to describe them more accurately” (“Pragmatism and Feminism” 6). I agree with this fundamental orientation toward reconstructing concepts, including womanhood, but I disagree with the implicit premises that these are mutually exclusive endeavors and that all descriptive projects are inherently also prescriptive, normative, or universalist.

race and gender inequality, distort inquiry by suppressing insights from the less advantaged, reinforcing stereotypes and other prejudices, and granting epistemic authority to ignorant views due to the social power of those who assert them" ("Journeys of a Pragmatist Feminist" 88).

Pragmatist thinkers who are invested in questions of race, gender, and equality at large argue that a fully developed pragmatism logically lands with a stance that opposes oppression of all kinds, just as intersectional feminists do. However, as Patricia Hill Collins argues, pragmatism's "anti-foundationalist orientation," even if it does not preclude the identification of values, does mute "pragmatism's potential as a political project" insofar as "projects with political goals typically embrace some sort of foundationalist premise that pulls their members together" ("Piecing Together a Genealogical Puzzle" 10).

Because different primary analytical lenses lead to different emphases in inquiry, feminist insights can build on pragmatist ones just as powerfully as the other way around, feminist pragmatists believe (contra Rorty). As Jane Duran has synthesized, "If the pragmatists find many traditionally maintained distinctions bogus, feminist theory has claimed that these distinctions frequently proceed from androcentric theorizing" (161). James Livingston notes, "Feminists have been more willing than pragmatists...to treat modern individualism as an indispensable moment in the development of the 'social self'...and also "to go beyond state-centered, electoral, and policy-oriented politics by treating civil society as the site of significant struggle, by claiming 'the personal is political'" (9). And Mary Mahowald contends that feminism doesn't just make pragmatism more inclusive, but also more fully pragmatist: "[feminism] critiques traditional (male-dominated) pragmatism for failing to take account of the entirety of human experience. By neglecting the experience of women, classical pragmatism has betrayed its defining

characteristic” (41).²² Historically, too, if pragmatism asks us to consider ideas as always situated in cultural, historical, and personal contexts, feminist discourse is one of classical pragmatism’s own major ones. Pragmatism was informed by feminist thought from the beginning and, as this project shows, by female literary writers who developed feminist pragmatist thought in public, contributing to major social reform movements and shifts in public consciousness in the early 20th century United States.

What Is Feminist Literary Pragmatism?

To assemble terms, feminist literary pragmatism is pragmatism that is literary in form and feminist in sensibility. In the most distilled form, pragmatism represents a multifaceted technique for practical thinking that centers on experience; feminism directs the focus of thought and action toward understanding, learning from, and improving the lives of women; and literature provides a medium with unique capacities for representation and articulation. Each complementary term brings something to the table that inflects the others as they combine. Given the proliferation of pragmatisms, of literary forms, and of feminist sensibilities, I expected the combinations to vary widely by author and to engage my key terms interactively rather than holistically, offering a discussion of “feminism, pragmatism, and literature” in multiple iterations, pointing in separate promising directions for future feminist pragmatist approaches to literature. They do vary widely, but over the course of my research, I found a historical whole that was clearer than the sum of its theoretical parts. For all their dramatic differences, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Anzia Yezierska, and Jessie Fauset present—to borrow a phrase Lisi Schoenbach uses to characterize her

²² She even argues further that all feminism is pragmatist in character because of its “rootedness in and orientation toward experience” (41).

formulation of “pragmatic modernism,”—“complex yet remarkably consistent theorizations” around a shared constellation of thematic interests, aesthetic values, and theories about the relationships between lived experience, knowledge, literature, and social change (5). They do so implicitly and explicitly, in editorial writing, in fiction, and in poetry.

Epistemologically, feminist literary pragmatism is invested in the interface between lived experience and learned experience as inevitable and interactive types of experience, each with strengths and limitations in the kinds of knowledge it can provide. Lived experience delivers a uniquely comprehensive kind of knowledge, beyond what language can represent. It’s where all understanding starts, and its primacy and inherent relevancy shapes perspectives. However, the perspective of lived experience does not exist in an independent vacuum. Learned experience is a fundamental part of all social life: people learn from other people, from the explicit and implicit instruction of institutions, and from cultural products. Received belief can be an agent for ill, as in the transmission of prejudice and misinformation, or in the creation of implicit assumptions or habits that limit imagination or action toward what might be possible. But it is also critical in exceeding the limits of one’s inevitably circumscribed lived experience, practical and mental. Beyond imagining or hypothesizing, it’s the only way to learn about any experience of living that isn’t your own. Received experience is also a tool that can enrich one’s understanding of their own lived experience. The individual ideas and experiences of others and the generalized insights of institutional learning and theorizing alike offer reflective filters through which to reappraise one’s own life experience. They can allow you to see how it fits into bigger pictures, to view it from different perspectives, or expand the range of language available to you to conceptualize or articulate what you have already experienced, felt, and known.

Feminist literary pragmatism is not limited to a single genre or medium but recognizes

the power of literary pluralism: the writers I study used and also commented on the distinct and complementary powers of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction in the pursuit of truth. I engage all three of these genres over the course of this dissertation, often beginning with an author's direct statements of belief as a lens through which to understand what her literature is doing or seeking to do.²³ However, I find a weight toward prose narrative in feminist literary pragmatist practice, and especially toward the imaginative potential of fiction. The feminist literary pragmatists I study found fiction, and novels especially, to be a particularly powerful mode of writing as a popular, immersive, and flexible genre with room for psychological and conceptual depth. It allowed curated and immersive representation of diverse social worlds, both imagined and real. Jane Addams argued in *Democracy and Social Ethics* that while "newspapers, in a frank reflection of public demand, exhibit an omnivorous curiosity equally insistent upon the trivial and the important," novels cultivate that same curiosity with greater depth and more tailored focus, providing readers with socially significant knowledge. She wrote, "Literature...portrays an equally absorbing though better adjusted desire to know all kinds of life. The popular books are the novels, dealing with life under all possible conditions, and they are widely read not only because they are entertaining, but also because they in a measure satisfy an unformulated belief that to see farther, to know all sorts of men . . . is a preparation for social adjustment" (8). To borrow a phrase from Dewey, fiction can provide "a point of view vividly realized" (*Reconstruction* 38).

Early 20th century U.S. feminist literary pragmatists used literature as a tool to mediate between lived and learned experiences, and especially to elevate female perspectives that might

²³Reading in alignment with my authors this way is a version of reparative reading, as introduced by Eve Sedgwick ("Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You").

unsettle received patriarchal “wisdom.” Writing conspicuously from the position of their personal backgrounds and identities, Gilman, Yeziarksa, and Fauset all saw themselves, and were heralded by others, for speaking as individuals on behalf of historically silenced collectives. However, they routinely frame their representational interests not so much in terms of authenticity, narrowly understood, but as being part of a broader effort toward creating truth in literature—whether that’s the truth of who the so-called New Woman is and is not, of immigrant experience, of life as a young-middle class Black woman, of what a future socialist United States might look like, or of what society as it is looks like from the “viewpoint or tenor” of an as-yet-unvoiced feminine perspective (“Philosophy and Democracy” 73). They believed that exposing readers to different experiences of life, and the consequences of different intellectual and social structures, could inspire changes of belief. As Dewey put it, in a more generalized form, they believed that “[a]rt breaks through barriers that divide human beings, which are impermeable in ordinary association” and acted on the premise that “this force of art, common to all the arts, is most fully manifested in literature” (*Art as Experience* 254). It’s a force of potentially substantial political power.

A commitment to literature as an important agent for social change is a defining characteristic of feminist literary pragmatism.²⁴ This consciousness-raising effort included a desire to communicate underrepresented experiences and ideas, and it extended beyond representation. Writers like Fauset, Gilman, and Yeziarska sought to shift the status quo by stirring independent thought *within* women and *about* women by communicating experience in resonant ways. They shared an investment in the question of how to reconstruct social structures by reconstructing social consciousness. Though these writers understood that shifting public

²⁴ This applied, political bent is what would primarily and provisionally distinguish feminist literary pragmatism from women’s literary pragmatism as a possible larger category for future work to explore.

opinion isn't the only tool for institutional reform—as evidenced by the multifaceted forms of activism that Gilman and Fauset took part in, and that Yeziarska supportive of—they felt that it was critical both to catalyzing action and to sustaining widespread transformation. As Lisi Schoenbach has argued, “Without the recontextualizing component of social change, the energies of shock disperse, leaving mindless habits of thought essentially intact. The gradualist politics of pragmatism, seen in this light, appear less like accommodationist capitulations to existing power structures and more like a refusal to take empty, radical posturing as a substitute for meaningful change” (8-9).²⁵ Or as Anna Julia Cooper put it in 1892, “True progress is never made by spasms. Real progress is growth. It must begin in the seed” (25-26). Without the roots of deep and meaningful buy-in, pragmatism argues, changes can be easily uprooted. Literature can seed ideas and it can water them.

In feminist literary pragmatist imaginings of deep and meaningful change to social structures and ideals, the relationship between individualism and the collective emerges as a major theme. All three of the authors I take up share a consensus that community matters and that connectedness is required to allow an individual full self-fulfillment. But this interconnected democratic individualism looks different in each case. Gilman imagines with optimism that a rational valuation of cooperation will lead individuals to approach alignment in a radically social consciousness. By contrast, Yeziarska foregrounds the individual and pushes the bounds of pluralism, with deep skepticism toward the kind of unification that Gilman advocates as

²⁵ I'm also interested to consider the possible relationship between philosophical pragmatism and political pragmatism for ethnic minority writers who often found themselves uniquely pressured by the literary marketplace to produce certain types of work (racially “authentic” and not too radical) that would appeal to mostly white book-buyers. The recent film *American Fiction*, based on Percival Everett's 2001 novel *Erasure*, has prominently dramatized this problem's persistence with verve (a most pragmatist aesthetic move, I think!) but for scholarly treatment of its 20th century iterations, see e.g. Werner Sollors, Jeff Kareem, and Martin J Favor. Editors balked at more “extreme” expressions of feminism from white women, as well: this was part of the reason Gilman decided to self-publish her own magazine.

suppressive of individuality and cultural difference. Though she shares Dewey's hope that ethnic groups might mutually assimilate to one another while retaining distinction, she also retains skepticism that desirable forms of intercultural understanding may ever be fully realizable. Fauset draws from Black feminist pragmatist tradition in her approach here, sharing Gilman's desire for social rationalism and Yeziarska's criticism of viewpoints that flatten groups of individuals into dehumanized conglomerates, coupling these stances with racially inflected recognition that no individual can escape the negative realities of social definition and a sense that to attempt to escape imperfect association in favor of radical individualism is an isolating exercise indeed.

Feminist literary pragmatism is prominently and transparently conceptual in its approach to social issues, in addition to engaging them representationally. It uses fiction as a medium for developing social theory, for modeling consequences of ideas, and for prompting readers to reconsider received ideas, especially about various forms of prejudice as cultural habits of thought. This is explicit in my writers' nonfiction, but it's just as present in their novels, which devote significant time to depicting characters as they deliberate social ideas, in conversation and in thought. Gilman's female utopian citizens introduce their societies to befuddled male inductees, who narrate their attempts to process the unfamiliar. Yeziarska's headstrong semi-autobiographical protagonists debate democracy and sociological methods with stiff semi-biographical John Deweys and ruminate about the impasses afterward. Fauset stages parlor conversations and public discourse on civil rights issues and shows the uneven, nearly unconscious process of intellectual absorption and translation by a light-skinned African American woman whose identification with her race slowly shifts. These stagings dramatize the cultivation of feminist consciousness with keen interest in consciousness itself: the texture of

mental experience as lived and especially the process of how minds change. Exploration of how people change their mental relationships with received belief is a theme that defines feminist literary pragmatism.

In representing lived experience, Gilman, Yeziarska, and Fauset also model experiences of independent, self-reflective thought with particular attention to the role of affect within rationality. They display interest in reconstructing gendered Enlightenment models of thought that bifurcate rationality and emotion; within a culture of white patriarchy, these models claim that the former is both superior and the primary property of men. They frame the values, limitations, and entanglements of rationality and feeling in a wide range of ways. To defend women's intellectual capability, they highlight instances of women's rationality and men's irrationality, individual and collective. To defend the value of women's culturally assumed emotional attunement, they critique the shortcomings, and even cruelty, of "cold" logic when "warm" feeling is excluded. If one defining feature of feminist literary pragmatism is its thematic interest in exploring and exploiting the relationship between gendered binaries of rationality and affect to advocate a balanced and integrated relationship between the two, then together Gilman the rationalist and Yeziarska the emotionalist represent the polar ends of the spectrum in how they envision the role of emotion in human thought and action. Fauset navigates a more rigorously nuanced middle. But regardless of inflection, each author highlights the falseness of attempts to isolate the head and heart from one another: they affirm that thought is always affective.

The affective nature of thought is at the core of what makes art meaningful to Gilman, Yeziarska, and Fauset, and it represents one of the strongest intellectual foundations they share. It's a grounding they share with Dewey, as well, who writes that a "lifetime would be too short

to reproduce in words a single emotion” but that “poet and novelist have immense advantage over even an expert psychologist in dealing with an emotion...Instead of a description of an emotion in intellectual and symbolic terms, the artist ‘does the deed that breeds’ the emotion” (*Art as Experience* 70). Though these authors vary significantly in how they conceptualize relations between the aesthetic, the intellectual, and the instrumental, each articulates some version of an aesthetic theory of social change. They share and act on the conviction that art matters in determining the shape of social life, and they explain and demonstrate their beliefs about how in their editorial and fictional writing. Furthermore, they defend the aesthetic potential of socially engaged art as not inevitably mere documentary or propaganda, defending what Gilman called the “novel with a purpose” as a creatively significant genre, capable of great aesthetic value (“Comment and Review” 24). Their works highlight the different standards applied, especially to women writers of color, in critical assessments of objectivity, artistry, and appropriate subjects and techniques for “real” art. In the face of irregular critical reception, these authors nonetheless wrote according to their own standards for the most valuable modern literature and pursued the ideas that they felt mattered, in the forms that allowed the truest voicing of their thought.

Program for Work

I present this dissertation in two parts, radiating outward from most to least established pragmatist figures as I engage in detail a small set of authors whose writings gesture toward feminist literary pragmatism’s stylistic and thematic range, whose intellectual networks demonstrate its central positioning within pragmatism’s development, and whose backgrounds exemplify (though not comprehensively) the diverse identities of feminist literary pragmatism’s

practitioners. Part One, “The Art of Emotional Reason,” establishes feminist literary pragmatism’s foundational values and recurring interests by examining two authors within John Dewey’s immediate circle. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a consensus figure in feminist pragmatism with abundant writing in both theory-as-such and literature-as-theory, sets the stage for approaching the other writers. Anzia Yezierska, a writer with a close intimate connection to Dewey who tends not to be identified as an intellectual, represents a radical alternative in perspective to Gilman that nonetheless attends to similar intellectual issues. Part Two, “The Art of Truth: A Case Study in Black Feminist Literary Pragmatism,” considers a version of literary pragmatism that has genealogical roots in two distinct but interrelated pragmatist thought traditions. In these two chapters, I first stake a claim for Fauset as a pragmatist public intellectual and then turn to a feminist literary pragmatist reading of her best-known novel.

Chapter One argues that Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s work surfaces a constellation of thematic interests, aesthetic values, and theories about the interrelations between lived experience, knowledge, literature, and social change that is definable as feminist literary pragmatism and traceable across a range of texts beyond Gilman’s own. I examine a series of articles published between 1909 and 1915 and two utopian novels, *Moving the Mountain* (1910) and *Herland* (1915), to explore Gilman’s multimodal commitment to literary pluralism. The heart of her feminist literary pragmatism, I argue, is her belief that there exist “ideas which need a special medium:” this is a reason to do philosophy in narrative and other literary forms, and it’s a reason for critics to consider Gilman’s aesthetic choices, sometimes diminished as unartistic even by her, as significant (“As To Purpose.”).

Gilman expresses a pragmatist conviction that art and literature must be understood as part and parcel of everyday life, not part of a separate, transcendental realm. Aesthetic value and

social significance, then, far from being mutually exclusive in cultural production, are always intertwined; she argues that purpose and usefulness don't disqualify a work of literature from being aesthetically valuable and that aesthetic beauty can be useful in itself. Because literature inevitably contributes to cultural conditioning, she says, it therefore has an ethical obligation to attempt truthful representation. Gilman's own attempts at truthful representation were uneven: widely considered the leading U.S. feminist theorist of her turn of the 20th century moment, Gilman makes many powerful and prescient statements on masculine domination and cultural structures, but racist foundations in Darwinist eugenics deeply compromise her levels of insight. Thus, I approach Gilman's interest in processes of social change as mental change, well dramatized in *Moving the Mountain*, as a jumping off point to consider a wider range of feminist literary pragmatist insights from other perspectives.

Chapter Two examines a perspective that is radically different from Gilman's in many ways: Polish Jewish immigrant writer Anzia Yezierska forcefully critiques American institutions and white, native-born Americans for failures like Gilman's to apprehend others. Where Gilman advances rationality and communitarian optimism, Yezierska foregrounds emotion and individualism, with more ambivalent hope and an eye toward the challenges of unresolvable difference that accompany the benefits of cultural pluralism. Yezierska's writing has been most valued for its representation of female immigrant experience, and some critics consider it to offer little more in intellectual substance, even when they note Yezierska's proximity to pragmatist thought. I argue that applying a feminist literary pragmatist lens toward her well-known brief but intensely intimate relationship with John Dewey suggests very much otherwise, particularly if we examine Dewey through this lens at the same time.

I demonstrate that Yezierska embraces Dewey's model of democracy wholeheartedly,

despite and within her critiques, while arguing that it needs to be made concrete and emotionally relevant in stories that will allow a wide range of readers to use the ideas to think for themselves. I develop my case for her feeling forward populist pragmatism with a focus on less studied texts: her novel *All I Could Never Be* (1932) (which offers her most extended reworking of the Dewey relationship, and which she says she wrote in belated place of a research report for a Dewey-led sociological study) and her essays “America and I” (1922) (in which she offers a utopian engagement informed by Dewey and alternate to Gilman), “Prophets of Democracy” (1921) (which includes her narrative-driven review of Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* [1916]) and “One Thousand Pages of Research” (1963) (a late career piece that offers a nuanced reworking of earlier themes). I also argue that we can see traces of Anzia Yezierska’s intellectual influence on John Dewey’s thinking around aesthetics and affect by examining his poetry and by adding an as-yet unnoted poetic convergence around Robert Browning (“Rabbi Ben Ezra,” specifically) in Yezierska’s and Dewey’s work. Noting Dewey’s high intellectual regard for Yezierska and the depth of available touchpoints between their work, not just their lives, I argue that Yezierska’s literary-intellectual engagement with John Dewey as an individual, as a symbol, and as a public theorist is more than substantial enough to deserve attention within pragmatism’s literary history.

Part Two, “The Art of Truth: A Case Study in Black Feminist Literary Pragmatism,” turns its attention to an author working in a feminist pragmatist tradition that is intertwined with, and distinct from, the Deweyan tradition in which Gilman and Yezierska centrally reside. Harlem Renaissance writer Jessie Fauset was among the movement’s most prolific and respected writers, and undeniably one of its most influential figures, but her work has often been considered a misfit in the movement and has remained marginal in most narratives. However, viewed through a pragmatist lens, Fauset’s writing—equal parts prim and daring—appears very

solidly of her time, both in the substance and the techniques of her dissent against white supremacist patriarchy.

Chapter Three makes a case for Jessie Fauset as a significant pragmatist public intellectual by tracing her deep embeddedness in pragmatist networks. Fauset's close working relationship with W.E.B. Du Bois as Literary Editor of *The Crisis*, the NAACP's magazine has often served as a shorthand for her connection to pragmatism, which is well documented by George Hutchinson as a central animating force in the New Negro movement.²⁶ However, her ties go much broader and deeper than that, and I consider her personal and intellectual proximity to Anna Julia Cooper an especially meaningful context for recovering Fauset's pragmatist public intellectualism. In these contexts, I note Du Bois' framing of Fauset's work as interdisciplinary sociological investigation and read a notable 1919 exchange between Jessie Fauset and the white sociologist Edward B. Reuter, about his book *The Mulatto in the United States* (1918) to define Fauset's Black feminist pragmatist aesthetics as grounded in a method that I call "literary empiricism."

Chapter Four provides a feminist literary pragmatist reading of Fauset's best-known novel, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1928 [UK], 1929 [US]). Taking the subtitle as a point of entry into the novel, I argue that, rather than a fixed or singular moral, or a call to action, *Plum Bun* instead offers in the pragmatist spirit of literary empiricism a vantage point from which readers can critically appraise a variety of social and ethical rules, habits, and structures according to the logic they display and the consequences they produce. Fauset, like Gilman and Yeziarska, is invested in the lived and felt experiences of women within social structures and in the question of what it looks like for someone to change their mind. Within a Black feminist

²⁶ See *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (1995).

pragmatist framework, Fauset presents ethical, aesthetic, and epistemological forces as effectively inseparable psychologically, and I argue that this is the novel's major contribution to pragmatist aesthetics.

Across all four chapters, I treat feminist literary pragmatism as an interactive writing practice and reading method. I believe that feminist literary pragmatism as a literary historical phenomenon is a delimitable practice which writers engage in differing ways and to varying degrees. With further scholarship, it perhaps even could become a category. But it only emerges if we read for it retroactively. Pragmatism was largely defined in its time as a school of thought within academic philosophy; this inherently exclusive construction has since been challenged to include thinkers who didn't label themselves as members of a pragmatist school of thought. Feminist literary pragmatism thus must harness specific interests and reading practices.

My practice includes beginning with biographical and historical contexts as important grounding. Practically speaking, this tactic is a way to direct attention to recoverable figures and to situate them in intellectual history. In terms of feminist pragmatist values, it's also a way of respecting intellectual production as always imbued with lived experience that is socio-historically situated. As Gilman alluded to in her reference to the "impressive brotherhood" of professional philosophy and as Dewey described outright, the history of philosophy represents "the significant record of the efforts of men to formulate the things of experience to which they are most deeply and passionately attached" ("Teaching Practical Philosophy," *Reconstruction* 44-5). These attachments deserve comprehensive attention. However, they play a supporting rather than a leading role in my thought and analysis. Connections around ideas and writing practices are the most important and substantial relationships to this intellectual history.

Comparative reading of philosophical and literary texts, in addition to literary close reading that is informed by my authors' critical framings, is the heart of my practice.

As a note on rhetorical choices and citations: in the feminist literary pragmatist spirit of making ideas useful across disciplines, I have aimed to make this dissertation as accessible as possible to a variety of readers. For practical reasons ("partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English Language and Literature"), this dissertation is fundamentally grounded in my home discipline of literary studies, imagines an academic audience, and in many ways takes a quite traditional form. But within that academic form, I have sought to prioritize clarity and ease of reading by steering clear of weedy insider baseball fields, and I balance argument with narrative in the construction of my text. I forgo exhaustive literature reviews in favor of summarizing the overall state of relevant scholarly conversations as succinctly as I can, using individual academic texts as representative touchstones and jumping off points. However, I am indebted deeply to the remarkable individual and collective work of many scholars, many more of whom I cite in footnotes than I engage directly. I hope that readers will follow the references that intrigue and excite them most; I believe they're all worthwhile.

The suggestion that literature can do philosophy, and that it can deliver special insight, is neither radical nor new. Many have proposed, as Martha Nussbaum has phrased it, that "there may be some views of the world and how one should live in it...that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose...but only in a language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars" (3). Or as Erin McKenna has argued in *The Task of Utopia*, "literature can address the complexity of visions for a better future in a way philosophical discourse often falls short of doing...Literature puts the philosophical ideal into action and plays with its possibilities—good and bad" (9-10).

Feminist literary pragmatism puts into play a wide range of possibilities—practical and verbal, intellectual and affective—that aren’t yet fully reflected in feminist pragmatist studies, and that are reflected quite little in literary pragmatist studies. In one of his characterizations of pragmatism, William James described her as “a program for more work” and “an indication of the ways in which existing realities...may be *changed*” (qtd. Gaskill “What Difference Can Pragmatism Make” 386). Feminist literary pragmatism suggests a potential program for future work from the grounding of a very wide range of historical views on the ways reality might be changed.

The three authors I have chosen as entry points into feminist literary pragmatism demonstrate the movement’s intellectual diversity as much as its diversity of other kinds; pragmatism’s attitudes and methods of thought do not lead to inevitable conclusions on social questions or to a singular aesthetics. Applications range widely. Aspects of my three authors’ projects are wildly divergent from one another and sometimes contradictory, even as these writers engage similar themes with meaningful shared foundations in belief. Some of the eugenic aspects of Gilman’s feminist pragmatism are thoroughly incompatible with Jessie Fauset’s insistence on the already equal mental faculties of Black people to white people. Anzia Yezierska’s deep lean into emotionalism and her resistance toward certain practices of sociological science are contrary to both Gilman’s and Fauset’s scrupulous forms of attention to logic and general support for scientific method. However, all three women shared an interest in revising reason-emotion dualism and to improve academic research projects in which they ultimately shared great, if not untarnished, faith. At the level of literary style, it doesn’t take more than a paragraph or two to feel just how different these writers’ work was. They had different relations to the purposefulness of their own artistry, as well. Gilman disavowed that her

work was art, even when it was praised as such, while Fauset insisted that hers was, even when it was disparaged as propaganda on “the Negro problem.” But all wrote with a sense of purpose and a desire to reach popular audiences that sometimes put them at odds with major aesthetic ideals of Victorian belles-lettres and avant-garde modernism.

I believe the field of literary studies has, despite all its attention to pragmatism and modernism, under-appreciated the pragmatism of female fiction writers as a coherent and important thread within an expanded modernist studies and that literature has gone under-appreciated as a site of feminist pragmatist thinking. I see these women’s novels as conceptual in their work, just as male pragmatist philosophers were invested in narrative. I hope that my project’s cross-disciplinary engagements across philosophy and a few branches of literary study will contribute to scholarly understanding of this compelling shared intellectual history.

PART ONE

The Art of Emotional Reason

Chapter One: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "Ideas Which Need a Special Medium"

"What society most lacks to-day is the capacity of individuals to feel and think *collectively*."
-Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Forerunner* (1913)

"The common needs and aims demand a growing interchange of thought and growing unity of sympathetic feeling."
-John Dewey, "The School and Social Progress" (1899)

Introduction

"To understand, to think, to accept provisionally with constant willingness to readjust in relation to new knowledge," is more difficult than "[t]o learn, to memorize, to believe, and to find in that belief a virtue, an attitude to be hotly defended as the most important thing in life," Charlotte Perkins Gilman declared in 1913 ("Humanness" 20). But, she argued, it is a learnable skill, and it was one she set out to teach. "Dubbed 'the Dean of American feminists' by admirers and 'the high priestess of feminism' by detractors" in her own day, Gilman is generally agreed to be "the leading feminist writer of her turn-of-the-century American moment" and one of the most historically and intellectually significant feminists of the 20th century, and she sits in the company of Jane Addams as one of today's most established classical era female pragmatists (J.

Allen 283; Malinowska 270).²⁷ Her sharp insight and formidable volume of output placed her influence as a feminist public intellectual almost without parallel among her immediate contemporaries. As a writer, her productivity was stunning, and her range included a highly robust and purposeful practice in the art of fiction, among other literary genres: eight novels and several hundred short stories comprise roughly a third of Gilman's vast published corpus (J. Allen 296).²⁸ I begin my exploration of feminist literary pragmatism with Charlotte Perkins Gilman because there is no steadier ground from which to start. Her robust representation of all three individual elements of my collective term—feminism, pragmatism, and literature—is beyond question.

Gilman is a uniquely literary figure among feminist intellectuals and among established pragmatists by every major measure: in her intellectual formation, her publication output, and her reception history. She was born as Charlotte Anna Perkins in 1860, as the Civil War was brewing, eight years after her great aunt Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It was the best selling novel of the 19th century in the United States, and it remains widely credited with “incalculable” impact—not only, but certainly not least, in stirring anti-slavery sentiment. (Tompkins 124).²⁹ This family legacy inspired Gilman, and she set socially influential writing as

²⁷ Significant accounts in the recovery of Gilman as a pragmatist feminist include Maureen Egan's “Evolutionary Theory in the Social Philosophy of Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1989), Jane Upin's “Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Instrumentalism Beyond Dewey” (1993) and Charlene Haddock Seigfried's *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* (1996) and “Can a ‘Man-Hating Feminist Also Be a Pragmatist?: On Charlotte Perkins Gilman” (2001). Gilman is now recognized in an array of major reference works, e.g. the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, *American Philosophy: From Wounded Knee to the Present* (2015), *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy* (2017). Nonetheless, Gilman remains “virtually overlooked by non-feminist academic pragmatists” in philosophy who have been cautious to expand the classical pragmatist canon (James, “Feminist Pragmatism” 134).

²⁸ I draw here from Judith Allen's chapter on Gilman in the *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists* (2011), which offers a succinct introduction to Gilman's life and work, but she also offers one of scholarship's most detailed accounts of Gilman's beliefs in her book *The Feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Sexualities, Histories, Progressivism* (2009).

²⁹ It also stirred the reinforcement and creation of racist stereotypes, tropes, and stock characters that would litter American media and culture for many decades to come.

her own mission as well. She approached it with gusto: Cynthia Davis has estimated that over the course of her career, Gilman published over 2,000 works of nonfiction, about 500 poems, several plays, and 675 works of fiction (xii).³⁰ From 1909 through 1916, she single-handedly authored and self-published a monthly periodical, *The Forerunner*, in which many of these works appeared. Her career was bookended with verse and narrative: her first book was a collection of poetry, and her last was a posthumously published autobiography. She regarded fiction as a uniquely flexible and powerful medium, and utopian fiction, highly popular in the Progressive Era, was one of the genres she most favored to articulate her social vision.

Gilman was better known during her lifetime for her sociological treatises, particularly the international hit *Women in Economics* (1898), but her fiction has been highly significant in her recovery. Gilman was first returned to the public eye in 1956 by a historian, Carl Degler, who noticed her books in the Vassar College library and who spearheaded reprinting of *Women and Economics* in 1966 (Freedman). By the early 1970s, the conversation had grown and shifted: feminist literary critics were either leading the charge to recover Gilman's work or—depending on who you ask—had “overtaken” the “initial efforts to reappraise her work by postwar historians and social scientists” (J. Allen 296). Outside of academia, the public revival of her reputation hinges heavily on the durability of a single powerful short story (Harrison). First anthologized by William Dean Howells and later revived from obscurity, “The Yellow Wall-Paper” (1892) is now considered a feminist classic and taught as a staple of many high school and college English classrooms. Gilman's literature has also had a long indirect cultural legacy through a range of other work it informed: for example, Degler introduced Betty Friedan to

³⁰ Davis's *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Biography* (2010) is widely considered the definitive Gilman biography and the collection she co-edited with Denise Knight, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Her Contemporaries: Literary and Intellectual Contexts* (2004) engages several of her connections with other writers in depth.

Gilman in 1955, influencing the thought that would lead to *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and the all-female Amazonian society Gilman imagined in the utopian novel *Herland* (1915) inspired, among other creations, Wonder Woman (Freedman, Lepore).³¹

This chapter examines this influential writer's aesthetic criticism and literary fiction through the lens of feminist pragmatism and Deweyan aesthetics with an eye toward identifying features that I argue characterize a broader feminist literary pragmatism. Even in such a prominent case of the interaction between feminism, literature, and pragmatism, these terms have yet to be braided together more than loosely in existing discourse.³² However, Gilman self-identified as "a philosopher" and has been accepted by feminist pragmatist scholars as such, with general recognition of the theoretical character of her creative literary work (*The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* 182).³³ She sets a precedent in theory and in practice for approaching literature in general, and fiction specifically, as a primary medium for developing feminist pragmatist thought.

³¹ See Jill Lepore's *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (2014) for how a number of suffragists and feminists influenced Wonder Woman creator William Marston.

³² Aleksandra Hernandez wrote recently in *Hypatia* about the scattered spread: "except for Jane Upin and Erin McKenna, not much critical attention has been devoted to the pragmatist character of Gilman's utopian social theory [which she presented largely through fiction] (Upin 1993; McKenna 2001). Moreover, though Gilman's feminist commitments have been widely documented, only McKenna and Charlene Haddock Seigfried place Gilman within a pragmatist feminist tradition" ("Pragmatist Feminist Utopias" 77). A few other worthy entries also belong on the list: Mary Jo Deegan and Christopher Podeschi's "The Ecofeminist Pragmatism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman" (2001), John Reuland's "The Social Worker's License: Reconstructing Social Selves in the Work of Jessie Taft and Charlotte Perkins Gilman" (2015), and Lorraine McCrary's "From Hull-House to *Herland*: Engaged and Extended Care in Jane Addams and Charlotte Perkins Gilman" (2019). However, Hernandez's point about the scantness of critical attention stands, especially relative to just how much Gilman scholarship is out there. The disciplinary spread and strong reputations of the outlets for the existing handful of articles (*Hypatia*, *Modernism/modernity*, *Environmental Ethics*, *Politics & Gender*, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*) is nonetheless promising and suggests existing appetite and broad potential relevance for future work along pragmatist feminist literary lines.

³³ Against arguments that Gilman's fiction is in fact *so* theoretical and didactic that its aesthetic form is incidental, see Laura Fisher's excellent article, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Novel Aesthetics" (2017), which situates Gilman's literature within a critically overlooked genre, the "sociological novel" (related to the social problem novel), which "thrived as a popular genre during the Progressive Era, the very years when the disciplinary divide separating sociology and social work from literature grew ever wider" (495). Fisher's reading of Gilman has been highly influential for mine, and I would suggest sociological novels as a site for future feminist literary pragmatist investigation. Fisher extends her work around the genre, with a focus on reform institutions, in *Reading for Reform: The Social Work of Literature in the Progressive Era* (2019).

Gilman also sets a precedent for considering what marginalized feminist pragmatists, working in nontraditional philosophical media, might be able uniquely to see—including many things that Gilman could not. Charlene Haddock Seigfried has argued that Gilman’s “unintended marginality created the conditions that allowed her to develop her feminist theories without having to compromise with the dominant, and conservative, academic forces” (“Can a ‘Man-Hating’ Feminist Also Be a Pragmatist?” 75). Some of the compromises she avoids involve the ideological forces of professional academic training as it existed at the turn of the century: for example, she enjoyed freer rein to theorize from the grounding of personal experience and to work from particularity toward generality. Others have as much to do with literary form as they do with intellectual content. In fiction, especially, Gilman found a powerful medium that was accessible to her as a female writer and accessible to a broad reading public. Its imaginative capacities served the development of her ideas as well as the engagement of her audience.

The first section of this chapter focuses on Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s detailed articulation of her beliefs about the function of literature and her own authorial strategies across a series of *Forerunner* articles between 1910 and 1915. Gilman’s literary critical texts provide part of my rubric for understanding her literature and its philosophy. Encountered by many *Forerunner* readers as paratexts framing Gilman’s fiction and poetry as it was first published, these serve as important intertexts for my reading of her fiction. Gilman grounded her approach to literature in her understanding of its intellectual and affective communicative function, naturalistically and culturally. Viewing its role in society as inevitably conditioning belief, she believed literature had an obligation to the science of ethics, distinct from the habits of morals, and to truthful representation.

Gilman also found fiction to be a particularly important medium. She describes the novel

especially as a distinctively flexible form, holding great audience appeal and unique epistemological power to get at certain kinds of experiential truths, hypothetical truths, and truths that go unnoticed or distorted in other forms of traditionally male-dominated knowledge production.³⁴ However, Gilman also considered literary fiction to be weighed down by tradition and in need of feminist reconstruction. In envisioning an ideal literature of the future, she defined literary revolution in very different terms than those that would come to define “modernism” in 20th century literary history: against inaccessible avant-garde formal experimentation, she envisioned accessible, socially relevant writing about a broad array of themes, blending beauty with usefulness. These literary values provide reason to question Gilman’s disavowal of her own “literariness” and a lens through which to evaluate her aesthetic choices.

In the second section of the chapter, I turn from Gilman’s discussion of literature in general to her articulation of her own particular purpose in writing. This section identifies Gilman’s concept of “ideas which need a special medium” as the backbone of her feminist literary pragmatism, in belief and in praxis (“As To Purpose.”). The premise that some ideas can only be developed, expressed, and/or understood in certain forms of writing undergirds several beliefs and practices that I argue are key to feminist literary pragmatism. It represents a statement of a belief in the value of formal and intellectual pluralism, in which non-traditional philosophical genres serve as important philosophical mediums to get at ideas otherwise unreachable. Gilman treats literature not only as a tool for emotional impact, but for bringing new concepts at the leading edge of thought into articulation. Practicing what she preaches,

³⁴ This last point becomes particularly important for authors writing against multiple forms of misrepresentation, including race and class as well as gender. Anzia Yezierska highlights the “cold” misunderstandings of Anglo-American social scientific method in approaching immigrant and impoverished groups of people; Jessie Fauset does not disparage scientific method as Yezierska does, but rather against its harmful misapplication when premised on the same racist bias that generates misrepresentation in fictional as well as scientific literature. She argues for broader methods in addition to more scrupulous practices.

Gilman expresses her purpose in multiple formulations, each offering a slightly different facet, and I examine her double-barreled expository statement of *The Forerunner*'s aims alongside the short poem that opened its very first issue.

In the third section of the chapter, I consider what Gilman's feminist pragmatist aesthetic theory looks like in action in by turning to her utopian novel *Moving the Mountain* (1911), with briefer consideration of her better-known utopia *Herland* (1915), and one article that, unlike either novel, centrally addresses race. In *Moving the Mountain* I identify in Gilman's criticism a version of literary persuasion that relies on reason, rather than tactics of sympathy and empathy most commonly associated with social change fiction, especially as written by women in this period and tagged (often dismissively) as sentimental.³⁵ In Gilman's utopias, her flat characters, minimal plots, and extensive exposition don't dig deep at the stuff that's supposed to create feelings. Gilman's primary aim is not to make people "feel right" (in Stowe's famous or infamous words describing her aim in writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) (480). She uses fiction not to stir emotions but to clarify ideas—to make them understood. John Dewey once praised William James for his "capacity to put things into an English which projects ideas as if bodily into space till they are solid things to walk around and survey from different sides" ("What Does Pragmatism Mean by Practical?" 99). Gilman, in her utopian literature, sought to do just that.

³⁵ Many feminist scholars have set out to challenge the periodization and devaluation of sentimental discourse in the 20th century, often noting sentimentality's racialization as well as its gendering. But a few of note to me for their specific focus: Suzanne Clark's *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (1991) represents an important argument to "to restore the sentimental to modernist literary history—with all its banality and also all its connections to subversion and ethical appeal. Doing so, we restore literature to its place within a history of rhetoric" (15). Jennifer Fleissner's *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (2004) offers an influential re-gendering of literary naturalism, a recognized but long masculine-associated activist genre. Lisa Mendelman's more recent *Modern Sentimentalism* (2019) "engages literary practices that are typically discussed in terms of their epistemological more than their emotional qualities" and seeks to reconcile the binary, not in a pragmatist paradigm but certainly complementary to one (11). June Howard has situated sentimentality in a long history from an older masculine tradition of sensibility to newer research in embodied cognition (see especially her classic article "What is Sentimentality?" [1999]).

However, I highlight that Gilman's rationality is not void of affect and her lack of interest in character depth does not also correspond with a lack of interest in psychology.

The near-scale utopia of *Moving the Mountain* devotes considerable attention to its male protagonist-narrator's process of reaction and acclimation to a new U.S. society in order to demonstrate the proposition that tangible exposure to an idea's practical consequences prompts change of mind.³⁶ Change of heart then follows, rather than leads. Gilman's projection from a "baby Utopia," reached in thirty years, to a full-scale all-female society in *Herland*, developed over centuries, projects Gilman's ideas of a rational, harmonious, cooperative feminist society to a fuller extent. However, its highly ordered collectivism looks much less utopic when compared with Gilman's real-world proposals for managing difference.

Gilman's literary-intellectual legacy is as vexed as it is significant, and the foundations of her thought include a number of sweeping, incorrect, and alarming social Darwinist premises.³⁷ If she is a textbook case for the radical wing of mainstream early 20th century feminism, she's also a textbook case for progressive middle-class white feminism at its most alarmingly blinkered, especially regarding race and ethnicity. Gilman made prescient and forceful arguments that women were as fully intellectually and socially capable as men—in her terms, as fully human—but stunted by "androcentric" socioeconomic structures and cultural norms (*The Man-Made World; or, Our Androcentric Culture*). Gilman believed that remedying these

³⁶ For a discussion on Gilman's use of the "disoriented male narrator," see Marsha Smith.

³⁷ For sampling of discussions at the peak moment of scholarly reckoning with this fraught legacy, see Maureen L. Egan's "Evolutionary Theory in the Social Philosophy of Charlotte Perkins Gilman" (1989), Bernice L. Hausman's "Sex before Gender: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Evolutionary Paradigm of Utopia" (1998), *A Very Different Story: Studies on the Fiction of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1998, eds. Gough and Rudd), *The Mixed Legacy of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (2000, eds. Golden and Zangrando), Denise Knight's "Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Shadow of Racism" (2000), Alys Eve Weinbaum's "Writing Feminist Genealogy: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Racial Nationalism, and the Reproduction of Maternalist Feminism" (2001). Agnes Malinowska's more recent "Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Fungal Female Animal: Evolution, Efficiency, and the Reproductive Body" (2019) offers a nuanced discussion of the internal tensions in Gilman's work as it reads today.

structural issues could improve women's lives and society at large almost immediately. Given education and opportunity, the female sex would rise to the challenge. But, when Gilman wrote (comparatively infrequently) about other vectors of oppression, she often reached different conclusions, as her 1908 essay "A Suggestion on the Negro Problem" starkly demonstrates. If white, middle class, American-born women needed education and immediate liberty, other oppressed people needed remedial education and delayed liberty, preceded by a period of strict control. She did imagine that an egalitarian socialist American future would inevitably be multiracial, but the future she hoped for would not be multicultural. Gilman imagined full assimilation by all to the cultural norms of middle- and upper- class white Americans and expressed her personal disdain for being near people of color in blatantly hateful racist terms.

Building on Erin McKenna's feminist and pragmatist concept of "process utopia," I argue that Gilman's dramatization of the process of mental change is not only a core priority for her, but that it is one of Gilman's most useful explorations for thinking today.³⁸ "Pragmatism can keep utopia alive without falling back on the end-state model of utopia," McKenna argues, such that "[u]topia can become an ongoing task rather than a resting place" (*The Task of Utopia* 3). Gilman scholars have described how Gilman's process utopias demonstrate constant openness to change; even what looks like perfection does not mean finality. I join with scholars who consider that Gilman's models of *how*, more than her models of *what*, offer the strongest jumping off point for further work. I propose that a rubric of feminist literary pragmatism offers new ways to approach Gilman's insights and limitations and to move toward more inclusive narratives of

³⁸ McKenna is quite explicit about holding the terms feminism and pragmatism side-by-side in the context of defining process utopia, not putting them together as a joint concept: "I am not entering the debate about a feminist pragmatism and/or a pragmatist feminism," she says (*Task* 14). She does write about Gilman as a feminist pragmatist elsewhere, however ("Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Women, Animals, and Oppression").

intellectual and literary history today. Gilman's multi-pronged literary engagement with the process of changing minds suggests a number of methods for how to approach other authors.

Before I turn to these discussions, however, it is helpful first to establish some of the basics of her social beliefs and aims and the pragmatist elements of her feminist work. Gilman set herself the mission of determining the root causes of society's problems in order to break a path forward to solving them. Her diagnosis, in a nutshell, was that men's domination of women had kept half of the world from fully developing and contributing to society, to everyone's collective detriment. Following from this diagnosis, Gilman's major cultural intervention was her two-fold case that women's full participation in public life would require economic independence and that women's liberation from the home would necessarily and inevitably transform the character of both public and private life. Gilman envisioned a total revolution of domestic structures that included the full professionalization of domestic labor: homes would become kitchenless, universal early childhood education would begin in infancy, and atomized housing models would give way to those that mixed private apartments and shared living spaces, with communal kitchens and baby-gardens.

Gilman's feminist proposals to transform the limits of the domestic were radical in their time.³⁹ At a time when opponents decried women's suffrage as potentially fatal to the existence of home and family, Gilman wanted far more than the vote: she advocated nothing less than a complete and rapid obliteration of the doctrine of separate spheres that delegated public life to men and home life to women.⁴⁰ This ideology, which rendered women and girls economically

³⁹ Her radicalism offers a good example of the difference between philosophical pragmatism and political pragmatism, usually mapped onto the practical virtue of compromise and its associated vices, including short-term thinking and capitulation to powers that be.

⁴⁰ Theoretically and aspirationally, at least. A life at home was frequently not the reality for working class women: as Yeziarska reminded her readers, women were often breadwinners in families that also included men, not only as

dependent on husbands, fathers, and brothers, had shaped Gilman's life profoundly. Her father had abandoned the family when Gilman was a child, and she grew up impoverished, moving frequently from relative to relative. Her formal education was sparse and irregular; despite her intelligence and much greater level of curiosity and motivation, her brother was the one funded to go to college. He, too, didn't provide adequately for the family. Gilman took the work she could, at one point selling soap door to door, at another illustrating advertising postcards after managing her way into some courses at the Rhode Island School of Design. Then, Gilman's first marriage, to Walter Stetson, though loving, proved disastrous; the fact that he was a spendthrift didn't help. Judith Allen considers this sequence of events one of the most intellectually formative aspects of Gilman's life: "Father, brother, now husband: the male breadwinners closest to Gilman all failed. Yet unpaid domestic duties and social customs barred her from paid work" of most kinds (Allen 285). This lived experience informed the tenacity of Gilman's major conviction about what women needed most: "the basic need of economic independence seemed to me of far more importance than the ballot" (*Living* 131).

Empowering women would not only bring the full potential of women's personal talents into the public sphere, Gilman believed, but also move humanity toward a more intelligent and rational collectivism by de-masculinizing an overly "androcentric" culture. She considered women to have greater fellow-feeling and proclivity toward care that she deemed a truer manifestation of human nature and potential than what she saw as the destructive, combative orientation of masculine individualism. But, she insisted that what some might call a

spinsters and widows. Nonetheless, the framework also gendered what work was generally "appropriate" and accessible for women across classes. Blue collar and white collar wage work alike had pink collar divisions: a female factory worker would more likely be sewing garments than smelting iron, for example. Unions for female workers such as the Women's Trade Union League of America and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union were important forces in Progressive Era feminist activism. For a study that attends to Progressive Era women's labor history, with note of the ways the movement overlooked marginalized domestic workers, see Lara Vapnek's *Breadwinners: Working Women and Economic Independence* (2009).

feminization of culture would primarily be a *humanization* of an overly gender-differentiated world. “The New Woman is Human first, last and always,” she emphasized: “Incidentally she is female; as man is male” (“The Humanness of Women” 12).

Gilman’s theories both affirmed and challenged gender difference, generally arguing it down in degree and partially recharacterizing it in kind. For example, she separated rationalism as human from individualism as masculine, considering competitive individualism as rational only in an irrational male-structured world: “the individualist view...is distinctly masculine. Males are essentially individualistic—born to vary and compete; and an exclusively masculine world must be individualistic and competitive” but, about the nature of the world, she argues, “We have been wrong. The new Social Philosophy recognizes Society as an orderly life-form, having its own laws of growth” (“The Humanness of Women” 12). In a better reconstructed society, collectivism—culturally feminine but also naturally human—is the rational approach to Gilman. Not-actually-masculine thought and not-actually-feminine feeling needed full, balanced cultivation as not-actually-separate faculties. The result of reconciliation, she believed, would be a more collaborative, equitable and flourishing society.

This integration and de-gendering of thought and feeling, with an eye toward improved collective life, is fundamentally pragmatist. For his part, John Dewey considered the individualistic “illusion of being really able to stand and act alone” to be “an unnamed form of insanity which is responsible for a large part of the remedial suffering of the world” and similarly imagined that better institutions, especially educational ones, could remediate the irrational collective suffering that human beings inflict on one another and themselves (qtd. Browne 1). Theoretically, Seigfried writes, Gilman is “firmly in the pragmatist feminist tradition of Jane Addams and John Dewey” when she declares: “What society most lacks to-day is the capacity of

individuals to feel and think *collectively*, to grasp social values, to recognize, care for, and serve social needs, to see in the common business of life, not personal expression or personal aggrandizement, but social service," ("Can a 'Man-Hating' Feminist" 79; "On Ellen Key and the Woman Movement" 36).

As a matter of intellectual history, this is a tradition they built together, rather than a happenstance of zeitgeist and convergent evolution of thought, as Seigfried and Upin have documented. Gilman and Addams met in 1894 in California and remained lifelong friends and collaborators in the women's movement, including as founders of the Women's Peace Party in 1915. Gilman lived at Hull House in 1895, both learning and lecturing in the community. She likely met John Dewey for the first time there and was certainly already familiar with his work, having recommended it to readers of the Pacific Coast Women's Press Association magazine the previous year. The two later participated in a women's suffrage symposium together in 1911 and continued to remain aware of each other's work. Dewey advised a dissertation in 1915 from now recognized feminist pragmatist Jessie Taft that engaged Gilman's writing, and he wrote in partial defense of Gilman in private correspondence, speaking in both personal and intellectual terms. Though Dewey agrees to sharing his friend Scudder Klyce's "disgust" with some of Gilman's ideas, he chides Klyce for letting that feeling color his entire impression, leading him to dismiss "Gilman's sound plea for the economic independence of women" and make unfair ad hominem charges against, in Dewey's experience, "an unusually cheerful, optimistic, amiable person." While acknowledging that Gilman would have gotten a better technical training had she been a man, Dewey points out that such training leads to the very sort of narrow specialization that Klyce deplores in her" ("Can a 'Man-Hating' Feminist" 81). As Seigfried summarizes, these

points of connection “all demonstrate that Gilman did affect the earliest development of pragmatist feminist theory” (75).

Seigfried offers a strong and succinct characterization of Gilman as a pragmatist feminist, as well as a demonstration of Gilman’s mutually influential interaction with other pragmatist thinker-activists. From Gilman’s very broad array of often highly specific social suggestions—she offered possible cultural, economic, and policy solutions across an expansive gamut of issues⁴¹—Seigfried summarizes pragmatist currents that run across Gilman’s work and that of other pragmatists, including the literary figures I identify:

Gilman shares many pragmatist theories, including the importance of evolutionary theory for undermining intuitions of eternal truths and the self-evidence of received facts; belief in the importance of lifelong education for developing the social consciousness necessary for full human development; the need for emancipation from reactionary institutional forces; and the integration of thought and feeling, aesthetics and knowledge, facts and values. (“Can a ‘Man-Hating’ Feminist” 75-6)

The key pragmatist, feminist, and literary term that doesn’t surface in this list, but that ties its items together is *experience*. Pragmatists understood life, as lived, is a whole rather than an assemblage of discrete parts: the integration of thought with feeling, aesthetics with knowledge,

⁴¹ All the way down to how to how to remember victims of the Titanic sinking: it was right to praise the “courageous and self-sacrificing” (she does not say chivalrous) men who chose to put women and children first, “but so should we honor the women who waive this sex advantage and choose to die like brave and conscientious human beings, rather than live on a wholly feminine basis.” And, she added about the news coverage, “In all that pain and grief and courage one bit of snobbery stands out—among those saved from death we find Mrs. So and So ‘and maid’! Had the ‘maid’ no name, no anxious relatives?” (“The Saving of Women in Disaster”).

and facts with values reflects how thinking, in a body and in a culture, actually works.⁴²

Elements of experience can—and indeed must be—be delineated with labels, descriptions, and narratives for the purpose of understanding, but they cannot actually be separated. Feminists share pragmatist orientations toward integration while prioritizing an understanding and valuation of women’s lived experience, specifically, using women’s perspectives and experiential knowledge to challenge established beliefs and institutions. And experience is also a key term for the value of what imaginative literature has to offer as a medium: it can represent lived experience, create imagined experience, and generate vicarious and aesthetic experience.

Using the core term of Dewey’s philosophy, Gilman argued that the “major lack in the minds of women is in experience” (“The Effect of the Position of Woman on the Race Mind” 250). Gilman’s pragmatist feminist logic hinged on the idea that removing narrow limitations on women’s experience would also allow thinking to expand. As Michael Kimmel and Amy Aronson have distilled it: “The liberation of women—and of children and men, for that matter—required getting women out of the house, both practically and ideologically” (Kimmel and Aronson xix). In a series of articles, Gilman even described forms of narrow thinking as emerging, quite literally, from the cultural conditioning of specific rooms of the home: “kitchen-mindedness” and “parlor-mindedness,” for example.⁴³ As she portrayed in “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” a room of one’s own, if it is one’s only room, can become devastatingly confining. Had

⁴² Social and biological sciences continue to shed increasing light on the depth and nature of the integrations, but pragmatists—many of whom were working at the cutting edge of psychology and sociology at the turn of the 20th century—were some of the most significant early advocates of moving toward an empirical, holistic view of experience.

⁴³ The latter isn’t as bad as the former, Gilman says, but it keeps people focused on personal problems and blind to systemic ones, while also (incidentally) mistaking decoration for beauty: “we, parlor-bred and newspaper-bred, continue to cry out fiercely against personal, primitive parlor sins, and remain unshocked by world-sins that should rouse us to horror, shame and action [as we sit in] these small shrines, adorned with what, in our doll-house taste, we fondly imagine to be beautiful” (“Parlor-Mindedness” 10). Dewey, Yeziarska, and Fauset were also greatly concerned with the threats posed by narrow social interaction and “bad” print culture to emotionally condition inappropriate disgust, desire, and aesthetic (dis)regard, as I discuss in following chapters.

Gilman taken up the thought experiment, she might have imagined a male philosopher cloistered in *his* designated room of the house, reading books and journals authored only by a tiny circle of other men, and diagnosed him as suffering from “study-mindedness.” Dewey, in parallel, characterized hidebound patterns in academic inquiry as a form of homeboundness: philosophical quarrels “go on within the limits of a too domestic circle,” he wrote in *Experience and Nature*, “and can be settled only by venturing further afield, and out of doors” (qtd. Browne 10). But, although nothing can replace getting out in the world *literally*, both Gilman and Dewey believed in the equal importance of print culture to broaden and enhance readers’ experience and open doors *literarily*.

A Feminist Pragmatist’s Literary Ethics

In her quest to be understood, Charlotte Perkins Gilman took pains not to be misunderstood. Even taken in good faith, her radical cultural and policy proposals were hard enough for most of the turn-of-the-century public to swallow. They were also easy for opponents to caricature, and when misunderstood in either concept or rationale, they made even easier fodder as boogeymen (or perhaps boogeywomen) for proponents of the status quo in gender roles, relations, and rights. But Gilman was convinced that if people understood her message fully and properly, they would see reason: the women’s movement would be apprehended to be “as natural, as beneficial, as irresistible as the coming of spring” and “the tottering fortress of the ultra-masculine” would fall (“The Humanness of Women” 13-14). As such, she wrote extensively about her beliefs, purposes, and methods, and in the process of combatting misunderstanding, she did a lot of debunking and disavowing.

Some of Gilman’s disavowals need to be taken with a dose of salt, however: they say less

about her resistance to the concepts at large than to historically particular versions. When she writes in her autobiography, a posthumously published effort to define her legacy that she wrote while facing a terminal breast cancer diagnosis, “I was not a reformer, but a philosopher,” the claim says less about Gilman’s status as a feminist activist than it does about identities that were broadly considered incompatible at her moment of writing (*Living* 182). But just as Dewey raised challenges to a thinking-doing binary from within professional philosophy, participating actively in public issues and encouraging others to do the same, Gilman did from the outside. And her next sentences highlight the compatibility of endeavors with an analogy: “I worked for various reforms, as Socrates went to war when Athens needed his services, but we do not remember him as a soldier. My business was to find out what ailed society, and how most easily and naturally to improve it” (*Living* 182). The comparison not only makes a claim for public philosophy; it also raises the question of who gets remembered for what when an either/or judgment is made. In a public intellectual/public servant binary, women were rarely credited for the former, so she claimed a legible side in the existing framework. She wanted to be understood first and foremost as a theorist, and as a theorist of women’s and men’s common humanity: women’s issues, she insisted, were human issues—the most pressing facing the world at the turn of the 20th century.

Ironically, Gilman deliberately distanced herself from the key professional identity that most defines her legacy today: by the end of her career, she resisted being called a feminist, despite having been a standard-bearer for the movement and an obvious, ardent advocate for women’s experiences and equality. Much like paradigm-setting pragmatists Dewey and Peirce eventually wanted to use new terms to distinguish themselves from an increasingly messy pragmatist pack and attacks being made against various pragmatisms, so did Gilman with

feminism. In a proliferation of contradictory iterations, she didn't want her ideas to be confused with versions of the concept that leaned deeply into ideas of women's femininity or moral superiority; her thought preserved and relied upon gender distinction, but she wanted to diminish culturally conditioned gender difference. She had always preferred the term "humanist" anyway as a better description of her aim to bring both women and men closer to a complete and shared humanity undistorted by cultural "over-sexing" of both genders.

Gilman's clearly suspect disavowals of her reformism and her feminism cast doubt on another disavowal that critics have been somewhat more apt to accept: Gilman's strident insistence against her own literariness. She declares "I have never made any pretense of being literary," and she further insists that by her novels, "I definitely proved that I am not a novelist" (*Living* 284, 306). But she makes the claim within a dominant intellectual culture that deeply undervalued women's intellect and largely regarded art with a social purpose as inhabiting a separate sphere from "true" or "high" art.⁴⁴ To argue that both process and outcome of writing disqualify her from "literary" status supports the elevation of Gilman's philosophy: the books were "all natural expression of thought," she says, "except in the stories, which called for composition and were more difficult—especially the novels, which are poor" (*Living* 100). She describes her gifts as "the faculty of inner perception, of seeing the relation of facts and their consequences" and as the "[t]he power of expression" (*Living* 100). However, she refuses to class her intention to "express an idea with clearness and vivacity, so that it might be apprehended with ease and pleasure" or her power of verbal expression as constituting "in the artistic sense, 'literature'" (*Living* 284-5). It's a denial with a subtext: the doubling of qualifiers

⁴⁴ As I will discuss in Part Two of this dissertation, this framework particularly dogged African American writers, who were relentlessly accused of producing "propaganda" that was not art, or that was bad art, for representing racial inequality as a feature of Black life in America.

suggests her resistance to the dominant definition of artistic literature, in scare quotes.

Gilman's self-assessment of un-literariness doesn't entirely hold either as an accurate self-evaluation or as a gesture of humility. It didn't in her period, and it rings even less true long after the end of a literary era defined by belletristic aesthetic values and "art for art's sake" ideology in many elite tastemaking circles. Gilman did write a good portion of her fiction hastily, under pressure to make her living, but she refused to accept the label of "literature" for any of it (Allen 296). She denied that even "The Yellow Wall-Paper," which garnered acclaim for vivid, nuanced literary achievement, fit the mold.⁴⁵ When Howells asked if he could anthologize it in his collection *The Great Modern American Stories* (1920) she consented to the inclusion but declined to accept the badge of literary honor: "I was more than willing, but assured him that it was no more 'literature' than my other stuff, being definitely written 'with a purpose.'" (*Living* 121).⁴⁶ The catch? A rather crafty Deweyan move of "questioning...categories and shifting...dichotomies" (Chaloupka 259). She punctuates with this twist: "In my judgment it is a pretty poor thing to write, to talk, without a purpose" (*Living* 121). Her disavowal of literariness is fundamentally a critique of the state of literature and literary criticism.

Gilman articulated her alternate vision of literature's purpose, promise, and responsibilities in a series of critical essays over the course of *The Forerunner's* run: together, these texts define the underpinnings of Gilman's feminist literary pragmatism, visible across her literary practice. The various elements cluster around a central stance that any art or criticism that attempts to divorce itself from purpose renders itself less effective by failing to understand how art functions in life. So, alongside installations of the novels *What Diantha Did* and *The*

⁴⁵ She did concede in "Why I Wrote The Yellow Wallpaper" (1913) that "[t]he little book is valued by alienists [those who treat and study mental illness] and as a good specimen of one kind of literature," and that pleased her (271).

⁴⁶ Gilman incorrectly names the anthology title as the *Masterpieces of American Fiction*.

Crux in February 1910, Gilman begins *The Forerunner's* discourse on literature in its first volume with her assessment of what it does: it communicates. She argues that intellectual and affective communication is the basic function of literature and the stick by which to measure it. "Literature is to be similarly judged by its initial purpose, the preservation and transmission of ideas and feelings," she writes ("Comment and Review" 23). This joint emphasis on ideas and feelings is characteristic not only of Gilman's feminist literary pragmatism, but also that of Jessie Fauset and Anzia Yezierska.

Gilman's strongest focus is towards ideas, which she finds particularly essential for several reasons. Aside from her own primary interests as a social philosopher, one is basic coherence: she writes, "Even the picture-work of fiction must carry a certain content of ideas, else it cannot read; it does not, as the children say, 'make sense.'" ("Comment and Review" 23). (Unsurprisingly, as I will note further later, Gilman had little regard for modernist formal experimentation that she found nonsensical; but even those opaque experiments, she held, communicated something, even if worthless in content and poor in execution, to her taste.) Another reason is resistance to elite literary criticism that she believed held a much too small view of "good" literature, and a silly one at that. She writes that the "overwhelming mass of fiction" is "ruthlessly condemned by the austere upholder of high standards" who treats "[l]iterature, in the esoteric sense of lofty criticism, [as] a form of writing which, like the higher mathematics, must be free from any taint of utility." This principle, Gilman declares, is so absurd as to be nonsensical: "Pure literature must perforce be a form of expression, but must not condescend to express anything.... This attitude of sublime superiority as an art is responsible for our general scorn of what we call, 'The Novel with a Purpose.'" ("Comment and Review" 24). She finds snobby sublimity to be poor grounds to dismiss this large literary category wholesale.

Gilman's opposition to separating art from life is tightly aligned with what Dewey would articulate at length twenty-four years later, the year before Gilman died, in *Art as Experience*. As William Chaloupka summarizes, "Dewey opposed the notion that the separate realm of the art world was what allowed art to make meaningful statements. Quite the opposite, separation often has the effect of masking that which is aesthetic" (253).⁴⁷ "When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience," Dewey writes, "a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, with which esthetic theory deals (*Art as Experience* 2)." Dewey scolds those who would vacate aesthetic theory by isolating it: "a philosophy of art is sterilized unless it makes us aware of the function of art in relation to other modes of experience" (10). In Gilman's terms, to neglect ideas and purpose in literature is to profoundly fail to understand it.

Gilman's literary pragmatism seeks to contextualize art within culture and within science, as part of an integrated experiential whole that can be understood empirically. Her most comprehensive discussion sought to ground her literary philosophy in natural philosophy. "Effect of Literature Upon the Mind," a chapter of the Forerunner-serialized treatise *Our Brains and What Ails Them* (1912), attempted a scientific explanation—and delivered a pseudoscientific one—of "the real relation of literature to the brain" with its "myriad cells, stored with impressions, transmitting energy modified by these impressions" (133-4). Literature, Gilman says, is society's collective "extra-physical paper brain": it functions as "a vast secondary storage battery," common to all, that enhances and channels the power behind every individual brain

⁴⁷A political scientist, Chaloupka was here making an early case for Dewey's aesthetics as a precedent for developing a stronger environmental social theory, integrating "values, politics, and experience" (243). Gilman's literature, as many scholars have noted, is deeply engaged with environmental issues ranging from industrial waterway pollution to toxic chemicals in food to land use to animal ethics. I choose this source here to make a gesture to the potential relevance of pragmatist aesthetic thinking—including, I argue, in aesthetic form—to thinking on other issues.

(135). This makes literature, not wholly metaphorically in Gilman's account, "the brain of society; and all our individual brains are steadily remodified by it" (137). Gilman speaks in socially and academically antiquated terms about the "race mind" of humanity and generates an unfounded narrative of physical and cultural evolution's past and future, but some of her basic points nonetheless represent major insights that, translated into more contemporary language, continue to shape cultural conversations around the importance of representation.⁴⁸

Quite literally, she argues, literature is a form of conditioning. Like Dewey, Gilman emphasizes that all imaginative production is culturally situated: "we may look to see, not only books filled from people's minds, but people's minds filled from books ("Effect of Literature" 134). Any creation is influenced by lived experience and received experience; culture inevitably shapes (and limits) what a person creates, hence the importance of perspective. Different people hear and tell stories differently because of "natural variance in minds," and these individual differences are "modified by many conditions, as of age, race, sex, class, and economic necessity" (136). Any "literature reflects the changes of time; and glaringly, in its unblushing limitations, it bears the distinction of class interests" (136).⁴⁹ Furthermore, all art and culture are biological in function because all *living* is biological. Cultural experience conditions the reactions of the human animal as much as any kind of experience conditions the reactions of any other kind of animal: we're not all that different, Gilman analogizes, from a pet dog whose "loving impulse" to jump up, bark, and lick your face can be shaped into doing tricks for you

⁴⁸ Regarding the "race mind," see Agnes Malinowska's "Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Fungal Female Animal: Evolution, Efficiency, and the Reproductive Body" (2019) for a fascinating discussion of Gilman's various metaphors for collectivity, organic and techno-scientific, and a recommendation to "enlist the 'organism' as a key organizing image" to make sense of what might appear to be contradictory analogies and to engender a perspectival shift toward a view of "living as embedded in a network of multispecies relationships." (282).

⁴⁹ Gilman's use of "class" here is not only socioeconomic, but encompasses a gender as a class, a racial group as a class, etc.

instead, “behavior which the poor beast fondly hopes will please” (134). Our experiences — including those of reading — form what Gilman called “stor[ed] impressions transmitting energy modified by these impressions,” a rather hazy description of brain function that we might map very loosely onto today’s understanding of neuroplasticity: experiences create and reinforce neural pathways in the brain (Gilman’s “stored impressions”) that channel the future electrical firing of neurons (Gilman’s “transmitting energy”) (134).

This foundation of conditioning leads Gilman to the conclusion that all cultural production is inevitably instructive, whether it is crafted to be didactic or not. In terminology that’s more popular today, all forms of media function at some level to normalize what they represent, whether that’s old ideas or new ones. Even the most disruptive challenge to convention itself normalizes the act of doing differently, just as every reproduction of a convention helps to reify it. Thus, Gilman believed that “Fictitious Literature” with a “lack of ethics” and a “submission to a hereditary flood of tradition” could confuse the public by conditioning, normalizing, and reifying the wrong ideas. However, she didn’t align herself with “the un-literary moralists, who want no books written but pious ones” any more than she did with “the un-moral literary craftsmen, who hold that literature is an Art—and exists for its own sake, knowing no laws of use or ethics” (“Effect of Literature” 138, 133). Gilman’s gripe with moralists and “un-moral” artists alike is a lack of will or ability to appraise and represent the world truthfully: while the latter deliberately disconnect from it, the former are susceptible to distortions of dogma, such as sex prejudice.

Gilman posited a literary ethics resting not on a particular “moral” but on the concept and value of literary knowledge, a matter of empirical truth quite distinct for her from the moralizing of reformist “propaganda” (“Effect of Literature” 135). Making a strict distinction, Gilman

explained, “Ethics is not Morality—Morality rests on custom; Ethics is a science. There may be no ‘morals’ in literature, save the accumulating habits of writers, quite as likely to be wrong as right; but Ethics there is” (138). Gilman's understanding of art as a form of communication and her assessment that art, ethics, experience and action always exist in relation, either direct or indirect, are both highly pragmatist in the Deweyan vein. Dewey writes in *Experience and Nature* that “while poetry is not a criticism of life in intent, it is in effect, and so is all art. For art fixes those standards of enjoyment and appreciation with which other things are compared; it selects the objects of future desires; it stimulates effort” (204). In parallel, Gilman writes that “conduct is modified not only by what we know, but by how we feel...How we feel, how much, how often, in what [habitual and sporadic] lines, is as important as what we think” (“Effect of Literature” 137). Fiction, she argues, gives concreteness and vivacity to both thought and feeling: “To feel and see some vital phase of human life; to throw that feeling, that perception, into such forms as to be easily assimilable to others—that is the art of fiction. It explains life. It translates the general into the particular and presents it to other minds; which, impressed by the particular instance, can re-generalize again in its own brain” (138). Fiction’s complex communicative power is not something to take lightly in Gilman’s estimation.

Literature’s ethical obligation for Gilman is to “explain life” without succumbing aesthetically or ideologically to habit: to attempt rigorous, honest and purposeful literary depiction of cause and effect and appropriate assignment of value. It is worth quoting in full her clearest and most forceful argument that an ethical commitment to exploring fresh truth is what gives great art both its social power *and* its aesthetic power:

Art is not great unless it is true. The crusting encroachments of convention and tradition constantly threaten, and it must steadily face life with open eyes and a brave heart, if it is

to be alive and free...If literature be true it can keep in the public mind the swift moving changes of time; show forth their power and purpose; hold us to a knowledge of new truth; and this is not in didactic form, but in the freest fiction. Truth in fiction is as true—and as necessary—as in sermon or lecture, and far wider in its reach. (“Coming Changes in Literature” 235-6)⁵⁰

What makes literature so significant for Gilman is its capacity to engender change by making readers more alert, flexible, and clear-sighted about their experience in an ever-changing world. It’s a model of literary power not the same as, but very much akin to, Dewey’s idea of art as intensifying experience and Viktor Shklovsky’s modernist ideal of defamiliarization,⁵¹ both of which emphasize art’s ability to shake people out of ruts in perception worn dull over time. Even more tightly, Gilman’s model mirrors Dewey’s belief “in the meliorative function of art, insofar as one of its effects is to stimulate [in Dewey’s words] ‘critical evaluation of the life’ of the community” (Hernandez 83). She is very clear to say that this is a property not only of “didactic form” but of “the freest fiction:” along with inevitable social consequence, purpose and beauty can be the property of both modes of writing (“Coming Changes” 236). Dewey’s aesthetics assert that “[t]here is no reason (at least, intrinsic to aesthetics) that art objects must be unuseful (in everyday life or in political and social life), in order to be beautiful” (Chaloupka 253). Gilman’s aesthetics shift the emphasis to the other side of the coin: literature at its most beautiful and aesthetically ambitious has every much right to usefulness as more utilitarian literature does—indeed, art compromises its aesthetic power if it lacks purpose.

⁵⁰In Part Two, I argue that Fauset also proposes a theory of truth as essential to good literature, in line with Anna Julia Cooper, and my pragmatist interpretation of *Plum Bun: A Novel Without A Moral* suggests that Fauset makes a similar distinction to Gilman’s between morality and ethics.

⁵¹ On defamiliarization, see his seminal essay “Art as Technique” (1917).

Function and Form

At the back of each issue of *The Forerunner*, Gilman included a section titled “As To Purpose.” In addition to answering several fairly specific anticipated questions about *The Forerunner*’s stance in the discursive landscape (for example, is it a socialist magazine?), the section offers a double-barreled mission statement. Gilman articulates her intention and rationale with parallel versions of the same fundamental question of purpose: “What is it For?” and “Why is it Published?” Though the pair of questions seems repetitive at first glance, their answers’ inflections are distinct: they address intentions for reception and in production, respectively. First, Gilman speaks to the outcome she desires; second, she addresses the question of *The Forerunner*’s technique and form. Offering a pluralistic articulation of what seems like it might be addressed singularly a signature move in Gilman’s literary pragmatism, and her framing of the magazine in these questions and in an opening poem offers clear explanation of her literary intentions, as well as a demonstration of her relationship to literary form.

What the magazine is for, Gilman says, “is to stimulate thought; to arouse hope, courage, and impatience; to offer practical suggestions and solutions, to voice the strong assurance of better living, here, now, in our own hands to make.” This four-part answer clearly orders the steps of Gilman’s imagined intervention, explaining what takes priority in both senses of the word —what is most important, and most important because it is what needs to come first to pave the way for next steps, as its title *The Forerunner* implies. The cognitive intervention of provoking thought within readers is what the magazine offers, first and foremost. Second, the affective intervention of providing encouragement and provoking eagerness complements the kindling of thought: it breathes fullness and strength into what might otherwise be a fragile

flame. (This order of operations is not incidental to this paragraph; it is one she repeats in other critical writing and demonstrates in her fiction, as I will go on to show.) Third, practical solutions and suggestions provide the material that can guide action, after prompting thought and feeling. Neither abstract theorizing nor personal sentiment is sufficient as an intellectual aim for Gilman; applications are necessary for stimulated thought to bear fruit. Finally, she reiterates in general terms that don't distinguish thought, feeling, action that "strong assurance" can promote collective morale in a community of readers (addressed in first person plural) who can, together, attain a future that Gilman rhetorically emphasizes is within imminent reach: "better living" is available "here, now, in our own hands to make."

Why it is published, she explains, is "to express ideas which need a special medium; and in the belief that there are enough persons interested in those ideas to justify the undertaking." The first half of this statement is the meatier part, but it's worth pausing on the second. By 1909, Gilman had a level of fame that could have pulled her any number of directions, and did: audiences were eager to show up to her lectures, and her ideas—as articulated by her proponents, her detractors, and herself—received ample attention in established print outlets. She was involved in an array of activist organizations, especially around suffrage and labor reform. Among many choices in how to spend her finite time (and money), Gilman decided it was worth devoting a substantial chunk of it to establishing a magazine. More than that, she decided to individually craft a publication that offered a holistic vision of exclusively her ideas, rather than pursuing collaborators or contributors to spread the workload, divide the cost, or diversify perspectives as most magazines did. Gilman's vision encompassed every detail of the largely self-financed endeavor, to the letter: she even wrote the ads, and only for products she had personally tried and endorsed. Despite the degree of egoistic irony in this approach for such an

avid anti-individualist, Gilman believed that her ideas and capacity for work were big enough to generate multimodal content for an entire monthly magazine. For seven years, she also banked on there being enough appetite for this to be her way not just to make *a* difference, but the greatest difference possible toward “the utmost attainable advance” in human living (*Living* 165). The premise that there exist “ideas which need a special medium” is the most significant bit of theory in *The Forerunner*’s statement of purpose, and I argue that this idea sits at the heart of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s feminist literary pragmatism. The use of multiple literary modalities isn’t simply a tool for engaging audiences to Gilman; it’s a technique for developing ideas and reaching toward forms of knowledge that are otherwise unavailable. Gilman believed that some concepts could be explored fully *only* through the right kind of aesthetic presentation. The rationale behind her commitment to literary form includes the generally acknowledged affective power of poetry and narrative, but it doesn’t stop there. Gilman does not see the distinctive capacities of literary genres as being limited to what they can offer in terms of emotional impact, or even as tools for clearly translating general, abstract ideas into concrete, specific forms. She also treats literature as an indispensable tool for thinking. For Gilman, cutting-edge social philosophy must be pluralistic in format—and some of it must be narrative in form—in order for promising ideas to reach their fullest potential, not just practically and in public, but intellectually as well.

Practicing what she preaches, Gilman doesn’t define or characterize her own “special medium” directly: she mostly allows the periodical’s contents to speak for themselves in their variety of subjects and genres. However, Gilman *does* clue a reader into her vision in a poetic epigraph that precedes the table of contents in the magazine’s very first issue. The short poem “Then This:” cues a reader to the importance of clarity, vivacity, and pluralistic form to her

endeavor, and it indicates the interactive relationship she hopes to cultivate between with an actively engaged reader:

The news-stands bloom with magazines,
They flame, they blaze indeed;
So bright the cover colors glow,
So clear the startling stories show,
So vivid their pictorial scenes,
That he who runs may read.

Then This: It strives in prose and verse,
Thought, fancy, fact and fun,
To tell the things we ought to know,
To point the way we ought to go,
So audibly to bless and curse,
That he who reads may run. (*Forerunner* 1.1)

Gilman considers the point where text meets reader in considering how to most effectively write; the first stanza of this two-part poem highlights that context and audience are top of mind as Gilman describes the landscape that *The Forerunner* enters. This existing print culture is alive and vibrant, beautiful and powerful: magazines “bloom” like an array of flowers and “flame” like fire so vividly that she must emphasize how “they blaze indeed.” They blaze not only with colorful covers, but with compelling content: “clear [and] startling stories” and “vivid...pictorial scenes,” painted (presumably) in the magazine’s combination of word and image as a medium. Gilman highlights her very tangible awareness of the other papers on the newsstand, and of

readers in the physical environment in which they encounter literature. She flags the importance of the idea that writing, especially in public, is a conversation between writers and readers that exists in a cultural context. In this conversation, the author's responsibility for clearly transmitting an idea is paramount, but Gilman imagines a broader version of responsibility than what is expressed by the phrase that concludes this stanza and takes a twist at the end of the next one.

Gilman's central play of phrase is a chiasmus that deploys and then reconstructs a saying that bridges cultural authority and with everyday common sense as a then widely used aphorism with Biblical origin, literary presence, and popular use, especially in journalism. "He who runs may read," as one punctilious Biblical scholar put it in 1921, is a "familiar quotation which is always cited in an incorrect form...We find it not only in the daily papers, but also in the works of the masters of English literature" (Haupt 182). It derives from "And the LORD answered me, and said, Write the vision, and make *it* plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it" (Habakkuk 2.2 KJV). Running, in this sense, means skimming or scanning: the idea is simply to make things literally easy to read, unambiguously clear and straightforward to grasp for anyone. But in conjuring the image of the bustling newsstand, Gilman also suggests the picture of people in movement: running eagerly to get the hottest scoop (Extra! Extra! Read all about it!), to consume it with avid interest, or on the run and perusing the day's information and conversation in passing. Gilman literalizes this implication in the next stanza, describing the intervention she hopes *The Forerunner* will make: "It strives...That he who reads may run," she writes, closing the poem with the second half of a forceful rhetorical figure that redirects the urgency of the poem's imagined running reader.

Success in this intervention requires not only the journal's own rhetorical effectiveness

but also that readers orient themselves toward more than passive consumption and open themselves to active response: to literally move upon being intellectually moved.. What Gilman imagines can accomplish this inspiration and interaction this is a mixture of content: a mixture of forms (prose and verse), a mixture of fact and interpretation in related expository and editorial material (“to tell the things we ought to know, / To point the way we ought to go”), and a mixture whose diversity is crafted to create a reading experience characterized by pleasure. “Thought, fancy, fact and fun” all go together, in a single line of verse as well as in Gilman’s larger project. In its order, the line pairs traditional contrasts of thought and fancy, fact and fun.⁵² But fancy and fun aren’t isolated from thought and fact; they’re intermingled. And in its consonance, the poem groups “fancy, fact, and fun” together: each one of those things is fully complementary with—and supportive of—serious thought.

Even more than conveying new experience, Gilman also thought that artistic forms of writing (and, again, fiction especially) could be distinctly powerful in fully expressing new ideas, especially social ones. She found that ideas at the leading edge of thought could be underserved by what she called “fact literature” alone, her grouping for all forms of writing dedicated to the transmission of knowledge, as distinct from “fancy literature,” the aesthetic imaginative work of fiction, drama, and poetry that usually hogs the label of “Literature” (with a hoity-toity big L) to itself (“Effect of Literature” 137). Though fact literature is badly undervalued by critics as literature, Gilman argues, its value lies in conveying the best of what is known at any given historical moment; as fact progresses, old fact literature becomes obsolete to its original purpose. Though “fact literature” is essential and undervalued, it is also insufficient: it falls short as ideas broach the edge of linguistic expression, including by bumping against the edge of pre-existing

⁵² “Fancy” and not “fact” but “truth” emerge as key terms in a locus of Yeziarska’s and Dewey’s poetic interest, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

conceptual frameworks. As one of Gilman's characters in *Moving the Mountain* remarks in a moment of struggle to explain the structure of a society that has moved "beyond Socialism": "It's very hard to put these new things into old words" (50). Much easier to show than to tell.

In elaborating her account of literature's social function, Gilman characterizes fiction, and especially the novel, as a special medium. "The novel is more fluent, less tradition-bound than poetry," she writes in praise of the genre, calling it "to-day by far the most powerful department in [artistic] literature. Its service is enormous" ("Effect of Literature" 138). She argues that fiction is (at least at her moment of writing) the most flexible and therefore most powerful form of written expression, with much room still to grow. "Literature is the most powerful and necessary of the arts," she argues, "and fiction is its broadest form" (*The Man-Made World* 93). Gilman credits dramatists with a special "breadth of knowledge of 'human nature'" (using distancing quotation marks because she believes human nature is changeable) and poets with "reveal[ing] the feelings of the human heart" most expressively. But fiction writers, she says, have freest roam for imagination and representation: "the power of fiction is that it can reach and express the great field of human life with no limits but those of the author" (*Man-Made World* 93). These limits, of course, can be substantial.

What most limits authors at the turn of the 20th century, Gilman argues, is the normalization of "Masculine Literature." Gilman argues that female writers and readers face a difficult challenge to "stretch their minds" beyond the constraints of the "masculine canon" with comparatively few role models for writing women's experience (*Man-Made World* 103). "As it is," she says, when the male writer "dwells forever on his natural emotions and sensations," the woman reader's "emotions and sensations are all in relation to him, with some faint decorous hint of coming hopes. But there is nothing to portray her deeper feelings" ("Coming Changes"

231-2). Even stories authored by women, she says, are “still restricted, heavily and most mischievously restricted” to masculine concerns, largely around love and war (*Man-Made World* 94). But, she says, there are new stories to be written: of young women objecting to giving up career for marriage, of middle-aged women feeling discontent at home, of parenthood, of divorce, of professional life, and (some of her examples are more convincing than others, Bechdel test notwithstanding) of “the inter-relation of women with women—a thing we could never write about before because we never had it before: except in harems and convents” (*Man-Made World* 105). She underscores her overarching argument with a natural metaphor for the abundance of women’s unrepresented experience and the importance of lived perspective: “If the beehive wrote literature, the bee’s fiction would be rich and broad,” she posits, and female worker bees would have quite a bit more variety than male drones in their tales to tell. By 1915, she saw the hive abuzz with change and presented women writers as just about to “emerge from the smothering pressure of literary tradition, and recognize their distinctive place and power” (“Coming Changes” 232). She sought to help realize that change by representing it.

Experiencing Reason in Woman-Made Worlds

In the preface to her first large-scale utopian experiment, Gilman describes her novel *Moving the Mountain* (1911) as a “short distance Utopia, a baby Utopia, a little one that can grow” (37).⁵³ She distinguishes her “baby Utopia” from other utopian literature by its theoretical near feasibility, claiming that is not necessarily a no-place or distant dream. She says that the

⁵³ This novel was serialized in *The Forerunner* starting in January 1911, along with *The Crux*; the preface was added when Gilman reprinted the book in a single volume.

great utopian classics from Plato's *Republic* to her contemporary Edward Bellamy's "great modern instance" *Looking Backward* are united by "one or two distinctive features—an element of extreme remoteness, or the introduction of some mysterious outside force" before claiming that her own work will dispense with both (37).⁵⁴ The first claim is uncontroversial: she projects the United States forward merely thirty years. The second is more dubious: arguably, a mysterious inside force has taken hold of the American public.

Attaining a fairly utopian United States by 1940, Gilman emphasizes, "involves no other change than a change of mind, a mere awakening of people, especially the women, to existing possibilities. It indicates the things they might do, real people, now living, in thirty years—if they would" (37). She sets off that last phrase behind an em dash—the conditional is critical here, and she stresses the requirement of collective will and agency. She continues, "One man, truly aroused and redirecting his energies, can change his whole life in thirty years." After an even larger pause than before, with a dramatic paragraph break, she concludes: "So can the world" (37). The novel then proceeds to imagine what might happen if a transformation of national values emerged immediately and developed organically, with mass mobilization toward a new ideological consensus on the core mindset of elevating the collective, rather than modeling the world on combative dog-eat-dog individualism: in short, on feminist/humanist rather than androcentric/hyper-masculine values.

The key feminist pragmatist work of the *Moving the Mountain* is not only dramatizing Gilman's societal vision of a hypothetically attainable feminist utopia. That vision remains historically fascinating and relevant for a set of insights that blend ideas about gender equality,

⁵⁴ On the relationship between Gilman's and Bellamy's thought and writing, see Ruth Levitas, Thomas Peyser, and Marguérite Corporaal. On *Moving the Mountain*, specifically, as a response to *Looking Backward*, see Naomi Zauderer.

domestic labor, child-rearing, and education with enthusiasm for racist eugenics and a very specific flavor of gender essentialism. But the novel also dramatizes the mental experience of changing one's mind, and this focus on process is just as central to its purpose and to the rationale behind its literary form. Gilman wants to get readers out of their stagnant mental houses and to show them how much more comfortable they could be elsewhere if they only learned to live together differently. She also wants to demonstrate that while any change involves the discomfort of adjustment, a rational process of change doesn't have to entail significant pain.

Gilman's vision of what collective social intention can produce is fantastical, technologically and socially. Her harmonious 1940 society is populated with electric ocean liners and clean, safe, and beautiful garden-like cities.⁵⁵ Crime has been eliminated, both individual crimes of theft and violence and the broader, graver crime of corporate pollution. It has eliminated the home kitchen entirely with the full professionalization of domestic labor and childcare, to the great improvement of both the food and the youth. It has made a rapid, conflict-free economic transition from capitalism both through and "beyond" socialism (to what Gilman cannot name, but absolutely not Marxist communism) (50). An array of production and market efficiencies, including the socialization of some major industries and the regulation of all, have been harnessed in favor of worker freedom and consumer protection rather than capitalist profits. In this world, Taylorist specialization of labor not is not grueling or mercilessly dehumanizing, but perfectly tolerable and desirable with much shorter work hours. No one is required to spend more than two hours each day at their job, Monday through Friday, but many people find enough purpose and pleasure in their work that they choose to labor for four. Neither desperation for

⁵⁵ On Gilman's techno-utopianism, see Michael Bryson's *Visions of the Land: Science, Literature, and the American Environment from the Era of Exploration to the Age of Ecology* (2002) and 2017 articles by Andrew G. Christensen (for a *Herland*-focused contextualization of Gilman's work within the tradition of the scientific utopia) and by Jennifer L. Lieberman and Ronald R. Kline (for discussion of "the electrical utopian novel").

survival nor workaholism afflicts this workforce of equal parts women and men: afternoons have become the new weekends, and citizens take them, by right and by choice.

Gilman introduces this world to her readers through the eyes of a male protagonist-narrator, whose touring comprises the novel's episodic plot. An audience surrogate, John Robertson introduces himself as the South Carolinian son of a Methodist minister father and a Yankee mother and "an American citizen twenty-five years old." He's only half-right: he has to stop and start again, grappling to remind himself of a recent jarring reacquaintance with himself as fifty-five. In a somewhat slapstick set-up beginning on a mountain in Tibet, John pieces together a "dim...account" of the bulk of his life (39). Thirty years prior, he took a fall while traveling in the mountains, got amnesia, and spent thirty years living in a village of Buddhist "peasants" before being found again by his sister Nellie—at which point he hit his head *again*, resetting his memory to where it had left off after the first bonk. John is unsettled but relieved to have no recollection of his "comparatively brainless" time among the "good people" of "venerable races" whom he'd gone to see and who had welcomed and cared for him as an injured, confused foreigner. His expression of interest and respect for their culture seems sincere but is ultimately abstract and shallow, trumped by the deeper dismissiveness of his and Gilman's internalized racism. The narrative says nothing about these people. It, like John, is eager to quickly return home to the U.S.—what he tellingly calls "the real world" (39-40). Asia is not so much a real place in *Moving the Mountain* as it is a fantastical plot device, just like the twice reset not-quite-tabula-rasa of John's mind.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Susan Lanser's "Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' and the Politics of Color in America" (1989) analyzes Gilman's famous short story in the context of "Yellow Peril" anti-Asian anxiety and marked an important provocation for scholarship, which had tended toward celebrating Gilman's feminism early in her literary recovery, to take fuller stock of her work's racial politics. See also Asha Nadkarni's "Eugenic Feminism: Asian Reproduction in the U.S. National Imaginary" for a reading of Gilman that argues "an American feminist subject was constructed in relation to abject Asian womanhood" at the turn of the 20th century (2006).

While the “baby Utopia” of Gilman’s near-future United States is the novel’s primary setting, I consider John’s mind to be a setting of equal importance to the novel’s purpose. Though this novel is shallow in characterization, it is deep in another version of psychology: one that portrays the process of experiential persuasion as rational first, emotional second. The experience Gilman portrays for John and creates for her audience is not one that involves deep and immediate feeling that prompts different thinking or action; rather, it is one where direct experience of an unfamiliar good serves as intellectual proof of concept.⁵⁷ When new things exist in the physical world, they can be shown to the uninitiated and the skeptical, as can new views of old things when those angles become available through a technological development (e.g. air travel, space photography, or moving pictures) or through the unearthing or creation of a novel social perspective (e.g. that of a New Woman). As in Dewey’s model of education, learning happens better through having a gently guided experience than through receiving a detached explanation. Seeing and accepting the rationality of something different is what allows reluctance to give way, allowing for a more gradual shift of feeling toward a more wholehearted embrace of change.

After John reaches an understanding of what has happened to him, he struggles to comprehend what has happened in his home country. But what proves hardest to grasp is *how* it came to be. Questions of what usually have definite answers, and his sister and her family are kind and capable guides. Not everything is easy for him to acclimate to, but it’s easy enough for him to see the state of things, and the changes more often than not win him over as clear improvements, or at least as fairly unobjectionable changes, even if they make him feel like an

⁵⁷ In parallel arguments both published in 2017, Laura Fisher has suggested that Gilman’s fiction “dramatizes something like an aesthetics of proof” and Katherine Fama, in a discussion on *What Diantha Did*, details how Diantha’s community, “like Gilman’s readers, must be convinced by an array of proofs, by a series of successes” (Fisher “Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Novel Aesthetics” 493; Fama 118).

alien museum specimen. But the question of how things changed fundamentally baffles him, and he asks “how” over and over again throughout the novel’s slight one hundred and eleven pages. How could such dramatic changes have occurred in such a short time? What generated the political will and by what practical mechanism was implementation possible? Nellie patiently and repeatedly responds with variations on an answer that couldn’t be simpler. People—especially women—“woke up.” Her good-natured laughter periodically enhances the breeziness of this surprisingly obvious solution to the world’s problems: the idea that not just “things” but also “people themselves could change” (42).

Pragmatist ideas about the nature and importance of experience, the operation of the mind, and human capacity for rational change undergird Gilman’s faith in the malleability of human thought and her commitment to combining utopian radicalism with pragmatic social reform, though the two modes of change are often cast at odds as incompatible. At a fundamental level, Gilman believes in the radical psychological potential of wider access to experiences—both physically and vicariously through art. But the suggestion that this could be easy is a fairly distinctive hypothetical scenario.

Gilman was by all accounts an optimist, but she wasn’t naive: she had experience in the hard work of social change as a seasoned activist in her 50s and knew the trenchant power of “the glacial moraine of old ideas, the inert force of sheer blank ignorance, and prejudice as old as Adam” (“The Humanness of Women” 12). She surely recognized the unlikeliness of the 1940 she imagines. It would be easy to determine that this vision is impossible for precisely the same reason it might, in theory, be tantalizingly close: the sole requirement is changing minds. *Moving the Mountain* alludes to the monumental scale of the task even in its title. So why, then, does Gilman so forcefully, repeatedly insist on the hypothetical ease of accomplishing a cultural

revolution without historical precedent in its combination of thoroughness, rapidity, and peaceful voluntarism? I argue that there are two prevailing reasons, both of which derive from a pragmatist conception of experience and an attention to lived experience that is directed by feminist values.

The first reason is well-discussed in scholarship and represents an iteration of the hope inherent in all forms of utopian cultural creation: that the first step toward building a better world is imagining it.⁵⁸ By fashioning and proffering an alternative vision of this world or another one, a writer can prompt intentional, aspirational movement away from what is and toward a desired alternative future. Though much less popular today than other varieties of speculative fiction, utopian literature was booming business at the turn of the 20th century. It was enjoyed for many of the same reasons readers and writers continue to turn to science fiction and fantasy in droves—wide space for imaginative creation, offering simultaneous potential for both escape from and potent critique of reality.

Within this broader tradition of utopian hope, the special benefit of a “baby Utopia” is that it makes it easy to translate imagination into real-world application. As many scholars have discussed, Gilman aimed to make a vision of widespread change tangible, accessible, and actionable. As Carol Farley Kessler writes, in “Gilman’s utopianism, a discourse of possibility (or realizability) collides with a discourse of realism, completely changing the latter” (*Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Her Progress Toward Utopia with Selected Writings* 8). In describing this kind of immediately useful literary utopianism, some Gilman scholars take a cue from Riane Eisler’s coinage of the term “pragmatopia” to distinguish impossible utopias from the comparatively

⁵⁸ See Lyman Tower Sargent’s *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction* (2010) for an overview on the genre.

modest utopia depicting an attainable scenario.⁵⁹ (Though the feminist concept was inspired in part by Gilman, “pragmatopia” doesn’t refer to pragmatism.) In more direct pragmatist terms, in a comparative argument involving *Moving the Mountain*, Marjorie Suchocki says, “Utopias are not only fantasies of what might be in a perfect world, they are also catalysts toward the actual futures that we create. For we will create the future; the question is not ‘if,’ but ‘how.’” (59). This question of “how” has anchored arguably the most significant feminist and pragmatist reading of utopias like Gilman’s: Erin McKenna’s concept of the always unfinished utopia, with desire for change built-in, as “process utopia.” (*The Task of Utopia*).⁶⁰

The second reason that Gilman emphasizes ease of transition is that her insistence makes an argument in itself about how the process of change works, not just externally and collectively, but especially internally and individually. Though the novel proposes an array of external outcomes, its process focus is on matters of mind and specifically on how individuals can internalize change. John’s frequent moments of struggle make for some of the most nuanced and stylistically striking moments of the novel, narratively. *Moving the Mountain* isn’t just a pragmatopia in contemporary terms, but also a pragmatist utopia in the terms of its day, in its psychology of truth. John says, as he starts to catch on to how the awakening worked near the end of the novel: “a sort of crystallization of chaotic progressive thought into clear diamonds of usable truth—is that about what happened?” (“Effect of Literature” 137). In that proposition about developing useful truth through experience, he sounds a lot like William James: “The truth

⁵⁹ For Eisler’s definition and use, see *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987) or “Pragmatopia: Revisioning Human Possibilities” (2004) for a shorter and more recent account. For an example of application in Gilman scholarship, see Carol Farley Kessler’s “Consider Her Ways: The Cultural Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Pragmatopian Stories, 1908-1913” (1994).

⁶⁰ On pragmatism and feminist utopian fiction, see also Ellen Peel’s *Politics, Persuasion, and Pragmatism: A Rhetoric of Feminist Utopian Fiction* (2002) and Simone Knewitz’s *Making Progress: Pragmatism and Utopia in the Works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and John Dewey* (2005). Philosopher Maurice Hamington (2007) has argued that “Utopias have been largely marginalized as fictional or historical constructs with potentially grave consequences, but this categorization may underestimate their motivational importance” (177).

of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events.”—that is, we discover an idea’s truth through experiential “verification” of its practical effects. (*Pragmatism* 574). He sounds even more like Anna Julia Cooper: “For each of us truth means merely the re-presentation of the sensations and experiences of our personal environment, colored and vivified —fused into consistency and crystallized into individuality in the crucible of our own feelings and imaginations” (*A Voice from the South* 176-177).

In structuring John’s process of change, Gilman suggests conditions for accelerating successful shifts in belief —important theoretical work in constructing process utopia that has nothing to do with the structure of the hypothetical utopian society itself. One condition she proposes is collective alignment. Though John encounters national transformation out of sync from other Americans, Gilman nonetheless links John with the rest of the society he is rejoining through her motif of sleeping and awakening. His second amnesia is repeatedly described as a “wak[ing] up” or “com[ing] to life” in language that parallels the waking up that Nellie says initially catalyzed widespread social change (38, 111). The conceit of the sleeper is common in speculative and especially in utopian fiction for good reason, of course.⁶¹ The presence of an outsider sets the stage for exposition (say, about cultural structures or technologies) that might otherwise feel absurdly artificial in dialogue, superfluous as description that delays plot or character development, or, frankly, just annoying for being too didactic. Gilman knows the genre tool well and makes explicit reference in the novel to others that use the sleeper figure, including H.G. Wells’ dystopian *The Sleeper Awakes* as well as Bellamy’s utopian *Looking Backward*. However, she shifts the topos.

⁶¹ For a recent discussion on turn of the century literary discourse on sleep and wakefulness, including in Gilman, see Hannah Huber’s *Sleep Fictions* (2023).

What's clever about Gilman's modification is that she describes the American women and men at large as having woken up, too. This parallelism establishes a set-up in which the laggard to change is aligned with mainstream progressive society, despite initial resistance to and alienation from it. The 30-year timeframe of social change contracts experientially to none at all not only for the reader, but also for a protagonist who experiences the change more rapidly, but arguably not in a fundamentally different manner than his countrymen and women born at the same time. This minimizes conflict and naturalizes the idea of socialist-feminist cultural change. Indeed, Gilman claims the most striking human changes—no lies, no war—aren't counter to human nature but rather its full expression.

Gilman also sets up the point that the messenger and context matter for the experience of assimilating new "truth." She gives John a trusted and beloved family member rather than a stranger as his guide to the new world. A foundation of trust supports his processing of his personal experience of the new world. "If there is anything on earth that I always hated and despised, it is a strong-minded woman!" says outdated chauvinist John before he relents, "That is—it *was*. I certainly cannot hate and despise my sister Nellie." Nellie is now the president of "*a co-educational college!*" he shudders—in italics, with an exclamation point (40). As John wrestles with his attitude toward the awakened women's new social standing, Nellie notes "How you do hate the new women, John—in the abstract! I haven't seen you averse to any of them in the concrete!" (112). He can't argue—every New Woman he's encountered has been gracious and lovely, not one harsh or shrill. His reaction to other concrete manifestations of abstract skepticisms is similar, and Gilman emphasizes the power of direct experience in many forms—particularly sight and interaction—to irresistibly shift a frame of reference. Gilman also

describes twice how “the common use of airships help[ed] to develop...social consciousness” by making the world “real and familiar...like a big garden” (105, 110).⁶²

Gilman raises the stakes on direct experience in the novel’s conclusion. John feels homesick: “It was a beautiful world but it was not my world,” he mourns, so he goes to see what’s left of the old (142). Though nearly everyone has adopted the new ways, they’re not compulsory. A few voluntary backwaters remain, and Nellie reports that their aunt and uncle are among those who refused change. When John visits his rural relatives, the shock of comparison stuns him so badly that he begs his cousin Drusilla to marry him out of pity for her grim state. Finding her old-looking and “shy with the dumb shyness of an animal...an animal in a menagerie, a sullen, hopeless timidity due to long restriction,” he appeals to her mutual pity for the shared isolation of their unusual positions in the new world (148, 147). After they leave, Drusilla “[grows] young” in the world, and John in the last line of the book “[grows] to find the world like heaven, too—if only for what it did to Drusilla” (148). The fruits of the new and old models speak for themselves; he’s a feminist socialist convert.

Gilman takes many of *Moving the Mountain*’s suggestions for both process and outcome to further extremes in her full-scale utopia, *Herland*; the magnification amplifies both strengths and shortcomings in Gilman’s perspective. In *Herland*, three male explorers—each embodying a different, still recognizable prototype of sexist bias—land their plane in the middle of the Amazon and find themselves captive in an all-female civilization where everyone is brilliant, athletic, and lives in communitarian harmony. Reproduction in Herland occurs via parthenogenesis and only by choice: every woman has complete control over her own maternity, and the children are raised collectively and professionally. The absence of male impulses toward

⁶² On the cultural power of the aerial perspective and the conceptualization of the earth as a globe, see Denis Cosgrove’s *Apollo’s Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination* (2001).

violence and individualistic domination—what we would today identify as toxic masculinity—has enabled incredible social, technological, and intellectual advancement. As these three different archetypes of masculinity react, Gilman is able to triple her account of how people change their minds or, in the case of the most misogynistic of the three, don't.

What these men encounter first, we learn as the sociologist Van narrates their experience, is the incredible *land* of Herland itself, a model of perfect conservationist management. Before they meet the women of Herland, the American men see its “parklike meadows” and “civilized” cities from the sky and, after landing their biplane, walk into a remarkable forest: “Talk of civilization,” remarks one character, “I never saw a forest so petted, even in Germany” (12). There's not a single dead branch, the vines are trained, every tree is either fruit-bearing or hardwood, there are ornamental flowers and medicinal plants as well as edible ones, abundant tame birds, as well as benches, tables and fountains. The practical and the beautiful are in complete alignment, manifesting in the environment the same ideal Gilman advocated for art. The food forest and park looks at first like uncultivated nature before it is revealed as nature that has been carefully and deliberately improved through cooperative female leadership.

The beauty of tight management in Herland looks very ugly applied elsewhere, however. Gilman's short essay “A Suggestion on the Negro Problem,” published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, lays out her 1908 rationale for a “proposed organization [of] not enslavement, but enlistment” to “best promote the civilization of the negro” (80-81). Her compulsory labor model differs less from its contrasted predecessor than she seems to realize, as Gilman's felt need to distinguish suggests. Although it calls for “education, the best we have” to, in her terms, advance the evolution of those compulsorily enlisted, the system is otherwise fully disenfranchising and degrading. It does not allow self-determination (what she labels as “the strain of personal

initiative and responsibility to which so many have proved unequal”) for the people conscripted, graded, and even uniformed according to rank, rendering hypervisible the othered and inferior status of Black Americans as individuals and as a racial group (81-82). From one angle, Gilman failed to see the problem of the same logic applied differently: Katherine Fusco persuasively reads the “Suggestion” as “a racist and paternalistic version of the Taylorist model she would later elaborate for (white) women in *Herland*” (422). From another, Gilman failed to apply the same logic to different groups: though Gilman envisioned a rapid realization of (white) women’s equality to (white) men, she was unable to consider a similarly swift or dignified path to equality between white people and people of color, regardless of gender. Either way, in trying to imagine a step forward, Gilman suggests a preposterous and reprehensible step backward.

Gilman’s logic of social progress as evolutionary and inevitably convergent, never divergent, is often highly troubling as she imagines principle in practice. Gilman was an enthusiastic promoter of both eugenics (the idea that selective reproduction can improve the human race over time) and eugenics (the idea that better environments can improve individuals immediately).⁶³ She promoted a feminist version of Reform Darwinism rooted in Lester Frank Ward’s “gynocentric theory” of the female as the human “race-type” (rather than as the deviant from a male norm).⁶⁴ As opposed to Herbert Spencer’s more enduring dog-eat-dog “survival of the fittest” version of social Darwinism, Reform Darwinists viewed collaboration as the ultimate human adaptation. Though Reform Darwinism was generally less friendly to various forms of

⁶³ See Polly Wynn Allen’s *Building Domestic Liberty: Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s Architectural Feminism* (1998) on Gilman and feminist environmental design and Dolores Hayden’s *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (1981) for a broader context. Kristen R. Egan discusses the racialized relationship between eugenics, domestic science, and environmental conservation in “Conservation and Cleanliness: Racial and Environmental Purity in Ellen Richards and Charlotte Perkins Gilman” (2011).

⁶⁴ See the recent Broadview edition of *Women and Economics and Other Writings* (2023, ed. Rachel Elin Nolan) for a brief sample on Ward’s thinking (pp. 307-317) and other primary source contexts on Gilman’s thinking,

“to the winner go the spoils” politics and economics (e.g. imperialism, laissez faire capitalism), it still naturalized the idea of “superior” and “inferior” people, to be selectively bred as well as educated. For some “types” to need paternalistic guidance (i.e. control) or simply to go extinct was both inevitable and desirable in this model, and Gilman had a very specific picture of which “types” were best. That picture was informed by a variety of pernicious white supremacist -isms: ableism, classism, anti-Semitism, nativism, and racism, which hardened in her later years. She thought that “lower” classes of people could be “brought up” to a “higher” standard, but her vision of that standard was narrow and her regard for those who could not meet it was at times utterly dehumanizing. For example, a progressive open immigration policy works, Nellie says in a chilling moment of *Moving the Mountain*, because “our people...have discovered as many ways of utilizing human waste as we used to have for the waste products of coal tar” (55). Up until her death in 1935, Gilman didn’t adjust her stance even as the most brutal outcomes of such social Darwinist logic were becoming horrifyingly clear with the start of the Holocaust.

Herland does not directly address race, except in passing but pointed mentions that Van is confident that the Herlanders “were of Aryan stock, and were once in contact with the best civilization of the old world” (55). However, the Herlanders’ highly ordered (or, to use a more sinister word, regimented) model of professional and family life bears resemblances to a somewhat freer version of Gilman’s racist “enlistment” idea. Adding race to the picture makes the dystopia inherent in the utopia clear: this new model of labor might seem appealing in an uncomplicated fictional picture, but it is impossible to imagine a real-world scenario in which bias and inequity would allow for anything even beginning to approach just, noncoercive implementation.

Conclusion: Looking Beyond

Various aspects of Gilman's thought sit together uneasily as viewed a century later. As forecasts, they are by turns prescient and misguided. As proposals, they remain radically progressive in some dimensions while regressive in others, especially ugly in hindsight. As historical contributions, they were critical to major steps in the advancement of women's equality, and they caused harm to other civil rights projects. Scholars largely agree that Gilman's legacy shouldn't be ignored, and that the racism in that legacy shouldn't be ignored, but there's significant disagreement about what the pieces of Gilman's picture add up to and about where to place her in larger pictures. In short, scholars grapple with the ongoing challenge of what to *do* with Gilman today. To use Van Wyck Brooks' famous phrase, to what extent and in what ways does she provide a "usable past"—as a role model for feminist futures, as a cautionary tale of feminisms past for feminisms present, as a bellwether on the landscape of cultural history?⁶⁵ If it is wrong not only to throw the baby out with the bathwater but also to throw out the shameful bathwater itself, how can we best handle the unwieldy, murky, sloshing tub?

The rubric of feminist literary pragmatism suggests a few things to do. At a basic level, pragmatist feminism encourages an attitude of approach toward Gilman's work that advocates pluralistic understanding rather than a singular synthesis. To oversimplify, criticism doesn't need to play a zero-sum game in which a binary "feminist hero" or "racist villain" ruling prevails, but this doesn't mean dodging the question of critical evaluation. It does mean working to understand her beliefs in their cultural context and to see how they play forward to where we are

⁶⁵ See "On Creating a Usable Past" (1918).

today.⁶⁶ This is work that Gilman scholars are already doing, but in a contentious field, the major categorization of feminist pragmatism offers a still underutilized resource for understanding her literature. To that existing resource, feminist literary pragmatism suggests further interdisciplinary touchpoints that could help better connect Gilman studies in literature with Gilman studies in other fields.

Most significantly to my mind, however, the lens of feminist literary pragmatism allows Gilman's work to provide a starting point for looking beyond it, and in places that feminist pragmatists haven't yet looked—not just by looking to the future, but by reappraising her contemporaries.⁶⁷ Her literature sets a feminist pragmatist precedent for taking fiction intellectually seriously, and it clues us to prioritize certain values and orientations, especially with regard to mental process and aesthetic function, features of process utopia which point in very different directions than other elements of Gilman's literature. Gilman provides a perhaps surprisingly strong starting point from which to diversify American intellectual history to include more women—especially women of different ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds who saw the situation of American culture and, especially, the solutions to its problems quite differently from Gilman. In terms of literary form, Gilman's feminist literary pragmatism (especially as articulated in her literary theorizing) also suggests a different framework for evaluating the “quality,” the modernity, and even the feminism of women's writing that has long come tagged with qualification and apology, even as it has been recovered from neglect by literary history. As

⁶⁶Dana Seitler has argued compellingly and influentially that a powerful way to “employ Gilman's body of work as a useable history” is not to disentangle the “‘liberatory’ aspects of her politics while repudiating” its other dimensions, but rather to “re-read Gilman's work not for its contradictions but for the coterminous ideologies of feminism and eugenics that she engages” (“Unnatural Selection: Mothers, Eugenic Feminism, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman” 64).

⁶⁷ This is an argument parallel in structure to other arguments that have been made about Gilman's process model utopias, e.g. Hernandez's that “Gilman's process-model of utopia allows for the possibility of making further adjustments to reflect values that go beyond Gilman's racialized conception of progressive motherhood” (80).

Gilman wrote: “Time passes. Minds develop. New knowledge comes. People’s ideas and feelings change—some people’s. These new ideas and feelings seek expression, in the natural forms—speech and literature, as is legitimate and right. But the canons of taste and judgment say ‘No.’...It is not the first time that the canons were wrong.” (“Comment and Review” 24).

Gilman embraced change and sought to generate it, both in her utopian literature and in her literary theory. Though confident in what she saw from where she stood, she understood that there were and would be other views, hopefully from improved positions. “No claim of exhaustive learning or final wisdom is made for any of these books,” she writes, acknowledging that she offers only provisional insight in an ever-unfolding world (“Humanness” 20). Some of the most important new views, she asserted, would be from the position of artistic vision and insight: “The power of the artist to enlarge our world of feeling ...is as noble work as the world knows” (“Effect of Literature 137). She characterizes that work of affective expansion as a project of sensory exposure and attunement: “To see—where others are blind; to hear—when they are deaf; to speak—when they are dumb; to be a special sensorium for the world, and to build up and tenderly develop its capacity for higher perception and emotion—that is the business of the artist (137). It is up to the artist to present what audience members are unable to perceive, given whatever the limitations in their personal experiences might be.

Whether we like it or not, Gilman says, cultural products—stories, in particular—are intellectually and emotionally instructive. She insists that because of this reality, fiction writers ought to instruct intentionally by concerning themselves with truthful representation. She emphasizes, as Anna Julia Cooper does, that this is not a passive or abstract replication but an active “re-presentation” of lived experience in “colored and vivified” form (*Voice* 176-177):

The thought of the world is made and handed out to us in the main. The makers of books are the makers of thoughts or feelings for people in general. Fiction is the most popular form in which this world-food is taken. If it were true, it would teach us life easily, swiftly, truly; teach not by preaching but by truly re-presenting; and we should grow up becoming acquainted with a far wider range of life in books than could ever be ours in person. Then meeting life in reality we should be wise—and not be disappointed.

(Moving the Mountain 116)

As we eat the “world-food” of literature, we ingest images of what the world is like and digest what we ought to think about it. There’s a reason the poet is the most dangerous person in Plato’s *Republic*: he can nourish the hoi polloi or stuff them with junk food. But rather than banish the bard, as Plato proposes, Gilman wants her to be useful. And she replaces Plato’s male poet not with a poetess, but with a writer of fiction. In *Moving the Mountain*, children especially thrive on a “diet” of excellent, sensible stories—especially utopian ones about an exciting future in which they might participate (116). Nellie describes literature as “the most useful of the arts—the most perfect medium for the transfer of ideas” (116). Gilman wanted writers to be mindful and more expansive about the ideas they transferred.

Gilman saw severe shortcomings in the many literatures around her, just as she did in the world, related to the heavy weight of accumulated androcentric tradition. In fiction there wasn’t enough that focused on women, and much of what did revolved narrowly on the marriage plot. It focused falsely, she argued, on a woman’s choice between husband and happiness or career and unhappiness, but “What she wants is both the husband and the career—and still to be happy. We need wiser, more far-seeing treatment. We need to see that it is not a question of choice, but a far

harder one—one of combination and adjustment. Let literature wake up and study the facts, new ones as well as old” (“Coming Changes” 233). The “young woman reader,” she argued, needed broader representation, truer representation, a stream of ideas to consider, and a picture for how to manage the interaction between feeling and thought in a complex and changing world: “She is herself the acting heroine in the world drama. Why does not the writer give her a true picture of what is going on, both within her and without, the tumult of new emotions, the confusion between the ultra-feminine background of inherited feeling and the waxing power of honest thought?” (“Coming Changes” 233). New literature, Gilman argued, wouldn’t only convey new ideas: it would kindle clearer thought and feeling.

Gilman did not regard the self-proclaimed avant-garde as defining modern writing but rather the elevation of literature “with a purpose” as the true disruption—the sudden “Then This:”—that would make literature new. She despised the modernism of Gertrude Stein—who took pragmatism in literature in a radically different direction that has been more elevated in literary study of pragmatism—as self-indulgent nonsense. She thought self-expression was a poor motive to create, simply one among many outgrowths of androcentric individualism. “This ache for self-expression is by no means the natural overflow of a creative spirit, but the unnatural irritation of a disease,” she wrote, “an inflamed egotism...elephantiasis of the soul.” She further disparaged various forms of “new” and “Insurgent” art for being not only selfish, but ugly, also chastising critics whom she accused of not trusting their own judgments enough to say outright of Impressionists, Cubists, Post-Cubists, Futurists, and others: “This stuff is ugly, it is absurd and unintelligible. It gives no pleasure, no stimulus, no lift or pull or push, merely a sense of annoyance, distaste and bewilderment, as if one was crawled over by a horde of idiot babies” (“On Some Recent Art” 112). The literature of modernity that Gilman wanted would generate

collective clarity, not represent personal confusion.

Feminism is the thing she thought would do the most to create clarity, newness, and pluralistic breadth in literature. “The world of letters will be another world when the long-arrested woman-half has come forward to an equal, even place; in fact, and in that more than fact—general recognition,” Gilman forecasted (“Coming Changes” 236). This would come in the form of books by women directed at all people, and books directed at women specifically. Gilman argued that women, as readers, needed both full access to the universal and the creation of a new particular literature: “What she needs as a human creature, she can find in the publications meant for people, unlabelled male or female. What she needs as a woman is clear portrayal of the tremendous issues of the transition period, stories that treat the girls’ struggle for independence, struggle with parental love, struggle with filial duty, struggle with domestic limitations—these would be eagerly read by innumerable women. Are there no women who can write them?” (“Coming Changes” 235).

Many women could and in fact did write such books —so many that Elizabeth Ammons argued that the early 20th century marked the birth of “the novel of female self-determination” as a new literary genre in her influential volume *Conflicting Stories*. As Catherine Rottenberg has noted, the author I turn to in the next chapter, Anzia Yezierska, was among these early practitioners (“Begging to Differ” 88). She hit every single thematic note Gilman sounds here, but in a decidedly different tone, as does Jessie Fauset, the author I consider in Part Two. Dewey imagined that women’s philosophy would take a “viewpoint or tenor” from “that composed from the standpoint of...masculine experience;” but, of course, there is no one feminine experience (“Philosophy and Democracy” 73). Writing against two different androcentric cultures, against the privilege of upper- and middle-class perspectives, and against the prejudice of U.S. born

citizens, Yezierska insisted ferociously on the need for American culture to listen not only to the reason of white women cloistered in the kitchen and men huddled in the ivory tower, but also to the emotional cries of Jewish immigrant women trapped in the tenement and the sweatshop.

Gilman prophesied that as the “great work” of the artist “is fulfilled the world’s heart softens, its range of sensibilities widens, its power of feeling deepens, as it becomes more able to grow and to do; to enjoy and to achieve” (“Effect of Literature” 137). Had her own range of sensibilities been wider, Gilman might have been better able to listen across difference to Yezierska’s pleas for just such a softening, widening, and deepening of democratic feeling.

Chapter Two: Anzia Yezierska's "Pragmatism for People Who Think With the Heart"

"I want to do something with my head, my feelings."

-Anzia Yezierska, "America and I" (1922)

"To be a man is to be thinking desire."

-John Dewey, "Beliefs and Realities" (1906)

Introduction

In 1965, aspiring writer Patricia Averbach took a job very briefly as one of many literary assistants the once famous Anzia Yezierska "press[ed] into service" over the years (Averbach, Henriksen 291). Yezierska was then about 75 and living at the Alcazar Hotel in Cleveland, near her daughter. In pursuit of continued independence and in need of care, she had recently and reluctantly moved from New York City, where, a friend quipped, Yezierska had "about 14,000 people enlisted in her aid but nobody [who] will really do anything when the chips are down" (Henriksen 291). Intensely driven and passionate, Yezierska had a lifelong gift for making allies and friends, paired with a propensity to exhaust and frustrate them. She had always demanded much of others and even more of herself.

Forty years past the peak of her national visibility as self-fashioned literary spokeswoman for the oppressed immigrants of New York City's Jewish Lower East Side, Yezierska was still writing doggedly, flagging eyesight and public opinion be damned. ("They don't like stories about old people," Yezierska told Averbach, showing her an editor's rejection letter as a gesture of tough-love mentorship, "but old people need a voice. That's what I write about now.") When

Averbach left at the end of her first day, she recalled in 2008, a brusque Yeziarska ended the conversation without a goodbye. In lieu of social pleasantries, she instead asked the eleventh grader if she'd read Proust. Averbach hadn't, but recalled that he was French. "His mother was Jewish," responded Yeziarska. "You cannot become a real writer until you've read Proust," she declared before shutting the door (Averbach).

One could hardly imagine a fiction writer of this era who has been received more differently from Anzia Yeziarska than Marcel Proust. Both have been accused, often and fairly, of becoming tiresome in too large a dose, but for opposite reasons: he for thinking perhaps too much, lingering in interminably long introspection, and she for thinking perhaps too little, beating simply and repetitively on a melodramatic drum. Proust's multivolume tome *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927; 1922-1931 in English as *Remembrance of Things Past*) is not only credited as a defining text of literary modernism; it is also heralded as a hallmark example of philosophical fiction.⁶⁸ Its pacing is slow and meditative, rendering events and layers of reflection with painstaking intricacy. Yeziarska's prose, on the other hand, is explosive, accessible, and direct, often marked by the cultivated crudeness of Yiddish-inflected dialect that she crafted carefully to be received as natural and authentic. Initially praised as an emotionally forceful recorder of immigrant experience, she is valued today most consistently for making a vivid contribution to the historical record with a feminist bent. The *New York Times* stated this valuation baldly in its review of Yeziarska's first novel, *Salome of the Tenements* (1922): "her gift is not creative; she is a reporter and an autobiographer rather than a fiction writer" (qtd.

⁶⁸ Proust's direct influence on French phenomenology and on existentialist thinkers, including feminist Simone de Beauvoir, is especially well documented. Since at least the 1960s, many scholars have suggested that *In Search of Lost Time* should itself be read as a work of phenomenology. For a recent example with a focus on Beauvoir, see Lior Levy's "Proust the Phenomenologist" (2022).

Henriksen 200). Neither then nor now has her creativity been as important as her testimony to the bulk of her audience.

Though Yeziarska holds a stable perch within the Jewish American literary canon, her place in the larger narrative of literary studies remains contested. She orbits the edges of several proliferating modernisms and what Jed Esty and Colleen Lye have called “peripheral realisms;” she is filed as both a naturalist and a sentimentalist; many embrace her as a feminist, while some qualify that label.⁶⁹ A lifelong creator of “semifictional autobiography and semiautobiographical fiction,” Yeziarska has required vigorous defense against charges of writing mere self-reportage—useful, but intellectually rote and artistically flawed (Wilentz x). For example, rallying in 1993 against “the long-standing judgment on her fiction [that] it may be important history, but it’s not really literature,” Thomas J. Ferraro unequivocally defends Yeziarska’s work as “not transparent” or “innocuous,” and “anything but unthinking” (59)—the last claim especially significant for an author praised and panned primarily on the basis of her overflowing feeling. In the intervening decades, a significant volume of revisionist scholarship has defended Yeziarska against charges of simplicity, but the case is not yet closed. And while Yeziarska has been alternately overlooked and scrutinized for her deceptive simplicity and slippery depth, rarely has she been accused of writing philosophical literature.

However, one fact alone offers reason to consider that Yeziarska has gone overlooked in this category for being clothed differently than we expect from a Proust, a Tolstoy, a Melville, or a Sartre, wearing the literary philosophical equivalent not of tailored woolen trousers but of a mass-market blue serge skirt and rumpled shirt, with abundant, unfashionable hair falling loose

⁶⁹ For excellent discussion of Yeziarska’s feminist politics and associations, see Lisa Botshon, especially “The New Woman of the Tenements: Anzia Yeziarska’s *Salome*” (2010). Susan Edmunds also links Yeziarska’s feminism with her radical labor politics in “Between Revolution and Reform” (2011), considering her in the “double context” of Russian Marxist reformers and U.S. working girls’ culture (406).

from its pins.⁷⁰ Or, to put it more plainly: for being a woman from the working class, writing in her second language, and arguing against headwinds of white supremacist nativism, patriarchy, and capitalism in terms that readers have long been conditioned to receive as oppositional rather than complementary: particular *rather than* universal; popular, *therefore* unsophisticated; emotional *instead of* intellectual.⁷¹ It's a fact well known to Yezierska scholars: one of the most personally and professionally influential experiences of Anzia Yezierska's life was a brief but intense intimate relationship with John Dewey in 1917 and 1918.

Both writers turned to literary art to process the meaning of the experience: Dewey to private poetry and Yezierska to public prose, primarily fiction. Though Dewey was keen to put the affair squarely behind him promptly after it ended, Yezierska never stopped working to metabolize their encounter in writing. Parsing the relational dynamic is one of the most consistent recurring motifs of her fiction, both in character and in plot. As Julian Levinson has put it, for decades “nearly every commentator on her work has observed [that] she dwelt recurrently, even obsessively, on this relationship in her novels and stories, playing out multiple

⁷⁰ In this characterization, I riff both on Yezierska's own self-presentation and on her recurring interest as a writer in clothing as a site for class-based judgment, performance of ethnicity and assimilation, and the clash between individual self-expression and Veblenesque culturally conditioned consumerism. Notable sartorial readings of Yezierska's work include Meredith Goldsmith's “Dressing, Passing, and Americanizing: Anzia Yezierska's Sartorial Fictions” (1997) and “The Democracy of Beauty: Fashioning Ethnicity and Gender in the Fiction of Anzia Yezierska” (1999), Katherine Stubbs' “Reading Material: Contextualizing Clothing in the Work of Anzia Yezierska” (1998), Christopher Okonkwo's “Of Repression, Assertion, and the Speakerly Dress: Anzia Yezierska's *Salome of the Tenements*” (2000), Catherine Rottenberg's “Salome of the Tenements, the American Dream and Class Performativity” (2004) and *Performing Americanness: Race, Class, and Gender in Modern African-American and Jewish-American Literature* (2008), Tyrone R. Simpson II's “The Love of Colour in Me”: Anzia Yezierska's “Bread Givers” and the Space of White Racial Manufacture” (2009), Ken Koltun-Fromm's *Material Culture and Jewish Thought in America* (2010), and Babak Elahi's *The Fabric of American Literary Realism: Readymade Clothing, Social Mobility and Assimilation* (2014). Okonkwo and Stubbs are particularly useful on Yezierska's use of fashion as a metaphor for her relationship with modernist aesthetic form, literary and otherwise.

⁷¹ Like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Yezierska intentionally worked in a style that she defended as more authentic, inclusive, and politically effective—and therefore more progressive—than prevailing high-culture versions of modernism. As Okonkwo, building on Stubbs, sums up: “Yezierska strongly objected to modernism's masculinist insistence on form, abstraction, and emotional restraint, and would not adapt her techniques and concerns to the period's literary aesthetic” (130).

scenarios involving a fiery, immigrant “Jewess” and a staid, well-established Anglo-Saxon man” (96). But the passion was not one-sided, even if it was ultimately highly lopsided. Dewey’s poetry surfaces just as much of its own kind of intensity, though experienced and written over a shorter period. It was a significant romance for both Yeziarska and Dewey, erotically charged but also, and primarily, intellectually passionate.

In this chapter, I argue for Anzia Yeziarska’s significance within the intellectual history of pragmatism not only by reappraising Yeziarska’s work in light of Dewey’s, but also by looking in new ways at *his* aesthetics in light of *her* influence, where we can best detect it. I treat both Yeziarska’s fiction and Dewey’s poetry as iterations of philosophical literature, starting from the premise that these two individuals exerted mutual influence on one another’s felt thought. They turned to each other, and to their images of each other, to better understand not just multicultural democracy, but also reason, emotion, and art. I hold that Yeziarska puts forth a feeling-forward iteration of feminist literary pragmatism that functions fundamentally as a counterpart, not a counter, to Dewey’s public writing along several vectors.

Yeziarska wrote versions of John Dewey over and over and *over* across the full span of her publishing career: he is a central character in the first story of Yeziarska’s first book, *Hungry Hearts* (1920), and he is a major figure in her last, the partially fictionalized autobiography, *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* (1950). His various guises are all thin, and he often appears as an academic who offers painful lessons in rationality and heartbreak to the Yeziarska stand-in.⁷² Dewey crops up first as a young sociology professor studying a Russian Jewish community in “Wings” and “Hunger,” the paired stories that open the *Hungry Hearts* cycle. In the first, he

⁷² In “if you know, you know” fashion, Yeziarska often hides her real-world models in very plain sight: for example, the protagonist of *All I Could Never Be* takes the “Mona Vale” fellowship, the fictional version of the Zona Gale fellowship at Wisconsin that Yeziarska secured with Gale’s help.

brings parachute research in the form of a parachute romance with one of his subjects, an aspiring, passionate immigrant “janitress,” Shenah Pessah. In the second, his absence propels Pessah’s aspiration. Later in the collection, Yeziarska reworks the romance to end happily in reunion in a story tellingly titled “The Miracle.” There, Dewey appears as an English teacher who ultimately returns to his immigrant student, asking her “to lift me out of the dead grooves of sterile intellectuality,” reversing the direction of the emotional education initially attempted (*Hungry Hearts* 87). In “To the Stars” (1923), he is a college president who gives her sympathetic counsel, partially in Dewey’s own quoted words. In Yeziarska’s most famous novel, *Bread Givers* (1925), he is Mr. Edman, a psychology professor who introduces the protagonist Sara Smolinsky not only to Dewey’s signature psychological concept of the “reflex arc” (in Philosophy Hall, no less!) but also to “the power of logic and reason,” saving her from life as “an over-emotional lunatic” (222-226).⁷³ As an absent character, he plays a haunting, propelling role in “Wild Winter Love” (1927), as the older Anglo-Saxon lawyer lover of a Jewish writer who meets a tragic end. He even appears by name as a series of Johns, including John Barnes in *Hungry Hearts*, John Manning in Yeziarska’s first novel, *Salome of the Tenements* (1923), and John Morrow in *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*.⁷⁴

Yeziarska’s representations of Dewey go well beyond the creation of an Anglo-Saxon character type: they often engage quite specifically with Deweyan theory. In both early and late fiction, Yeziarska routinely riffs on Dewey’s published and unpublished language, in several instances quoting directly or nearly directly without attribution (presumably as much to Dewey’s

⁷³ Ann Mikkelsen notes: “Irwin Edman was a Dewey student who participated in the Philadelphia [Polish] study alongside Yeziarska and wrote on aesthetic empathy in *Arts and the Man: A Short Introduction to Aesthetics* (1939; reprint, New York: Norton, 1960)” (387).

⁷⁴ The pseudonym is a rare one in the book. Though Yeziarska invents other characters whole-cloth to serve her narrative purposes in her “autobiography,” as a rule, real people retain their names, including an array of recognizable figures like Samuel Goldwyn, Will Rogers, and Richard Wright.

relief as to his chagrin). In Yeziarska's late treatments, she appears to bring her representation up to the edge of reality. In both *All I Could Never Be* and *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, the Dewey figure and the romance narrative map directly onto the real man and the real relationship, presenting Yeziarska's sharply dramatized version of both. This includes a detailed engagement with Dewey's academic program, as she encountered in classroom education, personal discussion, and conduct of research. In one instance, she names him as the author of a fictionalized book with a distinctly Deweyan title, and in another, she directly reviews one of his real ones.

Extant works from both writers attest not only to the strength of feeling between them but also to how their connection provided a staging ground for personal, social, and epistemological thought. Both attached "enormous symbolic cultural freight" to the relationship, as Robert Westbrook describes in the most thoughtful existing reading of what the Yeziarska affair might have to say about Dewey's philosophy (*Democratic Hope* 105). They imagined each other metonymically as representatives of America and its Other Half, layering each half with an array of raced, gendered, affective, and aesthetic associations. Gay Wilentz characterizes the foundation of their interaction as "a mutual desire to expand their limited worldview and create a bridge between apparent oppositions" (xiii). Dewey, Yeziarska, and the "generations back of [them]," to use a critical phrase from their literary dialogue, stood in turn for other oppositional concepts in need of fusion, especially reason and passion (*All I Could Never Be* 86). In forging bridges, recognizing chasms, falling headlong into the gaps, and trying to reconcile it all, literature was critical. Dewey and Yeziarska both found that imaginative verbal art offered access to some kind of expression or insight, some kind of truth, that traditional philosophical writing and creative nonfiction could not.

Previous scholarship has suggested various ways in which Yeziarska particularizes, refocuses, extends, and challenges Deweyan ideas, but this line of inquiry remains underdeveloped.⁷⁵ It has drawn out two major branches of argumentation, one around Yeziarska's social politics and another around her literary modernism, both of which address the emotional tenor of her institutional critiques. Yeziarska's pragmatist ties often emerge as a point of support within a case for Yeziarska's writing as an ethnic iteration of modernism, understanding modernism as grounded in the pragmatist lineage defended by scholars such as Daniel Joseph Singal and Houston Baker. Delia Konzett offers the most direct argument for Yeziarska's modernism in this vein. She summarizes Singal's account of the "Deweyan stream" of "American Modernist culture" as defined by a "focus on society as a whole, emphasiz[ing] the elimination of social barriers (geographic, economic, ethnic, racial, and gender), and tr[ying] to weld together reason and emotion in the service of programmatic social aims" ("Administered Identities" 617-618). "Yeziarska basically follows the latter," Konzett argues, "revising it to give equal weight to the immigrant perspective and taking Dewey to task for his uncritical stance on reform and philanthropy" ("Administered Identities" 617). Ann Mikkelsen argues that this "aesthetics of citizenship" highlights Yeziarska's "awareness of the affective dimensions of an increasingly fluid, meritocratic society" (363). While Yeziarska's pragmatist influences are most often addressed in modernist studies, her pragmatist thinking has been most deeply engaged in the realm of education. The most detailed published consideration of Yeziarska as an original pragmatist comes from rhetoric and composition scholar Amy Dayton-Wood, who argues that "the most significant textual link between Yeziarska and Dewey is their mutual investment in the

⁷⁵ I have found Amy Dayton-Wood, Cara Erdheim Kilgallen, Delia Caparoso Konzett, Amy Koritz, Lori Jirousek, Julian Levinson, and Ann Mikkelsen to offer the most attentive pragmatist readings of Yeziarska's work. Konzett, Koritz, and Mikkelsen speak most directly about Yeziarska's efforts to meld emotion and reason.

belief that education can help students to become more fully human” (219).⁷⁶ Yeziarska shows that “the discursive power of immigrants’ lived experience” raises several challenges to Dewey’s philosophy, Dayton-Wood says, including by surfacing the paradox that “experience itself defies attempts to document and interpret it” (228).

My work expands what has already been done by extending multiple vectors of approach while gathering them together to suggest a holistic view of Yeziarska’s feminist literary pragmatism, contextualized by that of Gilman and Fauset. In the context of a field that remains divided on the question of Yeziarska’s intellectualism or lack thereof, I deepen documentation of her deliberate pragmatist engagements with specific comparison between Yeziarskan and Deweyan language. I also introduce major new contexts in the form of John Dewey’s little studied poetry and, to my knowledge, scholarship’s first consideration of Yeziarska’s and Dewey’s shared investment in the poetry of Robert Browning.⁷⁷ The poem “Rabbi Ben Era” is a significant touchpoint for Dewey’s aesthetic theory and, prominently, for Yeziarska’s interpretation of Dewey. Additionally, because most existing work turns emphasis toward points of divergence and critique, I seek to flesh out the picture around Yeziarska’s and Dewey’s points of alignment, focusing on less studied works in both corpuses.

These points of alignment suggest avenues to move beyond an intellectual history that has had little to say about Yeziarska’s potential role in Dewey’s intellectual life, even as it has

⁷⁶ See Christine Launius, Chip Rhodes, and Dan Shiffman for further significant discussion of Yeziarska’s educational critique.

⁷⁷ Jo Ann Boydston’s edited collection *The Poems of John Dewey* (1977) is not only a marvel of forensic scholarship in its compilation and contextualization, but it also provides the best commentary on Dewey’s poems I encountered. Jerry L. Williams in 2016 suggested several reasons why study might remain so thin after nearly 40 years of availability: “First, [Dewey] clearly did not intend for this work to be seen. Second, scholars may have been a little uneasy about seeing the personal side of this profound public person... The final and perhaps most decisive reason these poems have received little attention by Dewey scholars may simply be because they are poems and not scholarly essays” (50). I cite Williams with a caveat, however: his factual accuracy around details is uneven. Other commentaries include those from Philip W. Jackson (1982) and Richard Gibboney and A.V. Christie (2002).

increasingly acknowledged Yezierska's place in Dewey's personal life, including in more recent biographies.⁷⁸ Engaging both writers' texts in a robust blend at the junctures where they meet, I consider less the well-trodden ground of what the biographical episode has to say about either individual personally and more what each writer's thought system illuminates about the other's. An appraisal of these meeting points illustrates the sometimes surprising proximity of Yezierska's thought to Dewey's, especially as she wrestled with the duality of what she often framed as (the immigrant Jewish woman's) "warm heart" and (the American-born Anglo-Saxon man's) "cold head." Comparison underscores the literariness at the heart of Dewey's work, and it especially elevates the underappreciated intellectualism of Yezierska's.

She confronts the challenge of cultural and individual difference not only from the personal standpoint of her lived experience as a Polish Jewish immigrant woman, but also with grounding in the theoretical perspective of Dewey's faith in democratic individualism. From this dual footing, Yezierska positions herself as a translator, communicating Dewey's ideas to an audience to whom Dewey struggles to speak, while elevating perspectives that he and Americans like him (writ large, inflected multiply across combinations of native-born, "Anglo-Saxon," scientifically trained, and/or male) are not fully able to understand. Hers is a populist pragmatism designed to speak to and on behalf of "the masses of people who think with the heart rather than the head," as she puts it in her one published review of Dewey's philosophical writing ("Prophets of Democracy"). Emotionalism is, for Yezierska, an inevitable part of thought to be embraced rather than denied. Where Gilman sought to destabilize "androcentric" culture by demonstrating

⁷⁸ Robert Westbrook's intellectual biography *John Dewey and American Democracy* (1991) and Jay Martin's biography *The Education of John Dewey* (2003) are the current authoritative accounts of Dewey's life. Westbrook's *Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth* (2005) includes more on the Yezierska relationship. George Dykhuizen's *The Life and Mind of John Dewey* (1973) was the most influential prior account and published before Dewey's poems came to public light and surfaced Yezierska in Dewey studies.

the superior rationality of feminist ideas, Yeziarska sought to destabilize it by showing the limitations of “cold” rationality and elevating emotionalism that has been maligned by Anglo-American culture as feminized and ethnically coded.

The idea of “thinking with the heart” is fundamental to both Yeziarska’s aesthetics and her social theory, and it is largely consistent with Dewey’s anti-dualist beliefs.⁷⁹ Viewed through the lens of Deweyan pragmatism, Yeziarska’s literary commitment to pitched affect, against repeated critical calls to add “restraint,” emerges as part of a poorly understood intellectual program. Although Yeziarska routinely frames emotionalism and rationality in diametrical terms, I argue that, like Dewey, Yeziarska does not propose that this binary is strictly oppositional. Yeziarska’s “thinking with the heart” maps, almost like a paraphrase, onto what is arguably Dewey’s most distilled definition of the human condition: “To be a man is to be thinking desire” (“Beliefs and Realities” 129).⁸⁰ Though moments where she positions emotion in contrast with heartless thought have attracted the most critical attention, she *also* routinely pairs thinking with feeling as inextricable from one another—a joint operation. When she writes “I want to do something with my head, my feelings,” it is significant that Yeziarska does not link her key terms with an “and,” but rather with a comma that sets up an appositive: “my head” *is* “my feelings.” (“America and I” 160). Though there are many ways to parse Yeziarska’s pragmatism—especially vis a vis its reform arm and Yeziarska’s institutional critiques directed

⁷⁹ Classical pragmatism’s anti-dualism was grounded in the emergence of psychology as a science and in early efforts to approach thought and feeling as environmentally engaged biological functions. It is today well established in neuroscience that cognition is affective and somatic. For one recent and rigorous account aimed at a general audience, see Luiz Pessoa’s *The Entangled Brain: How Perception, Cognition, and Emotion Are Woven Together* (2022).

⁸⁰ I am here taking the period normative terminology of “man” as “human” at face value, though there’s certainly a gender reading to be done, especially in the context of the relational dynamic between Dewey and Yeziarska.

toward education and philanthropy—it is this apposition that anchors my approach. Yeziarska challenges the supremacy of rationality over emotion within, not against, a blended model.

Where Yeziarska's pragmatist affect and rationality model branches from Dewey's, and diverges dramatically from Gilman's, is in her sense of how "warm emotion and cool intelligence"⁸¹—to use post-Yeziarska language from Dewey—do and don't come into accord, realistically, for most people. Dewey imagines "rationality [as] the attainment of a working harmony among diverse desires." "Reasonableness" does not fight against basic drives but is "in fact a quality of an effective relationship among desires rather than a thing opposed to desire" unlike stern moralists opposed to desire like to say (qtd. Boydston lvii). Dewey's "in fact" acknowledges that he's writing against the grain, and Yeziarska seems unconvinced by the argument. She vividly portrays emotion and rationality in seemingly inescapable conflict rather than in concert, within present social conditions. To imagine that feeling can be subsumed within thought, for her, is to delude oneself about the messy reality of human nature in order to prop up a false sense of intellectual security. For Yeziarska, Dewey at his best channeled a unique "magic of his personality" in his temperamental ability to get "[t]he head and the heart working in harmony" (*All I Could Never Be* 75). Yeziarska knew that she couldn't consistently hold that magical balance, and she posited that most other people ("the masses of people who think with the heart") couldn't either ("Prophets of Democracy"). She also knew keenly that Dewey himself couldn't keep harmony all the time and felt his shifts toward passion and remove intensely. Remarkable man though he was, even he was still a man. "Instead of the head" is, for Yeziarska, a part of the equation that needs to be counted in the solution, not as part of the remainder.

⁸¹ Dewey means something very specific by "intelligence," which is less like IQ and more like reflective thought. He offers several versions of definition in "Existence, Values, and Criticism," including this one: "intelligence is critical method applied to goods of belief, appreciation and conduct, so as to construct freer and more secure goods" (101). In shorthand, he also calls this "critical reflection" and "thoughtful valuation" (91, 101).

Yeziarska's feeling-forward pragmatism amplifies the romantic dimensions of Emersonian individualism within Dewey's, presenting a conviction they share in a different modality, for a different audience. Yeziarska and Dewey both believed that people, and democracy, would best flourish as individuals loosened the strictures of "ready-made" thought in order to understand what Yeziarska described as the "warm, rich muddle" of their own experience ("Wild Winter Love" 490). Not only can one size of pragmatism or democracy not fit all; each person must "dig his philosophy out of the depths of his own heart," as Yeziarska characterized the task ("Prophets of Democracy"). "What democracy implies when it is stripped clean of its false clothing," she says, is simply two things: accepting "thinking for ourselves" as our "duty" *and* "seeing that the whole community is in a position to think for itself" ("Prophets"). For both, individual tailoring is not an isolated endeavor: it involves forms of self-reflection and self-expression that can only emerge through receiving, personalizing, and moving beyond the ideas of others. Experience is not isolated or exclusively personal for either Yeziarska or Dewey. Experience, in the pragmatist model they share, includes both lived experience and vicarious, or learned, experience, as shared in relationship and communicated through cultural production.

The push and pull between lived experience and learned experience (in relationship and through culture) is a point of both comfort and intense anxiety for both writers. Engaging this tension is a center of critical gravity in Yeziarska's work. She gives it full emotional play and demonstrates how these forces pull differently, and harder, at some than others, especially those whose experiences have been marginalized by the cultural mainstream. She emphasizes how radical diversities of individual temperament, shaped by the powerful contexts of nature, culture, history, and personal experience, are not to be underestimated. Yeziarska illustrates the profound

difference that individuality makes in how pragmatist theory succeeds or fails—or evolves in a surprising new direction—when the rubber hits the road in practice.

Because Deweyan characters, Deweyan textual interpolations, and Deweyan themes crop up abundantly across Yeziarska's corpus, this chapter will invoke representative moments from a variety of primary texts rather than offer a comprehensive reading of any single work. However, *All I Could Never Be* (1932) will serve as my main point of contact with Yeziarska's fiction throughout the chapter. This is Yeziarska's most direct and extended re-creation of the Dewey relationship. She started writing it while working on Dewey's research team for a sociological study of Philadelphia's Polish community in 1918, in lieu of her research report, and its composition draws from fresh, direct interaction with Dewey as well as the filter of later reflection. It is also less well studied than Yeziarska's earlier output, especially her 1925 novel *Bread Givers* and her 1920 short story collection *Hungry Hearts*, which have both enjoyed robust critical reception and a degree of recovery in college classrooms.⁸²

In the first section of this chapter, I interweave analysis of Dewey's poetry with narrative of what we know of Anzia Yeziarska's relationship with John Dewey. Yeziarska's impact on Dewey has been most often treated as personal, but to approach Dewey's personal poems as philosophical ones suggests the kind of role she might have played in his intellectual trajectory.⁸³ As previous scholarship has noted, these poems don't just illuminate Dewey's inner emotional life; they also surface many consistent themes that Dewey also explored in his public

⁸² Appropriately so. Yeziarska's public profile peaked in the 1920s and cratered as the United States entered the Great Depression, which upended the publishing industry (along with virtually every other) and diminished public appetite for stories of poverty. *All I Could Never Be* has more to tell us about the intellectual underpinnings behind her body of work than about her direct cultural significance.

⁸³ Jo Ann Boydston treats the poems in "two major groupings": "personal poems" and "philosophical poems." The former, she writes, reflect the "emotions" of his heart" while the latter capture the "moods of his mind" (xxii). This categorization framework is useful but also has limits, one of which is to place Yeziarska strictly in the personal half of Dewey's story.

philosophical work, in a very different register. Dewey theorized art as a starting point for intellectual inquiry, and I treat his engagement of personal specifics as theoretical testing grounds for general ideas. Dewey's handful of "Anzia poems" are the only writings that we know for certain took Yeziarska as a direct and central source of inspiration. I focus on two of the most significant of these. "Two Weeks," is a long poem that Jo Ann Boydston calls the most personal poem in the whole corpus, and Richard Gibboney and A.V. Christie judge it to be "really the accomplishment of Dewey's poetic gifts" and the "Anzia poems" as a full set to represent his "greatest gifts and lyric intensities" (Boydston xxix, Gibboney and Christie 24-25). "Generations," a carefully revised poem that begins with a co-authored line, represents Dewey's most direct statement on Yeziarska as a writer; it was also the poem that meant the most to her. The poems point toward her centrality in at least some of his thinking about the significance of feeling within thought and the double-edged potential of art to direct both. Both also show how intellectually seriously he took Yeziarska, an estimation that scholars today ought not take lightly.

I then move to closely examine Yeziarska's 1921 review of *Democracy and Education*, her sole direct and open commentary on John Dewey's work. This review is most often cited for its withering personal critique of Dewey, but many critics leave out the context that Yeziarska pairs even her sharpest attack with her most luminous praise here. Yeziarska embraces Dewey's ideas openly and enthusiastically in a variety of texts, including this one, calling *Democracy and Education* nothing short of the "Bible of America." I argue that Yeziarska's presentation of how the work is received by garment factory workers as a masterpiece of "our own Tolstoy"—inspiring despite being at times impenetrable—narratively demonstrates her commitment to the power of artistic expression as a tool to make ideas into living things. For Yeziarska, the

strongest way to inspire independent philosophical thought is by emotionally moving readers with personal writing.

In the third section of this chapter, I return to poetry with a consideration of Dewey's and Yeziarska's writing on and with Robert Browning's poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra." The poem provides a context that further suggests the role of Yeziarska in Dewey's aesthetic thought, and reading each of their uses of the poem sheds light on shared interests. Dewey in 1891 and Yeziarska in 1932 each extract a small selection from the poem to deploy in service of developing larger arguments about individual value and interpersonal connection. Though they choose different passages to engage, both notably focus—from different angles—on the same core idea of interpersonal connection and personal value, engaging the same major metaphor within the poem, that of the potter's wheel. The poem is an anchor point in Dewey's first commentary on aesthetics, including discussion on truth in literature; the relationship between poetry, science, and philosophy; and heightened aesthetic experience. For Yeziarska, Browning provides a starting point and a mutable refrain through which to reconstruct her experience with Dewey, personally and professionally.

I conclude this chapter with a look at two of Yeziarska's essays, which I use to situate Yeziarska's signature ambivalence as a pragmatist stance that remains consistent across her career, and to compare that stance, particularly around questions of cultural pluralism and public rationality, with the positions of Dewey and Gilman. I discuss her well-known early essay "America and I" (1922), and "One Thousand Pages of Research" (1963) is a late piece which remains little known and offers a mature version of Yeziarska's lifelong critique of academe. Yeziarska's later works paint a slightly different picture of Yeziarska than the one we know best. Already in 1932, some of her harder edges soften. Another thirty years later, her themes remain

consistent and her protests strong, but they tend to be rendered with a degree of nuance that reflects further thought as well as, more often noted, enhanced technical skill. Anchored not in ethnographic study of an immigrant community, but in a study on experiences of aging, it also offers an opportunity to view Yeziarska's thought as it extends into a different setting and phase of life.

Curiously, Yeziarska's work goes all but untouched in existing studies of literary pragmatism.⁸⁴ Given the unique, if brief, period of close intimacy with John Dewey in Yeziarska's life, it's a peculiar absence. And given the well-known depth and persistence of Yeziarska's treatments and appropriations of Dewey in her literature, it's also a glaring one. The fact that literary pragmatist scholarship has neglected such direct and abundant personal *and* literary engagement with one of pragmatist philosophy's greatest giants suggests just how slow this field has been to fully integrate and center ethnic women writers. Yeziarska openly critiques the educational and philanthropic institutions that served as the laboratories for implementing and developing pragmatist theory, including the settlement houses and universities that both helped and obstructed her, but scholars do not fully agree on the extent to which these critiques constitute a revision of pragmatism, a rejection of pragmatism—or even an intellectually significant engagement with pragmatist theory at all, rather than a refocalized narrative embodiment of its implementation.⁸⁵ In sum, as Dayton-Wood put it in 2012, “critics have had

⁸⁴ At least three recent doctoral theses by are exceptions and suggest emerging work in this vein: Elizabeth Carolyn Brown's *Pedagogies of Imperialism: Racial Education from Reconstruction to the Progressive Era* (2016), Jane Elisabeth Coulter's *Modernist Pedagogy: Educational Experiments in Immigrant Fiction; or Making Jewish Immigrants American in the Progressive Era* (2017), and Courtney Ferriter's *Justice You Shall Pursue: Jewish American Pragmatism* (2017).

⁸⁵ On the most dismissive end, some scholars treat Yeziarska's thought as passively or incidentally pragmatist, by way of her schooling at Columbia and her relationship with Dewey. Ron Ebest, for example, considers that Yeziarska's “stories may be understood as arguments” in the periodical debates about “The Jewish Question” (105). However, he treats Yeziarska's “rhetorical strategy” less as a strategy than as an almost-accident: “To the extent that [it] was conscious, it presumably reflected, at least in part, her formal education and her sponsorship by Dewey and others” (122).

little to say about the extent to which Dewey's pragmatism shaped Yeziarska's work" and, I will add, even less to say about how Yeziarska and her work may have shaped Dewey's pragmatism (217). With a few notable exceptions, scholarship remains overdue to undertake a thorough pragmatist evaluation of Yeziarska's work, and especially to draw Yeziarska into larger conversations about literary pragmatism and Deweyan thought. This chapter aims to hew a facet on this currently rough-cut gem in pragmatism's intellectual and cultural history.

The Sweatshop Cinderella and the Private Poet

John Dewey and Anzia Yeziarska met sometime in the second half of 1917, when he was an established and esteemed academic of fifty-eight and she was in her mid to late thirties, seeking help in her long pursuit of financial security and a writing career.⁸⁶ Yeziarska had come to New York as a child in 1893, when she arrived with her family by way of Castle Garden from Polish Russia—a town called Ploch or Plotsk or Plinsk, depending on the account—fleeing poverty and pogrom violence. Immigration agents renamed her Hattie Mayer, and the family moved into a tenement building in the Hester Street neighborhood. To help make ends meet, she sold goods from pushcarts before shifting to garment factory work when she was a little older.

⁸⁶ I offer a select bit of Yeziarska's biography here, with a focus on the Dewey encounter, but there are several comprehensive accounts from which I cull these facts, with supplementation from Jay Martin's and Robert Westbrook's Dewey biographies. Full length biographies written about Anzia Yeziarska include Carol Schoen's *Anzia Yeziarska* (1982), Louise Levitas Henriksen's *Anzia Yeziarska: A Writer's Life* (1988), Bettina Berch's *From Hester Street to Hollywood: The Life and Work of Anzia Yeziarska* (2009), and Mary Dearborn's *Love in the Promised Land* (1988), which focuses at length on the Yeziarska-Dewey story. Jo Ann Boydston's research and discussion of the relationship in her introduction to *The Poems of John Dewey* (1977) broke the path for all that followed. Among more recent recaps, Westbrook's *Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth* (2005) is especially useful for its attention to remaining unknowns and to inconsistencies between accounts. Where accounts conflict, I defer to Westbrook for resolution or for assessment of inconclusive evidence. Westbrook generally favors Henriksen's account, written in consultation with Boydston, as the most reliable and illuminating. Though later biographies continue to enrich and to amend the picture, Henriksen's is my favorite as well: she writes with a loving scrutiny, balancing intimate perspective with intentional remove in her careful attempt to understand, as truthfully as possible, her multifaceted, much mythologized mother.

Dead-set on earning an education that her Orthodox father disapproved of, Yezierska (still going by Hattie Mayer) eventually moved out and into the Clara de Hirsch Home for Working Girls, made her way through night school, and got herself to college on a scholarship to study domestic science at Columbia University's Teachers College. She never cared for domestic work, and she didn't want to teach, but the philanthropic and higher educational systems seemed unable to imagine a poor immigrant woman as a fundable fit for anything else. It would have to do as a foot in the door to escape factory labor and to squeeze in a few of the liberal arts classes that she craved. She earned her degree and a certification as a cooking teacher by 1904, and then spent the next tumultuous decade and change trying to find her place in the world and to launch her writing career. She taught and waitressed, took acting and writing classes, lived with her sister in California and at the socialist Rand School in New York, entered and exited a pair of short-lived marriages to Jacob Gordon and Arnold Levitas, had a daughter with Levitas, and with anguish relinquished the child to her father's custody in 1916—though not before trying a variety of unsuccessful solutions for childcare and publishing an editorial in *The Survey* proposing a model for baby gardens, not unlike Gilman's earlier ones. By 1917, she had published her first short story, "The Free Vacation House," and had also begun reclaiming the name Anzia.⁸⁷

Late that year, stifled with boredom as managing housekeeper for the Emmanuel Sisterhood of Personal Service, Yezierska sought out Dewey for help to secure a job teaching in the New York City schools. Her last stint teaching hadn't gone well, however: before quitting

⁸⁷Much of this she would later gloss past in narrating and performing her public persona; she and those responsible for publicizing her work knew that seeming fresh from the sweatshop made a better story in the American rags-to-riches mold. For a rhetorical history of the American sweatshop, see Laura Hapke's *Sweatshop: The History of an American Idea* (2004). Yezierska's self-fashioning of her image is so crucial to her story that it is discussed frequently throughout Yezierska scholarship, but see Leslie Fishbein, "Anzia Yezierska: The Sweatshop Cinderella and the Invented Life" (1998) and Melanie Levinson's "'To Make Myself for a Person': 'Passing' Narratives and the Divided Self in the Work of Anzia Yezierska" (2004) for a couple of targeted discussions.

abruptly, she would call in sick with “nerves” and turn over entire class periods to a student instead of instructing herself. Officials would only offer her work as a substitute. Yezierska, indignant, resisted taking no for an answer. Dewey’s name was almost certainly familiar to her from her time at Teachers College and from his frequent periodical publications, which included articles supporting immigrant contributions to American culture, promoting the intellectual freedom of teachers, and speaking out against autocratic educational administration. She also reports having heard him speak years earlier at the International Garment Workers’ Union and may have encountered him at the Rand School.⁸⁸ However he had gotten on her radar, he seemed like an obvious ally, and a powerful one, so she showed up at Dewey’s office. Without an appointment, she simply walked in, with two short stories in hand to offer as proof of her capability.⁸⁹

Yezierska and her writing both made a big impression on Dewey, and he played a critical role in helping Yezierska launch her career. He affirmed her talent and potential in glowing terms, encouraging her to pursue writing rather than teaching. Materially, he helped advance her work with publishers (particularly Herbert Croly at *The New Republic*), provided editorial help on at least one story (“Soap and Water and the Immigrant,” later shortened to “Soap and Water”), and gave Yezierska her first typewriter. He also invited her to audit his graduate seminar in political philosophy, a two-semester course which she most likely joined in January 1918. The group comprised a number of Dewey’s most accomplished students, including another woman, Frances Margaret Bradshaw, who later became dean of women at Swarthmore College

⁸⁸ Gilman was also among the Rand School’s many high-profile teachers and lecturers (Ginsberg 80).

⁸⁹ Showing up at his office was a tactic that also worked for others who sought manuscript feedback from the soft-hearted Dewey.

and who made scholarly contributions in aesthetic theory and literary history.⁹⁰ It also included one other auditor, the eccentric chemical magnate and art collector Albert Barnes, who became one of Dewey's close friends and the one whom he credited as his strongest influence on the topic of aesthetics. When Barnes proposed in April bankrolling a study on resistance to assimilation in a Polish immigrant community in Philadelphia that summer, to continue in practice the theoretical work of the seminar, Dewey found a place for Yeziarska on the project as a translator and researcher.

Yeziarska, then a Mrs. Arnold Levitas separating from Mr. Arnold Levitas, arrived in Philadelphia a bit ahead of the research group to find them a house for the summer. When the study itself began, she was tasked with investigating "conditions affecting family life and women," while Bradshaw, the only other woman on the study, focused on residents' ideas about education (Martin 281). The study was a methodological and interpersonal mess. Dewey was away and Barnes didn't impose much structure in his stead, skeptical of "academitis" despite considering the student group laughably green (Martin 284). Yeziarska clashed with the others at every turn. Brand Blanshard called Yeziarska "something of a flibbertigibbet, full of enthusiasms and repulsions, but lacking steadiness and balance of judgement" and said to take anything she said, including in a "factual report," "with a good deal of salt" (qtd. Martin 290). Blanshard's warning didn't much matter, since Yeziarska never filed her report. Neither Barnes nor Dewey seems to have been very concerned about her alternate output. Barnes reported to Dewey that "Anzia, like the true artist that she is, keeps aloof from the science [of sociological research] which she detests, and spends considerable time in her room building phantasies, some of which

⁹⁰ These contributions include *Retreat from Likeness in the Theory of Painting* (1945) and *Portraits of Wordsworth* (1959), both published as Frances Bradshaw Blanshard. Bradshaw married Brand Blanshard, another graduate student on the project who later became a philosopher at Yale, just a few months after the study ended.

she is putting into stories and a novel, and some into my private ear, that she is not appreciated by the others; but her compensation is the statement that you will appreciate the kind of work she is doing” (qtd. Martin 290). When Dewey returned to the east coast, he tried to salvage what he could of the project, firing one researcher, dispensing with a questionnaire to which Yezierska had objected, and sharpening the study’s political bent.⁹¹ Ultimately, he generated a controversial case for intervention in Polish American politics in the form of a confidential report to the federal government.⁹²

During the seminar and the study, Yezierska’s and Dewey’s professional relationship became increasingly personal: both became infatuated, despite age difference and despite Dewey’s status as a married man, with children, then in a position of direct authority over Yezierska. Their intimacy reached its peak in the spring and continued through summer, developing both in person and through correspondence as Dewey traveled, including on an extended trip to Stanford in May to deliver a lecture series that became the basis for *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922). Different scholars offer more and less chaste characterizations of the romance’s tone, but it is generally agreed that the affair was primarily an emotional one and that it collapsed suddenly by early fall. One September evening beneath the Williamsburg Bridge, Dewey made a physical advance, perhaps a kiss and a clumsy touch of her breast, and Yezierska recoiled in shock. In that moment, their connection transformed from romance to regret. Dewey seems to have retreated instantly, while Yezierska rued her reaction as soon as she got home that night. Afterward, Dewey remained chilly toward Yezierska until he left on

⁹¹ Yezierska’s intellectual influence on the study otherwise remains opaque, but Robert Westbrook credits the potent excitement of romance, at least, as one motivation for Dewey’s “determined effort to intervene in the politics of the Polish-American community.” (*John Dewey and American Democracy* 221-2).

⁹² “Conditions Among the Poles in the United States: Confidential Report” (1918). An Atlantic columnist later derided it as “[t]he inept intervention of Mr. Dewey in behalf of the Poles” (“The Atlantic Report on the World Today: Washington” [December 1944]).

September 25 for a lengthy, already planned trip to China by way of San Francisco and Japan, where he delivered the lectures that became *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920) in early 1919. In terms of substantial interaction, that was more or less that. Hopeful to rekindle the connection, Yeziarska always asked her publishers to send Dewey a copy when one of her books came out. At some point, Dewey asked for his letters back. Yeziarska seems to have refused and then relented, but also to have committed several to memory by the time she did return them. The two had a final, definitive meeting in his office in 1927. In Yeziarska's fictional rendition in *All I Could Never Be*, he showed up late and cut the meeting abruptly short. If Dewey read any of her books, we have no evidence he ever told her; in the novel, the pages remain uncut.

Throughout the relationship, Dewey wrote poetry about it in private—about Yeziarska's gifts and beauty, about his passionate feelings for her, about the strange thrill and anguish of experiencing lust at this phase in life, and about his deep conflictedness at where this romance fit in his life, given their age difference and the major fact of his family.⁹³ Though these topics are fairly standard fare for lyric poetry, Dewey's poems themselves are quite idiosyncratic in their handling. The poems almost inevitably arc back toward finding more general answers to philosophical questions. The longer ones, in particular, are clearly intellectual exercises as much as expressive ones. It's a mode that makes sense not just for Dewey as an individual, but for a pragmatist in general. William James once wrote, "Many of the complexities of the moral life...would remain even if the universe was reduced to "one rock with two loving souls upon it" (qtd. *Democratic Hope* 112). Why not, then, theorize the complexity of human connection at the scale of two loving souls?

⁹³ Some critics have described Dewey as in the middle of a full-blown midlife crisis at this point. At work, Dewey was experiencing relational strain and public criticism over his support for American intervention in the Great War. At home, his relationship with his wife Alice was deteriorating in the wake of their young son Gordon's death.

In a literary pragmatist mode, Dewey's "Anzia poems" represent an instance of thinking toward general concepts through the perspective of personal experience and concrete situations. I take as representative examples two poems, which consider passion as an intellectual phenomenon, probe paradoxical power of art's public influence on private thought, and speak to Dewey's belief in Yeziarska's intellectual potential. In Dewey's processing of his personal relationship with Yeziarska, one of the most insistent recurring intellectual themes has to do with emotion's intersection with thought, knowledge, and literature. He details different varieties of frisson between thought, feeling, and physicality; he asks where feelings come from; he worries which ideas and emotions can be trusted as true; and he questions the role of culture and art in shaping thought, feeling, and identity. The literary form of poetry, written in intended privacy, allowed Dewey to his process of thinking with viscosity and vulnerability that his philosophical tracts rarely, if ever, display. Though the latter sometimes do capture a sense of wonder that motivates phases of Dewey's verse, Dewey brings distinct intensity and uncertainty to writing that has what Yeziarska more than once called "flesh and blood" ("Prophets of Democracy," *All I Could Never Be* 55).

"Two Weeks" clearly paints the picture of an attraction to Yeziarska in which intellectual, emotional, and physical dimensions are tightly, intentionally, intertwined. The combination carries implications for how we understand Yeziarska and Dewey alike as thinkers. In the former case, the poem displays how seriously one of the leading thinkers of the 20th century took Yeziarska as a thinker, an evaluation that should give scholars today pause about longstanding, easy-to-absorb narratives that treat Yeziarska as intellectually and creatively insubstantial. In the latter, the poem's transition from personal fantasy to personal philosophy shows how close Yeziarska was to Dewey's mind and heart as he worked through aesthetic and

epistemological questions about the relationship between literature, thought, feeling, and knowledge at this moment in his career. Gibboney and Christie consider this attempt at resolution, which I emphasize is tied up intimately with Yeziarska, to be the overarching theme of Dewey's poetry at large: "He is trying to bridge some dichotomy: Can emotion and the mind be wedded into a single form, need they remain distinct? He seems very intrigued at how he can resolve into a unity his experience, his thought, his emotion and whether poetry is the vehicle for that pursuit" (21).

Written in imagined address to Yeziarska, "Two Weeks" stages the intense tension Dewey was experiencing between the strength of his excited feelings for her and the strength of his attachment to his home life, weighted with a sense of duty that is part begrudging and part full of loving if somber gratitude.⁹⁴ Dewey emphasizes the centrality of intellect within passion early in the poem. After a stanza about his wife, Alice—a kind of mourning love poem within a love poem—John pivots to the powerful, obsessive, passionate thoughts he has of Anzia. He imagines her most likely at intellectual work, asking "Does she now think or write or rest? / What happens at this minute—it's just eight—" (lines 25-26). He pairs parts of her body with her mental activity, for example in praising her "lovely eyes" for what they are capable of imagining: "visions...Even in the tortured tangles of the tenement/ Of a life that's free and bold" (lines 34-36). Even his strongest gesture toward erotic imagery is not isolated in a sentence from her intellect: he aligns his image of "the curving of your breast" as it rises and falls with breath with "hear[ing] warm thoughts seething" (lines 31-33). The intercourse he names as the object of his desire is not physical, but verbal, whether in correspondence or conversation. He waits eagerly

⁹⁴ The metaphor of an "iron band" gets most of the critical attention, but there is softer natural imagery, too: "I have a garden of flowers and bees?/ But others built the wall and kept the flowers." (stanza 2). I read this, in its context, as a notable acknowledgment of both the domestic labor and intellectual nurturing from Alice that has enabled his self-development, his work, and his rest.

for the “fresh wonder” of her writing and feels her hand in his in a “dream that you are near / To talk with, and that I can hear / Your crystallized speech / As we converse, each to each” (lines 29, 38-41). This language is as much a characterization of passion as an intellectual phenomenon as it is a characterization of his specific desire for Anzia as both passionate and intellectual: the personal case demonstrates the general point.

Other writing of Dewey's also portrays the counterpart, at a clearer midpoint between personal and intellectual: intellectual life as an emotional phenomenon, described in Yeziarskan terms of fire and passion. In an undated typescript of a memorial speech for his most influential academic mentor, Professor George S. Morris at the University of Michigan, he offers a vivid, very physical description in praise of Morris's “intellectual ardor” and vigor as teacher: “His spare and tense frame seemed but an organ for the realization of thought....His emphasis always seemed moral rather than physical.” Dewey conflates body and mind when thoughts heat up with passionate feeling, just as much as Yeziarska does. But unlike Yeziarska, though Dewey values ardor (including in the kind of intensely heightened experience art can produce), he seems to want to keep the body in check, to sublimate and temper the physicality of the most intense emotions, and not just in erotic contexts. He writes of Morris, “As his eye lit up and his face shone, there was fire without heat, energy without violence,” adding longhand a clarification that this is “an exhibition of the life of thought” (draft memorial for George Morris). Dewey likely expressed similar values to Yeziarska: Henry Scott's dialogue in *All I Could Never Be* at times uses remarkably similar terms. In one scene, he counsels the frustrated graduate students on the Polish study to approach Fanya the way any sensible person would approach a fire: to get as much of its heat as you can without getting burned. In another, he encourages Fanya to nourish her body in order to support “the ardent life of thought and emotion you live,” in a notably

extended letter that Yeziarska may have reproduced in part or in whole from one that Dewey wrote to her (45).

As “Two Weeks” continues, following stanzas gradually amplify the larger philosophical stakes of Dewey’s visceral personal experience of mental “wonder” inextricable from physical “thunder” (lines 42-3). First, the temperature of Dewey’s emotional thought rises, and he ironically responds to Yeziarska’s accusations that he is all “cold heart” and “clear head,” free of confusion but also bloodless. The language of Christian communion underscores the union of the intangible with the fleshly and the potential for transformation between them:

While I am within this wonder

I am overcome by thunder

Of my blood that surges from my cold heart to my clear head—So at least she said —

Till my body sinks and merges

In communion with the wine and bread. (lines 43-48)

But, as his blood rises to his head and his thoughts heat from “warm...seething” to the painful fire of conflicted confusion, Dewey then turns away from the personal and emotional and more directly toward the general and the theoretical. At his most personal and passionate, Dewey gets to work trying to tease out philosophical ideas. Yeziarska reads such moves as self-soothing “evasion”: in *All I Could Never Be*, Henry tells Fanya that “my whole tradition...is to subject feeling to reason...till it ceases to exist” (*All I Could Never Be* 34). Though Yeziarska grossly overstates Dewey’s lack of feeling as he thinks, it is not hard to see why she reads a habitual move like this as a retreat into the comforting, familiar “grooves of...intellectuality” (*Hungry*

Hearts 87). The second person address drops out as he finds himself frustrated at wondering how true his feelings are, or whether literature and media have conjured mere imitations:

Damn fiction, damn romance.

Since I have read, I shall never know

Whether in an ancient mirror I see prance

Before me mimic passions in a row,

Or if they are authentic heaven and hell.

Moreover no one can ever tell. (lines 67-72)

Dewey shifts from a strangely subdued emotional outburst (punctuated with a period!), through a description of personal experience, into an objective conclusion about the human condition at large: emotion manufactured by culture is unavoidable. Although Dewey affirms and embraces this stance in his published work, this poem captures just how unsettling that fact can feel. It is a frustrating paradox for Dewey that one's ideas, and indeed one's very identity, are never fully independent. His description of "mimic passions" echoes two of the most famous metaphorical images in Western philosophy and Christian scripture. Possible afterimages of a truth from elsewhere dance like the shadows on the wall of Plato's cave, but within the cave of cultural conditioning, he cannot tell if they are not real; he sees them "through a glass, darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12 KJV). He ruefully concedes that "passions" cannot be neatly divided into factual and fictional boxes, to be easily judged trustworthy or untrustworthy to follow. In naturalistic language, he elaborates:

The thoughts of others which taking root

Have bred the plant and seed whose surplus,

Saved from waste, is called ourselves.

Our own! That lie again. When one delves

One finds but the tattered shred

Of what one has seen, or heard, or read. (lines 75-80)

Another way of framing this unease about externally conditioned emotion, thought, and self-constitution —and an especially relevant one with regard to “damn fiction” —would be to identify it as an unease about sentiment, as June Howard has influentially characterized the term, as signaling “when emotion is recognized as socially constructed” (*Publishing the Family* 219).⁹⁵ Because, as Howard notes, we “tend to think of feelings as personal and interior,” it can feel unsettling or uncomfortable to mark “moments when the entanglement of the subjective and the public is explicitly acknowledged or (often) invoked and obscured” (“Sentiment”). Dewey feels this unease keenly; the stakes of following his questionable-feeling feelings could be high, and, also, to be ensnared by sentiment is to be held in the past, a very un-pragmatist position. For Dewey, a tether to the long past of cultural and intellectual heritage leaves one susceptible to archaic ideas, made with different accepted knowledge to fit a different situation. He worries about the influence of “Romantic relics of a feudal age / Stored in today’s trim realistic cage” (lines 85-86).

However, if sentiment, in the sense of culturally entangled feeling, marked a troubling hazard for Dewey, it also presented a promising opportunity for literature in general and for Yeziarska in particular. If we are inevitably shaped by “the thoughts of others...taking root,”

⁹⁵ In fact, Ann Mikkelsen has argued that it is Dewey, not Yeziarska, who is the sentimentalist of the pair, in literary terms at least. She argues that Yeziarska “makes manifest an emotional, physical, and intellectual phenomenon that Yeziarska’s contemporaries termed aesthetic empathy,” which she “recoded as assimilative empathy.” I do not agree with Mikkelsen’s argument in full, but her historicization of “aesthetic empathy” as Dewey and Yeziarska encountered it, as an emerging term in art theory, is incredibly illuminating (363, 367).

even if it's just the "tattered shred" of something briefly encountered somewhere, then the work of providing seeds for others is deeply important, potentially highly influential (lines 75, 79). Unlike many of his contemporary aesthetic critics, Dewey worried less about sentimental aesthetic *form* than sentiment in *content*. He saw "conventions...get[ting] in the way of fresh insight" in trenchant ways among critics who were quick not just to disparage mainstream culture, but also to dismiss it (*Art as Experience* 1). At the beginning of *Art as Experience*, Dewey takes aim at ideas about art and aesthetic experience as properly existing "apart from the common life" (7). Like Gilman, he critiqued the old guard *and* the avant-garde for their shared anti-democratic attachment to this particular old-fashioned thought. However, Dewey writes, "The arts which today have the most vitality for the average person are things he does not take to be arts; for instance, the movie, jazzed music, the comic strip" and even (to Dewey's distaste) sensationalist journalism: "newspaper accounts of love-nests, murders, and the exploits of bandits" (4). In short, for Dewey, popular art had every bit as much of a role to play in dispatching "Romantic relics of a feudal age" as it did in continuing to conjure them ("Two Weeks" line 85).

To root out diseases of old culture, Dewey saw cures in planting new culture (as Gilman did) and in hybridizing culture into a multiethnic "symphony" (which Gilman didn't). Yezierska's writing, he believed, would help generate new ways of thinking to replace and update ancient relics in public thought. He saw her as possessing special intellectual and expressive gifts that could allow natural-born and naturalized American citizens alike to flourish through mutual exchange. He expressed this sense of wondrous promise in a poem which affected Yezierska deeply, to which she returned repeatedly in her fiction.

“Generations” emerged from a line that she wrote to him —on a literal shred of paper — that then he fleshed out into a full poem.⁹⁶ In *All I Could Never Be*, Fanya writes to Henry, “Generations of stifled words—reaching out to you —aching for utterance —dying on my lips unuttered—.” Henry writes back with, verbatim, the first two stanzas of Dewey’s three stanza poem, which takes Yeziarska’s struggle to speak, beseeching him, and transforms it into a power to speak, reaching far beyond. She becomes, he emphasizes on his second line, an expressive conduit for her people:

Generations of stifled words reaching out

Through you

Aching for utt’rance, dying on lips

That have died of hunger,

Hunger not to have, but to be. (lines 1-5)⁹⁷

He proclaimed that Yeziarska would speak on behalf of “Generations as yet unuttered, dumb, smothered, / Inchoate, unutterable by me and mine” through her artistic talent and on the basis of her lived experience (lines 6-7). The poem posits quite literally embodied knowledge and potential: “You shall not utter them; you shall be them,” he wrote (line 10). In so doing, she would “make from herself a person,” as Yeziarska routinely liked to phrase an ambition to “be somebody.” She would also contribute to a gradual revolution in which Jewish immigrants at

⁹⁶ Boydston documents that “Generations” is one of just four poems for which we have documentation of revision; Dewey treated it with particular care. It is one of two extant poems that we know he shared with Yeziarska.

⁹⁷ In the novel, Yeziarska makes a few minimal stylistic tweaks to suit her preferences, for example swapping in “utterance” for Dewey’s old-fashioned “utt’rance” and replacing Dewey’s first line break with italics on “*through you*” in an alternate form of emphasis (*All I Could Never Be* 32).

large would come into their social own: “In you I see them coming to be, / Luminous, slow revolving, ordered in rhythm” (lines 8-9). The process would be difficult, but he imagined results nothing short of complete regeneration: “From out the pain” of her experiences “[a] great song shall fill the world” until “an old world be content to go” (lines 11-12, 17).

Yeziarska readily took up the mantle Dewey draped upon her shoulders as spokeswoman for the oppressed and mute. “I’d live my life writing and rewriting my story,” she later wrote, describing it as “[t]he story of immigrants as helpless as deaf-mutes—children who came seeking the life of America and found themselves in the dead end of the sweatshop” (*Red Ribbon on a White Horse* 78). And for a time, many heard Yeziarska’s work exactly as she and Dewey had hoped. A critic at *The Globe* in 1926 summarized the stakes of her work for readers thus: “There are now, this very day...within our own city, thousands of immigrants whose souls are just as eager, just as brimful of unexpressed longings and desires and strivings upward as was Hanneh Hayyeh, with her shining kitchen, or Anzia Yeziarska herself...How have we received them?” (“Lost Beautiful: Life and Books of Anzia Yeziarska”). Yeziarska’s career took a meteoric rise after Edward O’Brien featured “The Fat of the Land” in his collection *Best Short Stories of 1919*. She published her first book, *Hungry Hearts*, the next year. By 1921, MGM had offered her a lucrative contract to work on staff as part of its stable of “eminent authors,” with the screenplay adaptation of *Hungry Hearts* serving as her first assignment. The studio’s publicists helped build her image in the press as “Cinderella of the tenements” and the “sweatshop Cinderella.” As Yeziarska’s daughter Louise Levitas Henriksen sums it up: “She was the heroine of a very American fairy tale” (1). At the apex of her career, Yeziarska’s work saw a wide popular audience in an array of major magazines, two Hollywood film adaptations, and frequent enough anthologization to merit inclusion in a major New York state standardized test.

But, in true Cinderella fashion, Yezierska's gilt carriage proved to have a limited shelf life. The culture and affluence of Hollywood made her uneasy, so she quit. Her book sales were middling, and reviews became increasingly mixed. Ultimately, Yezierska's career collapsed with the Great Depression: there was little money in the publishing business and arguably even less public interest in stories about impoverished immigrants. With help from other influential authors whom she counted as friends and with willingness to live an ascetic life, she always found a way to keep making ends meet and to keep writing: work with the WPA Writers Project, a fellowship at Wisconsin, and a longstanding gig as a book reviewer for the *New York Times*, among others. In 1950, her final book was published with a preface by W.H. Auden and met with critical approval, but it garnered only mild public interest. Never in her lifetime did Yezierska again approach the public visibility she had attained in the 1920s, and never did she fully stop mourning the loss of her relationship with Dewey.

We don't know what Dewey thought about Yezierska after they parted ways, but "Generations" offers two glimmers of suggestion. At the end of the poem, Dewey imagines witnessing Yezierska's cultural influence from a physical distance, while remaining spiritually close. In the stanza she didn't want to quote, he wrote: "I from afar shall see, / As one watching sees the star / Rise in the waiting heavens, / And from the distance my hand shall clasp yours" (lines 13-16). At that moment in 1918, at least, Dewey didn't regard separation from Yezierska as the inevitable end of his interest in her work or of her impact on him. We also know that nearly fifteen years after breaking things off, he would write in *Art as Experience*: "through art, the meanings of objects that are otherwise dumb, inchoate, restricted, are clarified and concentrated, and not by thought working laboriously upon them, nor by escape into a world of mere sense, but by creation of a new experience" (*Art as Experience* 138). Consciously or not,

the sentence recycles the jointly authored line of poetry that meant so much to Yeziarska, that she reproduced more than any other in her published work: his proclamation that she would represent “Generations as yet unuttered, dumb, smothered, / Inchoate, unutterable by me and mine” (lines 1-2). The phrase “dumb, inchoate, restricted” is a very small revision of “dumb, smothered, inchoate.” It dials back the potency of “smothered” to a less emotional word, “restricted,” that bounds the end of the phrase just as poetically as its predecessor sat stifled in the middle of it. Somewhere behind his view of art itself lay Dewey’s interaction with Yeziarska the artist and his personal faith in her particular power to create new experience.

Dewey frequently and openly credited various non-academic practitioners for their deep impact on his thought, and that they were especially influential in his thinking around mind-body dualism and aesthetics. Amy Koritz has argued that Dewey’s “attraction to Yeziarska partook of the same desire to overcome the division between mind and body” as did his enthusiasm for F.M. Alexander, whom Dewey said “has made one of the most important discoveries that has been made in the practical application of the unity of the mind-body principle” (171).⁹⁸ Dewey also took what artists had to say about his aesthetic theory particularly seriously, and he often found them to be more sympathetic and constructive interlocutors than professional philosophers. For example, in a 1935 letter to Read Bain he wrote “I am very genuinely appreciative of what you say about my book [*Art as Experience*], all the more so because you yourself write poems. It has not been an unusual experience with me to find that persons in other lines seem to have less difficulty in discovering what I am driving at than a good many professional colleagues” (letter to Read Bain, March 12, 1935). Yeziarska was one of those “persons in other lines,” and while

⁹⁸ For a sampling of Dewey’s eclectic affiliations, see “Dewey, Women, and Weirdoes: or, the Potential Rewards for Scholars who Dialogue across Difference” (Cunningham et. al.) or for a more comprehensive account, either *The Education of John Dewey* (2003) or *John Dewey and American Democracy* (1991).

we mostly know about their relationship from her writing, Dewey's poems show that she held a significant place in his thinking on the relationship between emotion, intellect, and art during a phase of deep, raw questioning.

Reviewing "Our Own Tolstoy"

Yeziarska revisited Dewey and his thought repeatedly in her fiction, with varying degrees of directness, but she also—just once, in 1921—openly engaged Dewey's philosophical writing in a review she published in *Bookman of Democracy and Education* (1916) alongside three other books on democracy.⁹⁹ This review, "Prophets of Democracy," illuminates her approach toward Dewey's work, and it also offers a rubric for reading the philosophical project of her own fiction. Though the review is best known for Yeziarska's scorchingly personal critique of Dewey's abstract and convoluted prose style, over-emphasis on Yeziarska's calls for a more accessible and passionate literary style have obscured the full content of this review. Yeziarska pairs her fiercest critique of Dewey with her most luminous praise, which she lays out primarily through narrative. Considered comprehensively rather than selectively, I hold that it clearly establishes Yeziarska's full-throated embrace of Dewey's "large, social vision" as a place from which further work should begin—that is, her alignment with Deweyan pragmatism and her agenda for feminist literary pragmatism. Yeziarska argues that the full realization of John Dewey's

⁹⁹ Jo Ann Boyston says in her introduction to Dewey's collected poems that this is the only time Yeziarska ever "referred to Dewey by name in print" (Boydston xliii) but this is not quite correct. *All I Could Never Be* lists one fake John Dewey title alongside two real sociology books (63). It is, however, the only time she engaged substantially with his work while naming him by name.

democratic vision will require the contributions of writers who can speak not just with clarity, but also personality, and, most significantly, on readers themselves.

Yezierska begins her review with the scene of an International Garment Workers' Union local meeting, when an announcement is made that Professor John Dewey would be coming to give a lecture on democracy. The chapter's reaction is "eager" but skeptical (496). One worker asks, "Who is he?" ... "Is he another one of these professors talking down to us from their heads!" (496). That the second "question" is an exclamation communicates clearly that it is, effectively, a non-question; she expects they will be condescended to, treated neither with empathy nor sympathy, but as receptacles for the professor's ideas. The union leader is quick to try and convey not only Dewey's stature but also his humanity. "Everybody in America knows who Professor Dewey is," the leader says, in a move from Yezierska that positions the factory worker who *doesn't* know as outside of America. "He ain't just a professor," the speaker continues, "He's from the higher-ups—the educated—but he is a *real person*" (496). The shorthand that communicates this combination of lofty fame, erudition, and humanity? "He is the American Tolstoy" (496).

Comparison to the Russian novelist and radical thought leader in political ethics doesn't only signal Dewey's titanic stature in America as a man of letters to Eastern European immigrant workers in the narrative, it also signals literariness as an important theme to the readers of her review. The breath of personality in words is a critical element of what makes John Dewey's ideas so inspirational in Yezierska's account, consistently in the flesh and sometimes on the page. This is true even when comprehension is compromised, but especially when communication is clear. "The American Tolstoy" is a shorthand Yezierska repeats several times in the review, not a throwaway moniker: the literary comparison is central, and her first usage

involves repetition in a series of sentences split across three paragraphs to create an effect near to lyric poetry: “He is the American Tolstoy. / And so we heard the American Tolstoy. / And then we knew—knew why the East Side, in their surge of enthusiasm, called this book the ‘new Bible of America’” (496). In these lines, she deploys repetition (the American Tolstoy, knew —knew why), parallel structure (he is, and so we heard, and then we knew), and rhythm (as the short sentences grow longer and build steam).

The first sentence frames who Dewey is. The second stages an encounter, prioritizing the listening of the “we” above the speaking of the “he.” And the third bursts with its own “surge of enthusiasm” that emerges as a product of learning and knowing, as Yeziarska continues her account not of *Democracy and Education* itself—the content of which she touches only minimally in the review—but how the garment factory workers (presumably mostly if not exclusively women) interact with it and react to it. She describes workers rushing to the libraries after the lecture to check out *Democracy and Education*, imprudently skipping lunch for a month to purchase it, or joining together to share a copy, “contented...with owning just a part of the book” (496). For the next several months, Yeziarska describes, groups of workers at lunch “sitting over machines, on window sills, over bales of cloaks —between mouthfuls of bread and herring” would “read aloud the thought-kindling words of this ‘new Bible of America’” (496).

There is no mistaking how overwhelmingly positive the framing of this review is. “The purpose and meaning of democracy!,” she exults (496). “That was the part that set us on fire—lifted us on wings!...Visions of an ideal democracy would rise over us like songs of freedom of an oppressed people”(496-497). Liveliness and action are rendered as flames, with reference to the already established idiom for social revolution as “setting the world on fire.” Yeziarska suggests that the mechanism for liberation and social transformation is the sparking of thought,

as Gilman does. Notably, however, Yeziarska emphasizes that comprehension of Dewey's text was not necessarily a prerequisite for independent thought to be kindled. "We did not always understand what we read," she says, even after spending a full lunch hour chewing on a single paragraph (and here she quotes an example) (496). Nonetheless, she continues, "[E]ven the most educated language drew us and lifted us out of ourselves" (496). Absent understanding, it is the texture of language itself—with maybe just enough grasp of content, meaning, and imagery—that inspires the mind. Dewey's text is received, in the factory, impressionistically and through sound, like poetry.¹⁰⁰

"It was as though our own Tolstoy were speaking," Yeziarska writes of the lunch listening sessions (496). The shift of language from "the American Tolstoy" to "our own Tolstoy" implies a few things: it claims, now, the Americanness of the workers; it claims Dewey for the female immigrant working class; and it continues to align Dewey with both the international and the literary. It also positions the garment worker, reading aloud, as a speaking extension of Dewey as Yeziarska quotes a Veblenesque section on wealth inequality and social separation as creating aesthetic and intellectual problems: "The evils thereby affecting the superior class are less material and less perceptible but equally real. Their culture tends to become sterile, their art showy display and artificial; their wealth luxurious; their knowledge overspecialized; their manner fastidious rather than humane" ("Prophets" 496; *Democracy and Education* ch. 7). Though Yeziarska claims throughout the review to have chosen her excerpted passages at random, the thrust of selections like this are pointed. The garment worker, speaking through Dewey's words, highlights not what impoverished immigrant Americans lack or need, but what the so-called "superior class" lacks at its heart, behind its artifice.

¹⁰⁰ In *All I Could Never Be*, Henry tells Fanya: "I suppose my rambling doesn't sound like sense at all. But I feel you understand me, somehow—not that understanding is always necessary" (56).

Having claimed Dewey for the now-speaking immigrant, Yezierska then highlights the line along which Dewey's precious words fall short, and where mere re-articulation is insufficient. In a sentence that might sum up the review, Yezierska faux-concludes: "scores of works have been written, but this solidly packed volume stands out as the source book of the highest thought of democracy, education, and Americanization" (497). But Yezierska often ends her stories and essays alike with sharp pivots, concluding with punchy ambivalence. Where she has fiercely critiqued, she surprisingly softens. Where she has exulted, she punctures her praise. After she seems to have concluded, she complicates. In her assessment of *Democracy and Education*, she returns to the question of readers' experience. At the root of the garment workers' struggle to understand Dewey is Dewey himself, as a prose stylist and *as a person*. He may have inspired the immigrant women at the shirtwaist factory with "visions of an ideal democracy" in which "separation into privileged and subject class" no longer afflicts workers with hunger and indignity (496). But, Yezierska nonetheless laments the book's difficulty and abstraction in personal terms that have been read as both brutal and aching:¹⁰¹

Unfortunately, Professor Dewey's style lacks flesh and blood. It lacks that warm personal touch that would enable his readers to get close to him. He thinks so high up in the head that only the intellectual few can follow the spiraling point of his vision. His sentences are compressed kernels of thought. And one has to break open each kernel separately to get even the partial meaning of his words.

One wonders why a man so imbued with the spirit of democracy must use such undemocratic language, and wonders if the reason lies in the man himself. For style is the

¹⁰¹ Jo Ann Boydston sums up both parses: "what might have seemed in 1921 to be an acid public comment about Dewey seems today to be an open plea to him" (xvli-xlvii).

unconscious breath of personality. Can it be that this giant of the intellect—this pioneer in the realms of philosophy—has so suppressed the personal life in himself that his book is devoid of the intimate, self-revealing touches that make writing human? Can it be that Professor Dewey, for all his large, social vision, has so choked the feelings in his own heart that he has killed in himself the power to reach the masses of people who think with the heart rather than with the head? (497)

The abstruseness issue is a clarity problem, but it's more than that: for Yeziarska, Dewey's impulse to withhold a "warm personal touch" in his public writing is an equally grave critical failing (497). It's one that Yeziarska reiterates in *All I Could Never Be*, when Fanya Iwanowa says to Henry Scott in person what Yeziarska wrote indirectly to Dewey: "your book *The Meaning of Democracy* belies the title...That book was meant to be the Bible of America. It's wicked not to have it available for everybody. You could light up the lives of millions. But somehow it needs flesh and blood" (55). To keep his emotional "flesh and blood" self hidden behind closed doors and cordoned within private poetry reflects a failure, for Yeziarska, at least in responding to how people think—with the heart ("Prophets" 497, *All I Could Never Be* 55). Whether she thinks Dewey disagrees or refuses to understand that people think that way or not, Yeziarska does not say. She does, however, insist that personal philosophical writing can be done.

She allows her review's final question of Dewey to hang, potentially damning but also, pivotally, unanswered. Instead of resolving her assessment of Dewey, she shifts to an example of scholarly writing that she presents as an alternative model of style, proof that intellectual discussion on "the profoundest social questions of the day" need not be remote and specialized. She praises John Erskine's *Democracy and Ideals* for handling "the problems of citizenship and

Americanization” in “a style so simple that anyone with but an elementary knowledge can enjoy it” (497). What works, she says, isn’t just that the words are “so plain, so clear that a child can understand” (497). It’s also something less tangible but equally powerful: a human not just behind the text, but within it. What makes this “a book for the brick-layer and coal-heaver as well as for the college president,” Yezierska asserts, is “a warm, personal current pulsing through every line that grips the reader’s heart and mind and imagination” (“Prophets”).

It is hard not to see implicit, if not explicit, response and rebuke from Dewey to Yezierska’s charges in the *Bookman* review when he writes in *Human Nature and Conduct* the next year: “The separation of warm emotion and cool intelligence is the great moral tragedy. This division is perpetuated by those who deprecate science and foresight in behalf of affection as it is by those who in the name of an idol labeled reason would quench passion. The intellect is always inspired by some impulse,” he writes (258).¹⁰² Whether he read the review or not, we know from “Two Weeks” and could presume from what we know about the Polish study that Yezierska and Dewey had already hashed out this disagreement, without satisfaction, and Fanya and Henry spar over scientific method at length in *All I Could Never Be*. He had written many years earlier that “poetry may deliver truth with a personal and a passionate force which is beyond the reach of theory painting gray on gray” as “[t]he graceless, rigid, dark facts of science, of philosophy, pass through the atmosphere of personality” (“Poetry and Philosophy”). But, he also insisted it was important to “remember that, after all, the advantage of method and standard are with the side of science and philosophy” (“Poetry and Philosophy”). It is not hard to imagine that Dewey had already said some version of this sentence to Yezierska: “Even the most case-

¹⁰² The resonance amplifies when one remembers that *Human Nature and Conduct* emerged from the content of Dewey’s May 1918 lecture series at Stanford, near the moment of peak intensity in Dewey’s feelings about Yezierska.

hardened scientific specialist, the most abstract philosophy, is moved by some passion” (*Human Nature and Conduct* 258). In this rendering, it is Yeziarska, in her very agitation for more heart who is, perhaps heartlessly, failing to see his.

But, again, for all her bitter critique, Yeziarska fundamentally and enthusiastically affirms the value of the work that Dewey has done. What seems ultimately to interest her *most* is how to use that work as a stepping stone forward and to move beyond it. In Yeziarska’s *Bookman* review, she ultimately answers the problem of sterile, impersonal criticism with a call to move from creating more theory to evolving theory through enlivened practice. She praises an argument that both could have been Dewey’s and that functions to support her critique of his abstruse style: “Ivor Brown calls upon us to concentrate more upon improving our thinking than upon increasing our information. At present we are crushed beneath outworn institutions, buried alive beneath mountains of dead phrases” (499). She follows this with a call to action that involves both artists and thinking individuals from any corner:

The world is surfeited with symbols. It needs no more beautiful abstractions and inspiring names; it needs only to make alive and real the experiences for which those names stand.

One man who digs his philosophy out of the depths of his own heart is worth hundreds who take it ready-made from other people’s books. (499)

Yeziarska proclaims that the world does not need more theories; it needs more stories that make theories real and relevant. Undergirding Yeziarska’s writing is a belief that literature provides a critical tool to develop vicarious awareness of “alive and real experiences” like one’s own and different from one’s own. To make a “beautiful abstraction” “alive and real” is to imbue the intellectual with the affective (499). Columnist Frank Crane famously praised Yeziarska for “dipping her pen in her heart” in her writing (qtd. Schoen 36). Yeziarska’s framing here, around

the idea of personal philosophy, suggests that dipping her pen into her heart and into her brain are one and the same. To bring alive and to dig from her own heart a philosophy beyond the ready-made is exactly the project her fiction undertakes. This literary practice rests on a theory that the world needs, and literature can cultivate, more independent thinking.

To provide stories that can make theories real and felt, thereby inspiring thought beyond what was “made and handed out to us in the main,” in Gilman’s words, is Yeziarska’s feminist literary pragmatist practice (*Moving the Mountain* 116). It’s what Dewey believed she could do, and it is not dissimilar in motive from Gilman’s utopian feminist literary pragmatism, but it is very different in inflection. Yeziarska elevates feeling and places more faith in “the masses of people who think with the heart,” especially working class and immigrant readers socialized in different emotional cultures than Anglo-Americans and often denied full access from the educational institutions that train specific methods of academic thinking. Yeziarska’s narrative emphasis on the active role of readers aligns what is arguably the most significant influence of pragmatism upon literary criticism: Louise Rosenblatt’s development of her “transactional theory” of literature, worked out at Barnard and Columbia in the 1930s, which drew direct inspiration from the work of her colleague Dewey, as well as Peirce and James, and paved the way for reader-response theory at large.¹⁰³ And, by leading up to this point with her narrative of the garment factory readers and listeners, Yeziarska demonstrates through literary practice within literary criticism that writing derives its complete meaning and significance from readers’ interaction with it. Dewey’s ideas, Yeziarska argues, will only mean anything if readers are actively moved; passive reception means little. She constructs narrative to fill the feeling gap in a way that inspires not just emotion in readers, but also thought that is powerful for being deeply

¹⁰³Major works include *Literature as Exploration* (1938) and, most famously, *The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (1978).

embodied and affective. As she describes the force in another essay, “my thoughts were not up in my head. They were in my hands and feet, in the thinnest nerves of my hair, in the flesh and blood of my whole body” (“An Immigrant Among the Editors” 56). Imbuing ideas with feeling and personality in writing helps a reader to personalize the insights—to use them to “dig his philosophy out of the depths of his own heart,” generating beliefs that are felt strongly enough to motivate action.

Fire and Gold: Reflections on Robert Browning’s “Rabbi Ben Ezra”

If little scholarship has engaged Dewey’s philosophical influence on Yeziarska, even less has turned the lens the other way around. To an extent, this is fair. He played a much larger role in her intellectual formation than she did in his, and she left an ample record of impact where he did not. Assessing Anzia Yeziarska’s influence on John Dewey and his thought is unavoidably a more speculative matter. However, the evidence is compelling enough to warrant cautious thinking in the realm of “perhaps,” and it doesn’t *only* exist in Dewey’s poetry and Yeziarska’s prose. For example, Mary Dearborn opens *Love in the Promised Land* with a tantalizing anecdote about a moment where it seems Yeziarska’s influence on Dewey’s aesthetic thought may have fallen just short of making it into the historical record through the testimony of a reliable eyewitness. At an event honoring Dewey’s life:

Harold Taylor, the president of Sarah Lawrence, asked, ‘Is it true that Barnes was the chief instrument for getting John interested in and working on aesthetics?’ Herbert W. Schneider, who had begun his Columbia career in 1917 as Dewey’s assistant, replied, ‘Painting, but not poetry. Dewey had a—’ John H. Randall, Jr., cut him off: ‘Dewey was

always interested in poetry.’ Corliss Lamont: ‘And actually wrote some himself.’ There the matter was left. What Schneider alluded to Dewey ‘having’ was not pursued” (2)

As Dearborn implies, there are good reasons to speculate that Schneider was about to make reference to someone that Randall and Lamont felt was better left unmentioned, and that that someone was Yezierska. Even unnamed as “a writer” or “a research assistant at around the time Dewey met Albert Barnes,” it wouldn’t take too much sleuthing for a curious listener to connect the dots to Yezierska and find a deep well of barely disguised reflections on an affair that blots Dewey’s reputation from more angles than one. Schneider was certainly very uniquely positioned to know about Yezierska and Dewey’s connection. As Dewey’s graduate student and teaching assistant in 1918, he would have had a front-row seat to watch, at least, the professional relationship and academic dialogue unfolding in 1918. And regardless of what he did or didn’t know suspect about the personal intimacy between Yezierska and Dewey then, he certainly found out at some point that his colleague Milton Thomas had been fishing papers out of Dewey’s wastebasket, including his intimate poems. Dewey had guarded them closely, but not quite closely enough when he threw them out in 1928 (Boydston xi). In 1939, as a professor in the Columbia philosophy department, Schneider discovered a set of poems that hadn’t made it to the trash but that had gotten tucked in the crevices of Dewey’s old roll-top desk and forgotten when he moved out of the office (Westbrook 222). Schneider told Thomas about the poems, who kept them until 1957; neither man said anything to Dewey.

In considering Schneider’s unfinished comment on the development of Dewey’s interest in painting and in poetry, it is significant to note that Dewey was developing close rapport with Anzia Yezierska and Albert Barnes at the same time, as participants in the same seminar and the

same research study. Together, these two forceful, idiosyncratic thinkers must have made for a powerful pair of interlocutors to spur and complicate aesthetic thinking. Apart from private conversations, there would have been ample opportunity for conversations on art, literature, and aesthetic theory to occur in the open at Columbia, despite Yeziarska's initial reticence in the intimidating context of the graduate seminar. We also know that by the spring of 1918, the Dewey-Yeziarska and Dewey-Barnes dialogues occurring in parallel were complemented by a concurrent, triangular Dewey-Barnes-Yeziarska discourse. Yeziarska was in conversation with Barnes in Philadelphia, and Dewey and Barnes discussed Yeziarska and her writing with one another as well. While reporting back on the Polish study's progress, Barnes let Dewey know about Yeziarska's refusals to fully participate in study work and her choice to post up in her office to write fiction instead. Despite having been reluctant about having Yeziarska on board in the first place, Barnes was ultimately less frustrated by her than Dewey's graduate students were. Though Barnes was a famously nasty anti-Semite (and Yeziarska reports that he treated her badly, he was nonetheless patronizingly amused by and tolerant of her eccentric artistry (Dearborn 122, 132-3). He imagined that Dewey would also be pleased by Yeziarska's alternate literary output and wrote that she was "an artist and, as Santayana says, to criticize her would be of the same degree of irrationality as to criticize the color of a child's eyes" (qtd. Martin 285). Yeziarska had been enough a part of their aesthetic and personal conversations that Barnes felt confident about anticipating Dewey's reaction, and Barnes knew that Dewey had hoped the financial support would allow Yeziarska to write. And although it's true that Dewey was interested in poetry long before he met Yeziarska, the same could be said for painting and

Barnes. In part *because* of Barnes, circumstances would have been ripe for Dewey to be particularly receptive to Yeziarska's fresh aesthetic influence.¹⁰⁴

I add to these circumstances another notable connection through poetry that has gone without commentary in scholarship to my knowledge. We have documentation of at least one specific poem that Yeziarska conspicuously connected with Dewey that we *also* know held longstanding significance in Dewey's aesthetic consciousness: Robert Browning's "Rabbi Ben Ezra" which provides both the title and the epigraph for *All I Could Never Be*.¹⁰⁵ Browning was for many years John Dewey's favorite British poet,¹⁰⁶ and Dewey took up this particular poem in his very first publication on aesthetics in 1891, "Poetry and Philosophy."¹⁰⁷ "Rabbi Ben Ezra" is, in fact, the only Browning poem Dewey cites by name in the text, though he quotes several, including "The Two Poets of Croisic," "Saul," "Pippa Passes," "Fra Lippo Lippi," and "Porphyria's Lover." It engages a variety of themes that emerge as highly significant in Dewey's Yeziarska poems and in Yeziarska's writing, including the issue of age and youth that preoccupied Dewey (especially where Yeziarska was concerned) and the challenge of being undervalued and poorly understood that dogged and motivated Yeziarska (for her entire life, and certainly at the juncture before she had established herself as a writer).

I suggest that reading Yeziarska's and Dewey's interpretations and appropriations of "Rabbi Ben Ezra" in tandem reinscribes existing cases for the literariness inherent within

¹⁰⁴ Dearborn further suggests Dewey was ripe for (or "vulnerable" to) *Barnes'* influence in part because of Yeziarska: "their relationship was cemented by Barnes's certain knowledge of Dewey's relationship with Anzia Yeziarska" (99).

¹⁰⁵ Anton Donoso came very close to making the connection in 1997 in "The Transactional Relationship Between Poetry and Philosophy According to John Dewey," which draws together most of the relevant texts but misses the critical link in *All I Could Never Be*.

¹⁰⁶ Martin notes that Dewey's home library included Browning's full works and that "he owned more volumes of literature than he did of philosophy" at the time of his death (400-401).

¹⁰⁷ It was later reprinted in *Characters and Events* (1929) with title "Matthew Arnold and Robert Browning" (Boydston Poems of JD xix).

Dewey's thought system, in addition to strengthening the case that Yeziarska affected Dewey as an aesthetic theorist, not just as a theorist of democracy "thinking desire" in a romantic encounter with the Other Half ("Beliefs and Realities" 119, 129). We know Dewey and Yeziarska discussed poetry; a variety of factors make it reasonable to guess that they discussed this poem. Regardless, the poem offers a fresh stage upon which to consider the philosophical and aesthetic dialogue between Yeziarska and Dewey—or what we have of it in print.

The poem's subject alone would have offered substantial common ground in interest, offering a figure with aesthetic, philosophical, religious, and social weight. Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra was a great Jewish poet and scholar of the 12th century whose polymathic pursuits spanned the farthest edges of both scientific and theological exploration, ranging from observational study in astronomy to Torah study in the mystic tradition of Kabbalah. One of the central themes of his work is the compatibility of "revelation and reason,"¹⁰⁸ a similar duality to the one that so deeply charged both Dewey's and Yeziarska's thought.¹⁰⁹ Originally from Muslim Spain, he later traveled across Europe and northern Africa, ultimately emerging as one of the most significant Jewish influences on European philosophical and scientific thought. As a view from the past of what might be possible for the future, this biography itself would offer heartening hope for both Dewey and Yeziarska in their dreams for American society. Especially against the contexts of Russia's pogroms and the United States's poor treatment of immigrants in general and hostility toward Jewish immigrants in particular, Ibn Ezra would have represented a more successful vision of cultural exchange between Jews and non-Jews of multiple

¹⁰⁸See the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1998), ed. Edward Craig, 647-654.

¹⁰⁹ Though Yeziarska let go of Jewish faith practice—and she did not teach her daughter Judaism—she became interested in various forms of mysticism later in life (Henriksen).

nationalities.¹¹⁰ Ibn Ezra's life (as Dewey imagined Yeziarska's might) could symbolize what kind of reconciliation might be culturally possible, and his writings engaged what kind of reconciliation might be intellectually possible.¹¹¹

Yeziarska characterizes the project of *All I Could Never Be* as one of intellectual reconciliation that Browning's lines helped bring to fruition. In a letter to William Lyon Phelps that he later published in his autobiography, Yeziarska describes the novel as her fifteen-years-in-the-making substitute for her uncompleted research report in the Polish study, a version of which the novel depicts.¹¹² She tells Phelps that her inability to produce a report or to come up with a suitable alternative had haunted her. "The 'scientific approach' of these sociology professors seemed to me so unreal, so lacking in heart and feeling," she writes, characterizing not just Dewey's writing but also his research methods as lacking in emotional understanding.¹¹³ With surgical precision but without felt understanding, she says, "They had cut up the Poles into little sections, which they pigeon-holed and tabulated...turning out reports that seemed to bring out to me the deep, unutterable gulf between the professors who were analyzing and the Poles who were being analyzed." Rather than holistic comprehension, Yeziarska felt, they had concocted a simulacrum of knowledge that was worse than none at all. "But," she writes, "I was

¹¹⁰ "Ethnicity" is a deeply imperfect catch-all to represent what "Jewish" meant in this historical moment and for Yeziarska and for Dewey. In the early 20th century, the categorial meaning of the label "Jewish" was complex and shifting, at times conflating race, nationality, religion, culture, and history and at times emphasizing one or more of these terms above the others. For in depth discussions, see Steven Belluscio and David Roediger. Dewey most routinely tends to treat "Jewish" fundamentally as a nationality, not a part of, say, "Polish" but a counterpart to it.

¹¹¹ Beyond the prominent influence of Jewish academics like Horace Kallen and Sidney Hook in the development of American pragmatism, some scholars have glossed elements of Jewish theology as intrinsically pragmatist and/or highly compatible with pragmatism, see e.g. Nadav Berman (2022), Claire Elise Katz (2006), Peter Ochs (1986 and 1992), and Rabbi Phillip Sigal (1970), who argued that "pragmatism, the characteristic American trait, is also the essential property of Judaism" (192).

¹¹² As I will discuss in the next chapter, W.E.B. Du Bois explicitly characterized Jessie Fauset's fiction as a form of creative sociology. Yeziarska's substitution of fiction for sociology represents a similar impulse, but couched in an oppositional framing rather than a complementary one. On *All I Could Never Be* and/as ethnography, see Nihad M. Farooq and Lori Jirousek.

¹¹³ On affect as a source of alternate authority in Yeziarska's writing, see JoAnn Pavletich.

too inarticulate to formulate a better way.” What ultimately did unlock an alternative, she says, was “Rabbi Ben Ezra,” which gave her a tool to understand her own experience: “this failure to write the report preyed upon me and tormented. I was prisoner of an experience from which I could not escape. till I saw Browning’s lines,” which became a framing device for the novel as well as its reported inspiration (qtd. Phelps 906-7).

Three lines from the poem become a kind of mutable refrain across the course of the novel; Yeziarska reconstructs the meaning of this intertext each time she invokes it. These shifting uses frame readerly attention and often signal the ways that Yeziarska’s semi-autobiographical protagonist, Fanya Iwanowa, is reconstructing her experience over time, over the long arc of a pragmatist process of personal growth. The poem’s words inflect her thinking, arguably for good and for ill—the double-edged potential that Dewey wrote about in “Two Weeks”—but her changing understanding of her own experience also changes the meaning of those words in a reciprocal interaction. Yeziarska starts with a standalone quotation that frames a reader’s entry into her text as an epigraph:

All I could never be,

All, men ignored in me,

This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped. (1)

Read on their own, these lines at first appear rather straightforwardly defiant, both a self-affirmation and an outward accusation. They declare sacred value not only *in spite* of social marginalization, but *on the basis* of the reasons behind that marginalization, precisely and in their totality. What society fails to recognize is not only *also* of worth to God, but of primary

worth. Any passing awareness of Yeziarska's authorial reputation and stated mission to serve as a spokeswoman advocating for impoverished immigrants to be treated with social and economic dignity reinforces this interpretation. However, Yeziarska's invocations of Browning's language turn their own wheel of evolving creation as the novel unfolds, and the words take on multiple casts and applications.

The first contextualized use frames the deification of a social identity and status that is inaccessible to Yeziarska's protagonist, Fanya Iwanowa. Yeziarska first aligns the speaker of the poem with the immigrant proletariat, of which Fanya is a part. At the beginning of the first chapter, Yeziarska introduces a "conglomerate gathering" at a settlement house eagerly awaiting a talk from Henry Scott, the novel's Dewey figure. It is a multinational crowd of "[m]isfits in the social scheme trying to find where they belonged" by "following every free lecture on music, painting, poetry, philosophy, or sociology with the same indiscriminate ardor with which their elders followed the exhortations of their rabbis" (19). The tone here casts skepticism on the idea that imbibing lectures on art and sociology will help these striving citizens any more than following Old World religious dogma, and she places her protagonist, Fanya Iwanowa, within this naive crowd. Possessed by the same "indiscriminate ardor," Fanya immediately idolizes Henry Scott: "Fanya's fanatic idealism made him a symbol of all she could never be. He was free of their sordid bondage for bread. He was culture, leisure, the freedom and glamour of the 'Higher Life.'" (20). "All I could never be" is specified, in short, to be the white, male, educated, American-born embodiment of economic freedom that confers social belonging. This is its main signification in the first half of the novel.

The poem's language doesn't appear directly again until the second half of the novel, in which Yeziarska fast forwards from Fanya's and Henry's brutal final exchange to a decade later,

when Fanya has attained fame as a writer, “success born of bitterest failure—the failure to hold a great friendship, a great love” (94). She is on the other side of the speaker’s podium now, better off but still unhappy. She’s jaded at the public’s fickle adoration of her like “a puppy,” struggling with writer’s block and sick of “the false life of fictionalizing her experiences—turning herself inside out into words. She bemoans the “unnatural wearing out of body and brain” (again, linked as a unit) involved in “forcing people out of air” (101). In a mirror image to Dewey’s “Damn fiction.” Fanya exclaims, “Damn this introspection!” (102). Turning inward is as frustrating and seemingly fruitless as looking outward to understand oneself, Fanya finds, and the process of producing fiction is as fickle as trying to disentangle oneself from it.

However, when Fanya tries to go back to a factory job instead, she is turned away as now another kind of misfit: she’s too old, and she’s threatening on more than one count. As a famous writer, she is at best not interested in work but in “atmosphere” and at worst, it goes unstated, not in fact a “harmless author” but someone with the capacity to expose any problems within the so-called “happy family” on the production floor (106-107). More openly, the interviewer remarks that as a “firebrand” Fanya might threaten the “established discipline of the factory”—that is, the stability and docility of the workforce. (She’s not wrong: Fanya does try to start a unionization effort in the restaurant where she ends up.) In short, the interviewer says, “Craft’s is not the right place for you...There is a right place for you, as there is a right place for all of us,” and as the door is closed on her, Fanya asks herself “What’s my right place?” (109-10). The question stands in the text as its own one-line paragraph, an isolated fragment, just as Fanya stands alone and unconnected. The triply repeated “right place” underscores Fanya’s seeming lack of one, much as when Yeziarska asks, in the tenement, “where is America?” while technically surrounded by it (“America and I” 159).

In this moment of isolation, Browning's lines and Henry come to Fanya's mind, but with new meaning in a new context. Fanya experiences something in between a vision and a thought, in Yeziarska's strangely abstract image of "Henry's quick understanding [that] flashed like lightning against the merciless judgment of the efficiency expert." Fanya draws in from her human environment ("the clamor of the street, the crowds passing by") and the breath of the natural environment ("the air, the sky") a form of self-confidence that Henry allowed her to access ("the conquering force that he unbound...."). After this long ellipsis, the lines of the epigraph are repeated, very slightly modified:¹¹⁴

All I could never be,
All, men ignored in me,
That I was worth to God.... (110)

Rather than the object of unattainability, Henry as deity has become a source of encouragement. If the circumstantial application didn't already make it clear that this application positions Henry Scott as God, just as Fanya did in the very beginning of the novel, Yeziarska replaces "with whose wheel the pitcher shaped" with another long ellipsis. Furthermore, Henry and Fanya's musical theme recurs immediately following. After walking home, sitting in her studio, she listens as "[t]he faint notes of a piano, 'Pelléas and Mélisande,' drifted in from somewhere nearby" (110).¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴Yeziarska substitutes "That" for "This" in what may be intentional or perhaps an error of misquotation.

¹¹⁵ Though Yeziarska's earlier, better studied work does not as often draw in literary references, *All I Could Never Be* is generously intertextual and conspicuously erudite. "Pelléas and Mélisande" is an opera about a pair of lovers, one older and one younger, that Fanya and Henry heard together earlier in the book. Meredith Goldsmith and Alan Ginsberg both discuss Yeziarska's extensive "knowledge of the canons of Western literature, Yiddish literature, and high and popular culture [as] illustrated by voluminous references in her writing" (Ginsberg 240).

Yezierska finally gives the theme of the Browning refrain not to Fanya but to Henry, in a moment of public exaltation that he tempers with humility. From a distance, Fanya watches, through opera glasses, as Scott is honored at the Plaza Hotel with a portrait painted by Kahlil Gibran. The remarks that precede its unveiling praise him in doubly remarkable terms: “A saint in his personal life—an Anglo-Saxon to the core in his championship of the underdog” (173). For a man who desired mutual assimilation in an always-already hybridized America, to be labeled “Anglo-Saxon to the core” is not, in fact, an accolade but a reflection of a failure to integrate the Other into the depths of his heart and being. Add knowledge of his extramarital romance, and the saintly praise is simply false. Henry remarks quietly, “The veil ought to be over me instead of over the portrait.” Like a funeral speech, he says, “all the little foibles and follies that made me human to the few intimates who knew me, [sic] were discreetly ignored.” He then states the premise of Yezierska’s “Rabbi Ben Ezra” excerpt: “The real man—who knows the real man except those who can see him stripped of his failures and successes?” (174). In an ironic turn, it is Fanya who takes the poetic standpoint of God, for she knows Henry intimately enough and has removed him from her pedestal to be able to see him personally and holistically, in Dewey’s words, “as I am, / Partly true and partly sham” (“Two Weeks” lines 105-106).

Further complicating the epigraph is consideration of the lines that immediately precede Yezierska’s selection, which specify their own antecedent for Yezierska’s mutable “all I could never be”:

Thoughts hardly to be packed

Into a narrow act,

Fancies that broke through and escaped; (lines 121-3)

What these lines describe is an overabundance of unruly mental activity, too many “thoughts” for a single life to contain and “fancies” that escape efforts at containment. This struggle with narrow form and with “too muchness” is exactly what challenged Yeziarska most throughout her life and work. The danger of “fancies that broke through and escaped” is something Dewey wrestles with in his Anzia poems, questioning the origin and validity of his fantasies about Yeziarska and struggling with what to do with them. And hashing out the relationship between “thoughts” and “fancies” is exactly the intellectual-aesthetic struggle on which Yeziarska and Dewey find the closest alignment and the fiercest disagreement.

They agree at a fundamental level that the “fancy” of literature (Gilman’s term as well for poetry, fiction, and drama) offers a powerful tool for independent thought that can help highlight what is valuable and unearth what is true. But they imagine art’s role in truth-seeking differently. In *All I Could Never Be*, Yeziarska turns to art as a place to go *after* thought, either to make already formulated ideas alive or to offer something at the limit where rationality fails, just as she had suggested in her “Prophets of Democracy” review. As a source of insight rather than expression, however, Dewey insists that art is most useful as a “clue” to precede and guide rational thought. It’s a position he frames through Browning’s poetry.

In “Rabbi Ben Ezra,” Browning uses the metaphor of gold refined by fire: “Leave the fire ashes, what survives is gold: / And I shall weigh the same.” (lines 86-87).¹¹⁶ The image of truth as gold, refined from the raw material of life through the fire of art, is an important one to Browning. He returns to it in several poems, and a central metaphor of Browning’s approximately 21,000 line verse novel *The Ring and the Book* is the image of truth as a forged

¹¹⁶ This metaphor presumably draws from the Biblical metaphor of the refiner’s fire (Malachi 3:2-3), with which Dewey would surely have been familiar through his devout mother Lucina if not otherwise.

golden ring. Browning defends the “fancy” of fiction as a source of truth. He specifically asks "Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?" and he proposes that because in the world already "lay gold, so in this book [of poetry] lay absolutely truth, fanciless fact" (I, 141-145). In “Poetry and Philosophy,” Dewey introduces an aesthetic belief that he holds to throughout his career and that he draws, initially, out of this language of Browning’s. He says that “poetry flashes home to us some of the gold which is at the very heart and core of our every-day existence.” The one Dewey quotes is “Two Poets of Croisic”:

But truth, truth, that's the gold! and all the good

I find in fancy is, it serves to set

Gold's inmost glint free, (stanza 152)

Julian Levinson has commented on the resonance Yeziarska’s favored language of lively fire shares with the Romantic poetry and the Victorian aesthetic theory in which Dewey was immersed. “As if in accord with Walter Pater’s formula for the aesthetic life (i.e., to ‘burn always with this hard, gem-like flame’),” Levinson writes, “Yeziarska describes Hanneh Breineh [in *Hungry Hearts*] as a figure who ‘burned through the depths of every experience... How every tiny spark of pleasure blazed into joy!’” (7). Critics often emphasize how pitched language such as this is a joint product Yeziarska’s own emotional disposition and of her careful effort to hone her writing of Jewish speech through close listening to her home community (especially at her sister’s house). But Levinson also observes that “Jewish speech is represented through a quintessentially Romantic image (Wordsworth: ‘My heart leaps up. . . .’” (8). Yeziarska’s linguistic representation draws from English literature as well as American life. In light of the

connection Yeziarska draws between Dewey and Browning, I would like to suggest further that Yeziarska's rendering of Yiddish dialect and immigrant affect may owe partial influence to her academic training and aesthetic discourse with Dewey.¹¹⁷

Levinson reads Yeziarska "as Romantic, subversive, and 'visionary' rather than 'ethnic,' documentary, and realist—terms that are frequently associated with her" (10). Romantic, subversive and visionary are all words that equally well describe Dewey's first radical call for the union of poetry and philosophy, which concludes thus:

The same movement of the spirit, bringing man and man, man and nature, into wider and closer unity, which has found expression by anticipation in poetry, must find expression by retrospection in philosophy. Thus will be hastened the day in which our sons and daughters shall prophesy, our young men shall see visions, and our old men dream dreams. ("Poetry and Philosophy")

Though Dewey largely tempered such rhapsodic language in his later publications, his poetry offers flashes of this visionary Romantic language, and Yeziarska implies she heard it when they spoke. In *All I Could Never Be*, Henry tells Fanya: "your writing is your real life...Everything changes and passes away. But art endures; because art is the marriage of the personal to the eternal" (53). She reacts less to the content of this statement than to the passion with which Dewey expresses this transcendental faith: "What Jew or Slav could feel as intensely as an

¹¹⁷ See Joshua L. Miller's *Accented America: The Cultural Politics of Multilingual Modernism* (2011) for extended discussion of how "[l]inguistic innovation in service of expanding (or detonating) what was designated as 'American speech' was a shared project" across the often-separated genres of "vanguardist experimentalism, ethnic (anti-) assimilation stories, and documentarist realism" in early 20th century American literature (25). On Yeziarska's "vernacular modernism," see Brooks E. Hefner.

Anglo-Saxon when he sheds his rigid puritan pose?” she asks, rhetorically (53). It is a glint of gold Yeziarska saw in Dewey’s poems to her, despite all of his contradictions and her own that she kept burning a literary fire to understand.

Intensity of feeling sits at the heart of Dewey’s valuation of art. In 1932, Yeziarska summarizes Dewey’s aesthetics as regarding “art [to be] the climax of human experience,” as she has Henry Scott say (*All I Could Never Be* 35). In 1934, Dewey writes in *Art as Experience*, “Art celebrates with peculiar intensity the moments in which the past reënforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what now is” (17). But long before Dewey fully develops this theory of sublimity within experience, he introduces that theme for the very first time in 1891 through the words of “Rabbi Ben Ezra.” He calls the poem a statement that nature and experience are but “the potter’s wheel that moulds the clay to ‘heaven’s consummate cup” and that “the meaning of life, the ‘uses of the cup” are—and here he offers Browning’s imagery, with no paraphrase or interpretation—“The festal board, lamp’s flash, and trumpet’s peal, / The new wine’s foaming flow, / The master’s lips aglow!” If one can feel this quickened, elevated experience, feel flash and peal and foaming flow, Dewey suggests, “he will understand why the song of Browning is one of joy and victory.” And that joy comes “in the contacts of life, not isolation, but companionship, service, love,—the first and the last word.” “Even a casual acquaintance with Browning,” Dewey summarizes, “suffices to show that love, as he conceives it, is no accident and no mere occurrence of the life-journey, but at once its path and its goal.” “Rabbi Ben Ezra” was, in Dewey’s writing, a poem of love writ large, and a starting point for his aesthetic theory to follow (“Poetry and Philosophy”).

For both Yeziarska and Dewey, the epistemological function of literary art is to depict life in its fullness, which is often messy and muddled and contradictory. Literature, unlike

philosophy as such, can allow that muddle to sit, rather than being compelled to shape it into clear—perhaps false—order. Though passionate for an education that allows clarity of thought through its expression, Yeziarska argues both for the importance of warm—even hot—feeling and for the arguable impossibility of reason to triumph, even if we desired it to. But to fully synthesize reason and feeling, to imagine that they can be fully understood and drawn fully into harmony, would be to avoid the messy fullness of experience, to neglect what she described as “the depths where things get complicated and unutterable” (*All I Could Never Be* 64).

Conclusion, Without Resolution

Yeziarska’s understudied intellectual interaction with John Dewey, sitting just beneath the familiar surface of her personal engagement, offers a clear example of how literary women participated in pragmatism’s development, both as obscured interlocutors at the heart of its traditional canon and as independent thinkers beyond it, writing to public audiences. I place myself in the camp of scholars who read Yeziarska’s work as affirmatively pragmatist. Her critiques of Dewey derive their ferocity from a passionate fundamental alignment with his thought system and desire to see it flourish, *not* a rejection of it. Many existing readings of Yeziarska’s critiques of Dewey and affiliated progressive institutions underemphasize the self-critiques that accompany her outward facing commentary or read a criticism of an implementation as a criticism of a grounding concept. But Yeziarska embraces Dewey’s ideas openly and enthusiastically in a variety of texts, pairing even her sharpest attacks with her highest praise. As I have shown, she frequently deploys and adapts his language—and he speaks in some of her terms as well. She also reimagines some of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s.

“As a young girl hungry for love sees always before her eyes the picture of lover’s arms around her, so I saw always in my heart the vision of Utopian America,” Anzia Yeziarska wrote in an autobiographical essay for *Scribner*’s readers in February 1922 (161). One of her most famous essays, “America and I” offers a distinctively ethnic version of the same utopian rhetoric that Gilman found so intellectually potent, as had Edward Bellamy and the score of other literary imitators and socialist reformers he inspired, including Dewey. However, Yeziarska’s version of “Utopian America” is a distinctively emotional one: “From the other end of the earth where I came,” she describes, “America was a land of living hope, woven of dreams, aflame with longing and desire” (157). Yeziarska maps her emotional model onto the scale of the nation, insisting on the importance of individuality and personalization.

Writing as a Jewish immigrant in explicit outreach to “American-born” magazine readers, she defines an ideal America as, above all, both the object and the embodiment of passionate feeling: of yearning, of imagining, of aspiring, of striving—of *wanting*. This idealization is a far cry from Gilman’s imagined oasis of level-headed rationalism. At the level of content, this rhetorical characterization is so familiar that it’s barely remarkable. Wanting more, reaching forward with hope—this version of ambition has long sat at the heart of ideas about the American dream that rest, individually, upon the right of the “pursuit of happiness” and, collectively, on the vision of the United States as an unfinished republic, perpetually moving toward a fuller embodiment of democratic ideals. It is especially potent in immigrant stories, though not exclusive to them. At another level, however, Yeziarska’s twist on this familiar rhetoric was striking to her contemporaries and remains unusual: she doesn’t abstract American desire into the familiar language of Jeffersonian idealism. Instead, Yeziarska romanticizes civic desire in a vividly literal sense, in the immediate personal and physical terms of gnawing hunger

for a passionate embrace. “To be a man,” Dewey posits, “is to be thinking desire;” to be an American, Yeziarska suggests, is to be feeling it (“Beliefs and Realities” 129).

This insistently personal, visceral romanticism is a hallmark of the writing that made Anzia Yeziarska a national literary celebrity in the 1920s. In invoking the picture-within-a-picture of “a young girl hungry for love,” envisioning “the picture of lover’s arms around her,” Yeziarska asks readers to personify the immigrant’s desire to be embraced by America to feel its intensity and reality (“America and I” 161). A reader’s Proustian memory of a past crush of her own might flash to mind, with its own idiosyncratic intensities. Or perhaps a recent incarnation of the romantic archetype might appear top of mind—perhaps the melodramatic intensity of a movie actress’s recent performance, maybe the image of Agnes Ayres opposite Rudolph Valentino in the mega-hit *The Sheik* a couple of months prior. Yeziarska knew the power of character as symbolic image. She was in Hollywood at the time, where she had been working with Samuel Goldwyn on the film adaptation of her first short story collection, “Hungry Hearts,” which was forthcoming in November with its own romantic plotlines (Dearborn 142-3). For her own part, when Yeziarska herself conjured a literal and symbolic “picture of her lover’s arms around her” in 1922, it seems likely she would have had John Dewey in mind (“America and I” 161).

His thinking did not always enhance hers: as Yeziarska maps her emotional model onto the scale of the nation, she adapts questionable rhetorical and conceptual framing devices from Dewey. When she positions herself as a narrator in “America and I” by using Dewey’s framing from “Generations” (“As one of the dumb, voiceless ones I speak, she begins, “one of the millions of immigrants beating, beating out their hearts at your gates for a breath of understanding”), she also personalizes one of Dewey’s most troubling extended metaphors from

“Nationalizing Education,” expounded again in “Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us”—a symbolic reading of a pilgrim-to-pioneer manifest destiny pipeline that completely ignores Native Americans (157).¹¹⁸ Dewey argues that what makes America historically distinct was that men battled wilderness, not each other: “we have been occupied during the greater part of our history in subduing nature, not one another or other peoples,” he claims (“Nationalizing Education” 426). With the frontier era closed, Dewey says, “we now have to re-create by deliberate and determined endeavor the kind of democracy which in its origin one hundred and fifty years ago was largely the product of a fortunate combination of men and circumstances” (“Creative Democracy” 341).¹¹⁹ Yezierska writes herself into this false narrative, constructing an analogy between herself and “Pilgrim Fathers” who in “a rocky desert country, surrounded by Indian savages on all sides...did not ask the Indians for sympathy, for understanding. They made no demands on anybody, but on their own indomitable spirit of persistence.” She, a modern-day pilgrim from Europe to America, struggled “on the lonely untrodden path through which all seekers of the new world must pass” (“America and I” 162).

“Nationalizing Education” also offers Dewey’s most famous statement on cultural pluralism. He declared the United States to be a “symphony” of nations in which all Americans are always-already “hyphenated” in a process of mutual assimilation, in which different ethnic groups adopt the best from each other in a process of mutual assimilation to create harmony and

¹¹⁸ Originally a 1916 address to National Education Association members, the published text of “Nationalizing Education” was a repeated touchstone for Dewey’s public writing in her fiction: she quotes it verbatim and at length in her short story “To the Stars” (96).

¹¹⁹ For a comprehensive examination of Dewey’s persistent rhetorical use of the Indian and the frontier as symbols and foils, and his neglect of Indigenous people and issues, see Matthew Villeneuve’s *Instrumental Indians: John Dewey and the Problem of the Frontier for Democracy in Indigenous Education, 1884-1959* (2021).

collective progress (426).¹²⁰ “Neither Englandism nor New-Englandism, neither Puritan nor Cavalier any more than Teuton or Slav, can do anything but furnish one note in a vast symphony,” Dewey writes, saying that society should “extract...from each people its special good, so that it shall surrender into a common fund of wisdom and experience what it especially has to contribute.” He continues that “the genuine American...is not American plus Pole or German. But the American is himself Pole-German-English-French-Spanish-Italian-Greek-Irish-Scandinavian-Bohemian-Jew-and so on. The point is to see to it that the hyphen connects instead of separates” (426). Yezierska was at an abstract level highly enthusiastic about this, foregrounding what Anglo-Americans and immigrants like her have to learn from the other’s emotional style. But, she also questioned whether the weight of “generations” that creates the “surplus...called ourselves” made Dewey’s imagined symphony unplayable (“Two Weeks” lines 76-77).¹²¹ In her writing, she remains dogged by the idea that the kind of change she wants, and that Dewey wants, isn’t actually possible—that the problem of cultural difference and cultural distance is simply too big to resolve.

Significantly, Yezierska’s utopian vision in “America and I” is less a complement than an

¹²⁰ Dewey builds the “symphony” metaphor from Horace Kallen’s orchestra metaphor in “Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot” (1915): “every type of instrument has its specific timbre and tonality, founded in its substance and form; as every type has its appropriate theme and melody in the whole symphony, so in society each ethnic group is the natural instrument, its spirit and culture are its theme and melody, and the harmony and dissonances and discords of them all make the symphony of civilization” (220). Dewey wrote to Kallen about the essay that he liked the orchestra idea, but only “upon [the] condition we really get a symphony and not a lot of different instruments playing simultaneously. I never did care for the melting pot metaphor, but genuine assimilation *to one another*—not to Anglosaxondom—seems to be essential to an America. That each cultural section should maintain is distinctive literary and artistic traditions seems to me most desirable, but in order that it might have more to contribute to others...That we should recognize the segregation that undoubtedly exists is requisite, but in order that it may not be fastened upon us” (qtd. Westbrook 2015 213-4). For further discussion, see José-Antonio Orosco’s *Toppling the Melting Pot: Immigration and Multiculturalism in American Pragmatism* (2016).

¹²¹ She skewed heavily toward essentialist views of both race and gender, though without ever specifying how much of the weight of generational heritage might be historical versus biological. Though she avoided many of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s social Darwinist pitfalls with regard to white supremacy, she seems to have been more attached to less flexible ideas about gender. Yezierska was enthusiastic about the work of Ellen Key, whom Gilman routinely critiqued for too narrow a view of female nature despite other radical feminist views (Ginsberg 82).

obverse to Gilman's; rather than an optimistic portrait of a future, it is a memory whose promise did not come to pass. Yezierska introduces the idea of utopia at the exact moment she says it was punctured for her: "But now I felt the America of my dreams never was and never could be. Reality had hit me on the head as with a club. I felt that the America that I sought was nothing but a shadow—an echo—a chimera of lunatics and crazy immigrants" ("America and I" 161). Her hopeful feeling is punctured in terms of irrationality at its most extreme. Often, Yezierska's relationship with Dewey is read also as an allegory of punctured hope that suggests the limitations of their attempt to reconcile incompatible differences.

The most thoughtful existing reading of what the Yezierska affair might have to say about Dewey's philosophy has been offered by historian Robert Westbrook in *Democratic Hope*, and it centers on the issue of that which is irresolvable. Beyond biographical illumination itself, he says that better knowledge of Dewey's private life "would also put the temperamental disposition to reconciliation that so defined his particular philosophical wisdom into some unattended contexts and enhance our sense of its virtues and shortcomings" (102). Westbrook focuses particularly on the shortcomings, attending primarily to intellectual limitation rather than personal weakness. "Rather than seeing this romance as revealing a failure by Dewey to live up to the virtues of his philosophy," he argues, "it can be better seen as a revelation of one of the signal weaknesses of his philosophy" (111). Westbrook names that weakness using Dewey's own lament: "Dewey remained infected with what he characterized to William James as the 'Hegelian bacillus of reconciliation.'" (101).¹²²

¹²² Other scholars have widely engaged that same tendency under the more generous label of a "quest for unity," a coinage from Steven Rockefeller that draws from the vocabulary of Dewey's public rather than private writing (*John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism*). In *All I Could Never Be*, Yezierska gives Henry Scott this lament: "At least you have unity. I am always fighting myself" and "perhaps your instinct may be surer than all my reasoning" (50).

The difficulties of the Yeziarska situation and its sudden collapse show that Dewey did not find actionable answers wholly through philosophizing. The situation remained messy, without a reconciliation. Westbrook argues that Dewey's poems offer a "perplexing portrait of a thinker who knew full well in his own experience the messiness of the moral life as most of us live it yet who-even in the face of this experience-was unable to make this messiness...essential to his philosophy" (113). Considered at length:

Dewey's own moral philosophy offered little guidance to tragic decisions. For it is precisely the sort of moral conflict that his love affair presented choices between incompatible and incommensurable values that Dewey's 'quest for unity' obscured. Dewey's ethics, at its worst, suggested that one could always find a synthetic resolution that harmonized competing values. William James...observed that more often than not we must settle for something less [and that] 'some part of the ideal must be butchered.' (112)

Because others have called out this weakness of Dewey's—that he doesn't offer as much as other thinkers on how to settle or to butcher when resolution is out of reach¹²³—it is worth asking, what does adding the Yeziarska connection, specifically, offer to this line of critique? Dewey faced many other messy situations in his long life: what does *this one* have to say?¹²⁴ I believe that Yeziarska's own responses offer part of an answer, though her perspective is beyond

¹²³ I would argue that feminist pragmatist practitioners in the Deweyan tradition are largely better at this, given the grounding in particularities of feminism as a values guidepost to point decisions in a particular way, even if the values are pluralistic and the way is hazy. Feminism suggests what ideals might be prioritized when one or more must be butchered.

¹²⁴ Westbrook doesn't hesitate to call Dewey's responses to some of these other situations "cowardly, contemptible, and pathetic" (110).

the scope of Westbrook's work.¹²⁵ Questions of temperament and irresolvable situations preoccupy Yeziarska, who wrestles with her own "bacillus of reconciliation" in her slow, persistent effort to make meaning out of her experience with Dewey definitive enough to solve societal puzzles that she saw her personal struggles to emblemize. She strove obsessively to understand what she framed as the "Anglo-Saxon coldness...that all the suns of the sky can't melt," her own hot nature as an "Oriental mystery," "a Jewess, a flame" and, most critically, how both she and the diverse body of Americans at large might approach creating a seemingly unattainable temperate blend through a Deweyan process of mutual assimilation (*Salome of the Tenements* 157, 108, 37).¹²⁶ To the extent she reaches conclusion, it is in accepting lack of resolution itself.

When theory or science bumps up against its limit, Yeziarska's answer is to accept the limits of the impersonal and the generalized. Instead, turning toward feeling and while thinking in terms of the particular and the specific—even when feeling is blisteringly hot or cold, and even when the particular has little clearer answer than the general. In ideal circumstances, the feeling head is propelled jointly by "warm" emotional and "cool" rational forces. The trouble lies when these forces pull against one another: when feeling and thought suggest different courses of action ("I want" vs. "I should"), or when one or both forces become amplified (when warm gets hot and cool chills to icy). "The head and the heart working in harmony" is an ideal, but often one that must be butchered (*All I Could Never Be* 75). "Harmony"—Dewey's favored metaphor

¹²⁵ Kathleen Weiler has critiqued this choice of scope: "Which women are visible at any time depends on the lens of interpretation cast upon them," she observes after describing Yeziarska's supporting role in Westbrook's discussion: "In Westbrook's reading, Yeziarska is of no concern; neither is the asymmetrical power of Dewey and Yeziarska nor the way their lives are shaped by gender. Gender is simply not analysed" (175, 169).

¹²⁶ On Yeziarska's use of orientalism, see Ljiljana Coklin's "Between the Orient and the Ghetto: A Modern Immigrant Woman in Anzia Yeziarska's *Salome of the Tenements*" (2006). On her ongoing ambivalence about race, see Blanche Gelfant's "The Possessive Self in Mary Antin and Anzia Yeziarska: Gender, Jewishness, and the Assumptions of Americanization" (1998).

for cultural pluralism through multidirectional assimilation—is easier said than sung. The feeling head will inevitably be plagued by self-contradiction. If even the remarkable Dewey’s trained tendency to be “cool in the head” overtook *him*, what hope for those of us with less “magic” to our personalities? If pragmatism can’t take a one size fits all approach, then its ideals must be custom tailored to the temperament, history, and capacity of any given individual, or else they will fail. It is to the strength of the common individual that Yeziarska always turns. This remains as true in her latest, most tempered work as it does in her earliest and most fiery.

Two years before Patricia Averbach met her, Anzia Yeziarska took part in a study on aging at Columbia. *Time* magazine wrote a profile centered on Yeziarska’s involvement, and Yeziarska herself published an essay based on the experience titled “A Thousand Pages of Research.” As much as she criticized the business of higher education and sociological research, it seems Yeziarska never lost faith in the value of universities’ work, or at least in its potential. Over the course of months, a group of women met for hours of recorded conversations about their experiences and perspectives on aging—their needs and problems and hopes and ideas.

In the family of participatory action research, this methodology represented a significant step forward in community engagement from what Yeziarska experienced from sociology in the nineteen-teens and twenties. However, Yeziarska describes how this study still fell short on delivering anything back to the group with immediate relevance. On the last day of discussion, she recounts, the professor leading the study glows that the recording transcripts total a thousand pages of research that will help understanding and future progress. The participants, meanwhile, are stunned that this is how the project ends for them—abruptly and fruitlessly. They shuffle off, discouraged and frustrated. It is worth reproducing the essay’s final vignette in full, in which Yeziarska records her own reproduction of a different kind of roundtable discussion:

Unwilling, or afraid, to disperse, we made our way as a group to the school cafeteria. We sat around a table, mute as mourners, sipping tea. ‘We talked our heads off—for what!’ asked Kathleen Monahan.

‘For a thousand pages of research,’ I replied.

‘He had a job to do and he did it,’ said Alice, calmly.

‘So our seminar was only a job to him?’

‘We were only statistics to him,’ said Charlotte Hicks. ‘Dots on a graph.’ Methodically she began tearing the pages from her notebook, watching them flutter to the ground.

‘His heart,’ said Minerva Neilson, ‘is wired to a tape recorder.’

Kathleen Monahan stood up and took hold of her shopping bag. ‘What dopes we were. A whole year wasted, only to find out the professor don’t know nothing.’

‘What did you want him to do?’ Alice asked. ‘Be God? Make us young again?’

‘Where do we go from here?’ I asked. (63)

Yeziarska sounds many familiar notes here. The professor is cast as a false idol. The complaint that “We were only statistics to him” and not people is a longstanding refrain, as is the articulation of feeling disillusionment and betrayal at being part of “only a job,” not something with personal stakes or clear outcomes. Those powerless are rendered “mute.” The image of a heart wired to a tape recorder modernizes Yeziarska’s characterization of the heartless researcher

who is disconnected from the human beings with whom he is interacting. It places an inhuman barrier between the researcher and the women's speech; what endures of their time is not something personal or live, but first the reproduction of the tape, then of the even further depersonalized transcript (which ironically highlights the limitations of Yeziarska's own print-based mission). The metaphor mechanizes the heart and implies, perhaps, that professors have become welded even more tightly into a technical approach that has further solidified over the decades. The gesture of tearing pages from the notebook is undoubtedly a melodramatic performance of frustration at being a mere subject for extraction without reciprocation.

But there are key differences here from Yeziarska's earlier versions of the crestfallen or betrayed female subject.¹²⁷ No one is crying or sighing "oi weh" or bursting into any other kind of metaphorical flames. The paper protest is just as muted as it is melodramatic. It's quiet, even "methodical." The pages do not fly in the air; they "flutter" gently to settle on the ground. There is a countervailing voice against the most indignant one, asking, quite reasonably, "What did you want him to do?" In other words: Do you think anything he *could* have done would have satisfied you? And is there *any* resolution possible in confronting the core existential condition of growing old? The follow-up fragment question—"Be God?"—taps into the divine language that Dewey and Yeziarska had long taken as a touchstone decades prior in "Rabbi Ben Ezra," a poem fundamentally framed around appraising youth and self-worth from the wise perspective of age. Its core conclusion is that the value of one's soul will speak for itself and can stand on its own, no matter whether men see it or not. It is, perhaps, okay if these women are "mute" (63).

Yeziarska herself speaks only in neutral terms in this scene, offering a speech act of closing, followed by a speech act of opening. When another woman exclaims "We talked our

¹²⁷ I mean this in multiple senses of this beautiful contranym—subject as scientific object, subject as agent, subject as literary protagonist.

heads off—for what!” she isn’t, noting the punctuation, asking a question so much as airing a grievance and inviting the other women to join her in releasing their own emotions. Yeziarska doesn’t accept the proffered emotional bid, instead responding with the briefest of factual answers: “For a thousand pages of research” (63). There’s a whiff here of Shakespeare that she invokes in *All I Could Never Be*: Hamlet’s muttering of “words, words, words and Macbeth’s “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow” soliloquy bemoaning of the “tale...signifying nothing,” (*Hamlet* 2.2.210, *All I Could Never Be* 87, *Macbeth* 5.5.17-28).¹²⁸ However, the sentiment is not articulated in the novel’s terms of exclamation, nor with the existential bitterness of the Shakespearean original. It is not a derogation or an expression of dismay. Nor is it an approval or a defense, like the one Fanya gives of the Polish study at one point in *All I Could Never Be*. It is simply an empirical restatement of what the researcher reported, carrying an undertone of a disappointment met with forbearance—taken philosophically, that is, in the idiomatic sense that Yeziarska employs in the first scene of *All I Could Never Be*. It is definitive. But it is not the end of the story. Emphasizing the act of personal questioning by placing “I asked” as the concluding phrase, Yeziarska gives herself the last word with the question: “Where do we go from here?” (“A Thousand Pages” 63).

Pragmatism, as a method and value system to guide inquiry, is fundamentally a tool to answer “where do we go from here?” as best possible, wherever “here” might happen to be. I consider Anzia Yeziarska’s wrestling with conflicted feelings and irresolvable problems to be a core element of her intellectual project and philosophical stance—not an indecisiveness that compromises the coherence of her work, frustrating and puzzling though it may be. Yeziarska’s combination of vehemence and ambivalence is distinctive; it is, I would argue, one of the most

¹²⁸ Fanya says to Henry, “You know less about the Poles than when you started... Well what have we got? Words—words—words. We have ben awfully busy—with—with nothing” (*All I Could Never Be* 87).

defining features of her writing in both style and substance. This combination has stymied critics as much as it stymied Yeziarska herself in her own lifetime; she struggled with deep frustration at the same self-contradiction that Walt Whitman embraced with joy in *Leaves of Grass*. “Who am I? What am I?...Where is America? Is there an America?” are unanswerable questions that require ongoing asking (“America and I” 159). In more hopeful moments, as at the end of “America and I,” the best consolation she finds is in reconceptualizing America as “a big idea—a deathless hope—a world still in the making...it was the glory of America that it was not yet finished” (50). The pains of contradiction should not be ignored and cannot be avoided, but reflective accounting of experience (what Dewey often called “intelligence”) can help heal some and mitigate others, even as it generates its own strain. Yeziarska’s ongoing dramatization of painful uncertainty is an ongoing practice of “reflective thought” as Dewey defined it in *How We Think* (1910/1933):

Reflective thinking is always more or less troublesome...it involves willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance. Reflective thinking, in short, means judgment suspended during further inquiry; and suspense is likely to be somewhat painful . . . the most important fact in the training of good mental habits consists in acquiring the attitude of suspended conclusion . . . To maintain the state of doubt and to carry on systematic and protracted inquiry— these are the essentials of thinking. (qtd. C. Fischer *Gendered Readings of Change* 167)

This ongoing questioning, this ongoing pursuit, this ongoing doubt, is what Yeziarska’s literary philosophizing leaves us with. At its best, it brings “the thrill of wrestling with dreams

forever beyond us” (Yeziarska qtd. Phelps 907). At its worst, it brings precarity and confusion to be endured. Regardless, all we can do is grow where we are. This, too, is the core tenet of Deweyan pragmatism: that there is no final truth, only the understanding we continually develop together, as individuals. Yeziarska is willing—not peacefully, but persistently and relentlessly—to accept that which cannot be fully expressed, documented, and reconciled, even when it hurts to keep moving forward through unfinishable work. All we can do is to think and feel our way through it, together, pulling our philosophies out of our own hearts along the way. Yeziarska leaves us not with answers to the flaws of Deweyan pragmatism or the problems of American democracy, but with a reminder that questioning is essential to growth, and that constant growth may require constant growing pains.

PART TWO

The Art of Truth: A Case Study in Black Feminist Literary Pragmatism

Chapter Three: Jessie Fauset's Literary Empiricism

"We must bridge this gap of poetry from science"
-John Dewey, "Poetry and Philosophy" (1891)

"Now this would be poetry if it were only truthful."
-Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice From the South* (1892)

Introduction

When Jessie Redmon Fauset published her debut novel in 1924, *There is Confusion* caused a stir. At 42 years old, Fauset was already one of the most visible and influential figures of the Black American literary and intellectual world, and even if she hadn't been, her race and gender alone made the book's arrival from a prestigious white-led press a landmark event. The book was such a rarity in the marketplace that some critics touted it (incorrectly) as the first novel ever published by an African American woman.¹²⁹ Jean Toomer's masterful *Cane* had just flopped badly for Fauset's publishers, Boni and Liveright, selling fewer than 500 copies in its

¹²⁹ That distinction belongs to Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859). Critics also notably overlooked at least a baker's dozen other novels published between 1868 and 1903 by Frances E.W. Harper, Pauline Hopkins, Amelia Johnson, and Emma Dunham Kelley. For these recovered texts and others, see *The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers* or the Schomburg Center's *African American Women Writers of the 19th Century* digital guide. Jaime Harker argues that Harper and Hopkins "unmistakably influenced" Fauset (60).

first printing, but the bold young firm was optimistic about the commercial prospects for Fauset's book.¹³⁰ They promoted it to Black and white American readers to a degree then "unprecedented" for a novelist of color (Sylvander 70). Though some white critics dismissed it, and most other Black writing, as good "propaganda" but "mediocre" literature, many positive reviews took careful pains to emphasize that the book should not be dismissed—or valued—merely as "race fiction" (*New York Times*, qtd. Harker 71-2). They praised Fauset's grasp of American life and her capacity to convey human universality with artistic merit that deserved regard within the full field of literary production.¹³¹ "Technically, 'There is Confusion' more than reaches the level of the better class of contemporary fiction," wrote Howard University's Montgomery Gregory, calling it "a novel of unusual power and exceptional artistry" ("The Spirit of Phyllis Wheatley"). Written with acknowledged craftsmanship, *There is Confusion* was both pioneering and palatable.

Sociologist and *Opportunity* editor Charles S. Johnson, with the help of pragmatist philosopher Alain Locke, seized the occasion of the book's release party to elevate an entire cohort of Black literary talent.¹³² The large soiree drew an elite interracial set of New York's

¹³⁰ Boni and Liveright brought readers many books that came to define the American modernist literary canon, from authors including William Faulkner, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, H.L. Mencken, Theodore Dreiser, and Sherwood Anderson. Among notable separate endeavors, Horace Liveright was the first American publisher of Freud, and Albert Boni put out Alain Locke's *The New Negro* anthology (Hutchinson 371).

¹³¹ This critical refrain extended to Fauset's other novels, as well, and beyond the Black press. In recommending *The Chinaberry Tree* to readers of *The Atlantic* in 1932, reviewer Mary Ross summarized: "Though the story's setting is distinctive, its charm and its strong appeal lie not in the color of its characters but in Miss Fauset's grasp of experience of meaning for all of us. A novel to be read." Ross's set of four recommended titles in this article also includes John Dos Passos's *42nd Parallel* (Ross).

¹³² Johnson saw Fauset's novel as a timely accomplishment with the potential to raise the profile of Black literature at a ripe moment. Educational and economic gains had grown the Black middle class and along with it, the Black book-buying public. Accurate cultural representation was seen to hold promise to support the elevation of the race, both by inspiring Black Americans and by demystifying Black American life to white readers who were beginning to develop increasing interest in African American writers. And, critically, the cultural front took on outsized importance in the crusade for civil rights in the political context of post-Reconstruction white backlash. A number of historians starting with Rayford Logan in 1954 have called this period the nadir of American race relations (*The Negro in American Life and Thought: the Nadir 1877-1901*). For the specific cultural context of the 1920s and '30s,

literati to Manhattan's Civic Club, and John Dewey was on the star-studded invite list (Hutchinson 391). W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson lent their old-guard clout to endorse the up-and-coming group. Walter White and Langston Hughes were honored. Countee Cullen and Gwendolyn Bennett read poems. White headliners offering remarks included publisher Horace Liveright and art collector Albert Barnes, to whom Dewey later dedicated *Art as Experience* in honor of a friendship and aesthetic discourse that intersected with Yeziarska, as I discuss in Chapter Two. Carl Van Doren, the future Pulitzer Prize-winning critic and then editor of *Century* magazine, expressed confidence that New York's younger Black writers would invigorate modern American literature with "emotion," "eloquence," and a distinct critical perspective: "They will bring a fresh and fierce sense of reality to their vision of human life on this continent, a vision seen from a novel angle by a part of the population which cannot be duped by the bland optimism of the majority," he said (*Opportunity* 2.17 143). Many regard the event as the start of the Harlem Renaissance: as a recent article on its centennial legacy put it, "If the Harlem Renaissance had a birthplace, this party was it" (Chambers and May-Curry). What *Opportunity* billed as "The Debut of the Younger School of Negro Writers" defined the burgeoning New York literary group as a group, and it accelerated their publication (*Opportunity* 2.17 143-144).¹³³ However, as the dinner's purpose shifted, its original honoree became "the object of curious, if polite, attention" wrote Howard University professor Montgomery Gregory (*Opportunity* 2.17 181). Fauset never forgave the slight.

David Levering Lewis's classic text *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1984) continues to offer a definitive cultural-political history of the Harlem Renaissance. Lewis characterizes Johnson's motivating logic thus: "No exclusionary rules had been laid down regarding a place in the arts. Here was a small crack in the wall of racism, a fissure that was worth trying to widen" (48).

¹³³ Among the night's other legacies, networking at the dinner secured Locke's guest editorship of a special issue of *Survey Graphic*; that curation later formed the backbone of his movement-defining anthology, *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925) (Hutchinson 391-2).

The event foreshadowed the trajectory of Fauset's reputation; she's been sidelined in the history of a movement in which she was a central player. Three further novels and a significant corpus of shorter works place Fauset among the most prolific Black American writers of the early 20th century, male or female, as well as one of the most visible. By the 1930s, she had solidified a reputation as "one of our foremost Negro writers," even "the potential Jane Austen of Negro literature" (Ross; Braithwaite 26). "During the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance, Jessie Fauset was herself the most prominent black woman writer," writes Cheryl Wall (36). Working side by side with W.E.B. Du Bois, Fauset also played a tremendously significant cultural role as a career-builder, tastemaker, and conversation-shaper during her influential tenure as Literary Editor of the NAACP's magazine, *The Crisis*, from 1919 to 1926.¹³⁴ The magazine was so important to the NAACP's public foothold in its early decades that "trustee Joel Spingarn asserted rightly," says Cheryl Wall, "that without *The Crisis*, 'there would be no Association.'" (45). Fauset's writing, curation, and capable management played a pivotal role at a critical moment.

Langston Hughes, one of many still-famous writers who saw first publication under her editorship, dubbed her "midwife" to the New Negro literary movement for the profound influence of this editorial work (*The Big Sea* 219). However, the feminized epithet of praise became a double-edged sword, dominating and flattening many characterizations of Fauset's substantial and diverse work as an editor, critic, novelist, essayist, poet, translator, and educator. The stage was set for this overdetermination from early in Fauset's career, in the intellectual context of vehement public debate about the New Negro, politics of representation, and

¹³⁴Fauset was officially added to the *Crisis* masthead in November 1919 after moving to Harlem, with delay partially on account of paper rationing as the Great War drew to a close. However, Fauset provided substantial editorial work from Philadelphia starting in July 1918, including her first of many stints filling in for Du Bois as general editor during his extended absences (Sylvander 56).

strategies for racial advancement after the disappointments of Reconstruction and the seeming stagnation of the period Charles Chestnutt retrospectively dubbed “post-bellum, pre-Harlem.”¹³⁵ Despite her pathbreaking career and international visibility in the 1920s and 30s, Fauset remains a peripheral figure in most accounts of the Harlem Renaissance and of early 20th century women’s literature.¹³⁶

Black feminist recovery of Fauset’s writing began in the 1970s, and a growing body of scholarship continues to reappraise her work and litigate her legacy today.¹³⁷ However, broad recognition remains elusive in part because traditional narratives of literary history anchored discussion around binary frameworks into which Fauset’s work fits poorly. Scholarship has struggled for decades to move fully beyond overdetermined terms of debate about where Fauset falls on the scale from conservative to progressive, “mid-Victorian” to modern, or, as Ann duCille puts it, “respectable” to “risqué” (*Coupling Convention* 109). Criticism of Fauset’s work is almost uniformly characterized by an obligation to respond to—now frequently to amend or to qualify—earlier assessments of the novels as non-innovative or even retrograde, both politically and formally (this study included!). Gregory Phipps describes a scholarly “consensus...that Fauset’s social critiques are subtle and tentative” and that her “narratives are ‘feminine’ as

¹³⁵ For a set of discussions on this period, see the collection *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem: African American Literature and Culture, 1877-1919* (2006), eds. Barbara McCaskill and Caroline Gebhard, and Andréa N. Williams’ more recent “Postbellum, Pre-Harlem” in *A Companion to the Harlem Renaissance* (2015), ed. Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, an excellent collection. For Chestnutt’s original characterization, see “Post-Bellum–Pre-Harlem” (1931) in *Charles W. Chestnutt: Essays and Speeches* (1999).

¹³⁶ Writing about Fauset’s lost legacy in the *New Yorker* in 2017, Morgan Jerkins notes that Fauset’s name recognition remains fairly scant even within African American studies and among contemporary Black literary writers (“The Forgotten Work of Jessie Redmon Fauset”).

¹³⁷ Significant treatments in Fauset’s recovery include Abby Arthur Johnson’s “Literary Midwife: Jessie Redmon Fauset and the Harlem Renaissance” (1978); Barbara Christian’s *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (1980); Deborah McDowell’s “The Neglected Dimension of Jessie Redmon Fauset” (1981) and *‘The Changing Same’: Black Women’s Literature, Criticism, and Theory* (1995); Ann duCille’s *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women’s Fiction* (1993); Jacquelyn McLendon’s *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen* (1995); Cheryl Wall’s *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (1995); and Carol Allen’s *Black Women Intellectuals: Strategies of Nation, Family, and Neighborhood in the Works of Pauline Hopkins, Jessie Fauset, and Marita Bonner* (1998).

opposed to feminist, dabbling in questions of autonomy while upholding gender divisions” (115).¹³⁸ Fauset’s corpus, like Yeziarska’s, is recognized most consistently for its documentary value. Her journalism and poetry remain particularly understudied.¹³⁹ Though more frequently discussed, her novels are often taken up more for what they reveal about middle-class black femininity in the period than for what they offer artistically or intellectually.¹⁴⁰ But just as Yeziarska’s emotionalism belies her intellectualism, Fauset’s subtlety should not be mistaken for tentativeness, nor should the bourgeois character of her work be taken to signify insignificance of feminist vision.

Feminist literary pragmatism offers a framework to illuminate the theoretical substance of Jessie Fauset’s literary writing and to contextualize the creative rationale that motivates its aesthetics. When an examination of her scrupulously nuanced writing is paired with rigorous consideration of her professional positioning in relation to several of pragmatism’s established vectors, Fauset emerges as a forgotten figure in the intellectual history of American pragmatism. In this frame, her fiction reads as thoroughly of its modern moment and as more openly forward-looking within that moment than other literary historical models might suggest. A pragmatist

¹³⁸ Among the scholars who have studied Fauset in greatest depth, who are mostly Black women, the literature is more ambivalent about the extent of Fauset’s feminism, less about its existence. Wall suggests that Fauset’s skillful essays point a clearer picture than her fiction and “chart the process by which a woman conditioned by background and training to accept a very conservative social ethic assimilated a good many progressive ideas” (48).

¹³⁹ For a selection of Fauset’s essays, see *The Chinaberry Tree & Selected Writings* (Fauset, ed. Richard Yarborough with foreword by Marcy Jane Knopf). Though not comprehensive, the short set captures the internationalism and cosmopolitanism that threads through Fauset’s journalism, including travel writing, literary commentary, and editorials on current events across the African diaspora. Elizabeth Sheehan’s “Fashioning Internationalism in Jessie Redmon Fauset’s Writing” (2015) offers discussion. For a unique contextualization of Fauset’s children’s writing vis a vis her relationship with the Global South, see the chapter “W.E.B. Du Bois’s Brownies” in Madhumita Lahiri’s *Imperfect Solidarities: Tagore, Gandhi, Du Bois and the Global Anglophone* (2020). Carol J Batker’s *Reforming Fictions: Native, African and Jewish American Women’s Literature and Journalism in the Progressive Era* places Fauset’s journalism in a broad domestic context (2000).

¹⁴⁰ For example, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* grants that sexism stymied Fauset’s career, but nonetheless dismisses her work and skewers the era’s Black middle class in the process: “The sentiments of her figures...are saved from caricature because they reflect faithfully the attitudes of a class that was itself a caricature” (124). In 2017, Lewis repeats his stance in softer terms, but with continued lack of interest in Fauset’s art beyond its documentary value, reiterating that the novels “were a bit prissy, to some extent, even for the time, but they are useful” (qtd. Jerkins).

epistemological orientation, I contend, grounds Jessie Fauset's aesthetic beliefs and practices, both in content and in form, and the aesthetics of her novels carefully modify conventional literary form in service of cutting-edge intellectual content.

In this chapter, I describe Fauset's methodological approach to fiction as "literary empiricism," which I claim as a distinct and original instantiation of Black feminist pragmatist aesthetics. Fauset grounds her work in commitment to the truth value of lived experience, prioritizing the vantage point of African American women and insisting upon nuanced, accurate representation of Black female positionality and individuality. With a Deweyan rejection of epistemological and experiential boundaries, a Black feminist commitment to the complex, intersectional specificity of lived experience, and a unification of theory and praxis that characterizes both, Fauset engages literature as one methodology for apprehending, analyzing, and sharing social truths—an understanding of which can motivate critical thinking and action.

Like the feminist literary pragmatists I discussed in Part One, Fauset uses literature to represent lived experiences, to model mental processes of change as both rational and affective, and—even more than Gilman or Yeziarska—writes with a committed belief that aesthetic and social aims can coexist in art; a primary aim of aesthetic impact, coupled with rigorous engagement of ideas, can create social impact. Like Dewey, she treated "[t]he moral function of art itself" as being "to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, perfect the power to perceive" (*Art as Experience* 338). Also like Dewey, Fauset considered intentional moralizing to compromise not only the artistic quality of an artwork, but also its social and moral power. "If the artist desires to communicate a *special* message," writes Dewey, "[H]e thereby tends to limit the expressiveness of his work to others—whether he wishes to communicate a moral lesson or a sense of his own

cleverness.” (*Art as Experience* 108-109). Fauset insisted routinely and resolutely, across many works of literary criticism and many discussions of her own work, that art’s comprehensive powers could only be realized through aesthetic integrity.

I want to be clear at the outset, however, that claiming Jessie Fauset as a pragmatist thinker is not an exercise in legitimizing a Black woman’s thought by retroactively pulling it under the umbrella of a more famous man’s ideas. I also do not wish to imply that Fauset is a pragmatist merely through absorption of others’ thoughts, including her female predecessors and contemporaries. Rather, I seek to situate her at the heart of pragmatism’s development as an intellectual and cultural tradition. Jessie Fauset’s social and aesthetic theory, articulated in editorial writing and in storytelling, is intellectually substantial in and of itself as an iteration of Black feminist pragmatism, developed in robust mutual dialogue. In addition to recognizing her connection with canonical pragmatist thinkers by way of W.E.B. Du Bois, it is crucial to understand Fauset’s robust engagement with other Black feminist thinkers, and to mark the forms of pragmatism that are foundational to Black feminist theory more broadly. V. Denise James, a philosopher leading the charge for the development of Black feminist pragmatism as an academic field, notes that “black feminists...have long used the label pragmatist and similar methods without an indebted connection to the classical pragmatists or academic feminist philosophy” (“Feminist Pragmatism” 139). But, the parallels between them make for fruitful dialogue. As James well puts it: “Feminists do not need Dewey to help in their assertions of the validity and importance of their work but find in his work a powerful ally in the construction of theory” (“Theorizing Black Feminist Pragmatism” 94). And, indeed, a complex, often under-acknowledged web of connection historically links multiple pragmatisms and feminisms in a sphere of mutual influence.

In the construction of theory a century ago, Dewey himself found powerful allies among contemporary feminists and race thinkers, who helped motivate his public engagement and push his social thinking. He developed his ideas about pluralism, democracy, and aesthetics in direct and indirect engagement with feminists (mostly white) and with Black intellectuals, activists, and artists (mostly male). His ideas about aesthetics, in particular, were informed by African and African American art, music, and literature. Dewey's involvement with the NAACP as a founding member placed him in contact with the cultural dimensions of the New Negro movement as well as with its political activism. His close friendship with former student Max Eastman further connected Dewey with Harlem Renaissance writers and writing. He wrote the introduction to Claude McKay's 1933 *Selected Poems* collection, at McKay's request (Hutchinson 50). Albert Barnes's avid interest in Black art and powerful patronage of African American artists (who regarded him with ambivalence) also provided significant intellectual and social touchpoints for Dewey. However, as many scholars have discussed, Dewey failed to tackle issues of race and gender substantially in his work, despite his strong antiracist and feminist commitments.¹⁴¹ His public writing on social issues often tended toward a materialist analysis and a minimization of social and cultural difference, even within an embrace of pluralism.

Feminist of color theorization, including Fauset's, starts from precisely the sites of analysis and need that Dewey glanced past. Pragmatist and Black feminist thought traditions have been characterized as complementary but differently focused. As Patricia Hill Collins has analyzed, although pragmatism "engage[s] themes of social inequality, power, and politics,"

¹⁴¹ Thomas D. Fallace's *Dewey and the Dilemma of Race: An Intellectual History 1895-1922* (2011) is particularly significant in tracing Dewey's relationship with race, as is Eddie Glaude's *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (2007). Shannon Sullivan and Gregory Fernando Pappas have both made multiple significant interventions with regard to both race and gender in Dewey's thinking. *Pragmatism and the Problem of Race* (2004, ed. Lawson and Koch) and *Pragmatism and Justice* (2017, ed. Dielman et al.) are anthologies of note.

these issues “were not focal points of classical pragmatism” and, partly because of that history, are “not yet central” to contemporary pragmatist discourse (“Social Inequality, Power, and Politics: Intersectionality and American Pragmatism in Dialogue” 443). V. Denise James has characterized the difference of emphasis as being one of freedom versus justice: “The seeds of a conception of radical pragmatist justice are present in Dewey but they require a black radical corrective,” she says (“Pragmatism and Radical Social Justice” 164-168). By contrast, issues of social inequality, power, politics, and justice have long been of primary concern to Black feminists, who locate analyses in specific raced, gendered experiences and power structures that didn’t figure centrally in Dewey’s theory.

Central to my understanding of Black feminism, as I identify it in Fauset’s work, are three interconnected analytics that span contemporary and historical iterations.¹⁴² The first is a focalization of Black women’s issues, experiences, and voices in its development of theory and its goals and methods in activism. The stakes of this focus include active resistance to dominant feminist frameworks propounded by upper- and middle-class white women that fail to listen and respond to the needs and interests of “the women who are most victimized by sexist oppression,” because of both implicit bias and explicit white supremacy (hooks 60). However, what Patricia Hill Collins has called “oppositional knowledge” offers more than a remedial corrective to white feminism; it develops original frameworks in addition to reacting to others. (*Fighting Words* 45). The second analytic is, similar to pragmatism, articulation and embrace of standpoint

¹⁴² I use the term “Black feminism” as an umbrella while also noting both the multiplicity of Black feminisms and the fact that the label is, as Collins has described, not a term without “difficulties,” which include “balancing the genuine concerns of African-American women against continual pressures to absorb and recast such interests within White feminist frameworks,” “direct conflict between Black feminism and selected elements of Black religious traditions in the United States” (e.g. around lesbianism), “perceived separatism” (as rejecting Black men), and preference for terms originating more squarely from Black thought and culture (such as Alice Walker’s frame of “womanism”) (*Fighting Words* 68-69).

epistemology—the belief that knowledge is always socially situated, such that who you are will shape both what you see and how you interpret it.¹⁴³ The third is intersectionality, the recognition that different dimensions of socially constructed identity are not separate, but interact with one another, such that single-axis analyses of systems of power and oppression (e.g. around race or gender or class alone) fail in their accounting, especially eliding the experiences of multiply marginalized groups.¹⁴⁴

The prevailing metaphor of “intersectionality” is both a particularly significant term in contemporary Black feminist discourse and a contentious one. Debate abounds over what it means for the concept to become institutionally legitimated, culturally popularized, and increasingly decoupled from its origin in Black women’s thought and issues.¹⁴⁵ Some welcome its expanded application; others question concept creep and distortions; worry for co-option by the power structures it has historically critiqued is a major concern. Discussion of what exactly it *is* remains contested. However, I value philosopher Kristie Dotson’s pluralistic read that not all of the disagreement is a problem: “clashing conceptions of oppression,” rather than signaling theoretical weakness, offer “an important insight into the nature of oppression itself. Namely, that oppression holds within its structure the ability to manifest stably differently at different times to different people” (125). Dotson describes, in beautiful language, that for well over a

¹⁴³ Collins offers an important account of Black feminism’s relationship with standpoint theory in *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (1998).

¹⁴⁴ Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined this term in 1989; it has origins in a deep tradition of Black feminist thinking and a complex life in contemporary discourse. For a very slightly less distilled distillation, I offer this from Collins: “In its over two decades as a named discourse, the ideas of intersectionality have not yet crystallized into a standard canon defined by its founding figures. Rather, intersectional scholarship and/or practice seemingly pivot on a loose set of shared ideas, namely, (1) how race, class, gender and sexuality constitute intersecting systems of power; (2) how specific social inequalities reflect these power relations from one setting to the next; (3) how identities of race, gender, are socially constructed within multiple systems of power; and (4) how social problems and their remedies are similarly constructed within intersecting systems of power” (“Piecing Together a Genealogical Puzzle” 1).

¹⁴⁵ Jennifer Nash’s *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (2019) offers a provocative and important intellectual and institutional history of intersectionality.

century, “there have been attempts to create metaphors capable of capturing experiences of oppression that seem to twist, turn, twirl, and jump so as to resist being tracked” (121). My work examines how Fauset made manifest to her readers some of the twisting, twirling, intersecting forces that she saw affecting Black women and how her feminist literary pragmatist practice fits into a pluralistic landscape.

Taking multiple angles of approach, I first situate Fauset as a public intellectual who was deeply embedded in pragmatist intellectual and activist networks, using her biography to gesture toward the complex interconnections between these movements. Fauset’s relationship with W.E.B. Du Bois often serves as shorthand for her first- and second-degree exposure to pragmatism. While Du Bois does help place Fauset in a direct intellectual lineage with James and Dewey, the shorthand seriously underserves the depth of Fauset’s engagement with feminist pragmatist discourse and activism. I take Anna Julia Cooper as my main touchstone for the most prominent and sophisticated articulation of Black feminist theory—and Black feminist pragmatism—in Fauset’s moment of writing, noting the women’s close working relationship. Other relevant networked figures include Black pragmatist feminists Mary Church Terrell, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Fannie Barrier Williams, and white feminist pragmatists Isabel Eaton, Ella Flagg Young, and Jane Addams.

After I establish Fauset’s abundant pragmatist connections, I turn toward her direct articulation of a democratic and pluralistic attitude toward the production of knowledge through experience that fundamentally characterizes philosophical pragmatism and Black feminism. I focus specifically on a 1919 critical exchange with sociologist Edward Reuter, in which Fauset discusses scientific and critical method. The dialogue offers a distinctive view of Fauset’s beliefs on knowledge production and captures a provocative moment of interaction with mainstream

academic social science: Fauset is emphatic, precise, and bold. She critiques bias masked as objectivity, insists upon the empirical validity and significance of oral testimony by African American people, and strikingly equates “science” with “honesty.”

In defending this last claim, the terms of her argument prefigure by fifteen years logic *and* vocabulary that John Dewey employs in the opening of *Art as Experience*. Fauset’s expansive view of what might count as scientific goes beyond Dewey’s, however, and extends Black feminist standpoint theory in the vein of Anna Julia Cooper. I consider the implications that Fauset’s epistemological stance here holds for her artistic work, relating it to her statements of authorial intent regarding truth and aesthetic integrity. Together, Fauset’s keen interest in literary truthfulness, her striking claim that the scientific and the honest are one and the same, and her thoroughgoing grounding in pragmatist thought and Du Boisian sociology all suggest that there is value in considering her literature as empirical investigation, in the Deweyan sense of philosophical art. I describe this mode of writing as “literary empiricism.”

Fauset’s storytelling has long been critiqued for didacticism as a flaw, but understood as literary empiricism in a Black feminist pragmatist tradition, the transparently explicative and analytical elements of her novels read less as “Sunday school self help tract,” as Claude McKay lamented, and more as instances of literary philosophizing (1924 letter to Josephine Herbst, qtd. Harker 72). Fauset’s novels do not merely reveal an ideology of early 20th century black middle class femininity to today’s symptomatic reader; they deliberately document and theorize interacting race, gender, class and power dynamics under specific and always evolving social conditions.¹⁴⁶ Fauset is interested in scrutinizing the psychological conditions of modern life

¹⁴⁶ I note here the political stakes of my reparative reading approach toward Fauset’s work on Fauset’s own terms: it is well documented that practices of symptomatic sociological reading frequently undervalue the creativity of writing by authors of color, especially women, reducing art to gussied-up autobiography or simple social documentation.

behind “the Veil,” to use Du Bois’s terms, and on the edge of the color line (*The Souls of Black Folk* x). Fauset mused that these conditions impel philosophical thinking; it is required to navigate the practical and psychological complexity, injustice, and absurdity of life as an American of color. The medium of the novel allows Fauset to offer her empirical and theoretical work to a broad reading public in an accessible, relevant, and compelling format that focalizes individual experience.

My work adds to existing scholarship that has directly and meaningfully approached Fauset in a pragmatist context within the past 25 years. Kathleen Pfeiffer, Jaime Harker, Nicholas Gaskill, and Gregory Phipps have each identified elements of Fauset’s work as convergent with Deweyan ideas about certain kinds of relationship: between individuals and communities, between art and a multicultural democracy, and between lived experience and truth. Kathleen Pfeiffer (2001) has argued, “To read Fauset in the context of her contemporary intellectual culture is to see that she was neither anachronistic nor marginal” (80). Pragmatism is one of several major contexts she engages, noting in one thread *Plum Bun*’s convergence with Dewey’s thinking on the interdependent relationship between freedom, individualism, and community (79).¹⁴⁷ Dewey “summarizes the lesson of *Plum Bun*,” she says, in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) when he writes, “Liberty...is that secure release and fulfillment of personal potentialities which take place only in rich and manifold association with others” (Pfeiffer 90). Jaime Harker (2007) makes a claim for the significance of “pragmatist aesthetics” in Progressive Era women’s literature more broadly, including Fauset in a lineage of “political domestic fiction” that she traces from mid 19th century “sentimental power” through to interwar “middlebrow” (4, 8). She emphasizes pragmatist beliefs about art itself, noting Fauset’s “strong” second-degree

¹⁴⁷ Pragmatism goes unnamed as such in the article but is implicated in any discussion of Deweyan social analysis and philosophy.

connection with John Dewey and aligning their shared faith in “the power of literature to connect and transform communities” as well as to “make sense of...a multicultural America,”—the same faith that motivated Yezierska and Dewey’s belief in her (8, 13).

Much of Gaskill’s work foregrounds the cultural significance of pragmatist thought, and *Chromographia: American Literature and the Modernization of Color* (2018) argues persuasively and engagingly that “the combined efforts of psychologists, philosophers, dyers, and paint manufacturers” generated a pragmatist “vernacular metaphysics of color that opposed the persistent dichotomies of subject and object, inside and outside, nature and culture” (7-8, 12). As new color technology transformed understandings of perception and experience at the turn of the 20th century, literature inscribed the social worlds in which that revolution occurred. In his discussion of aesthetic education and racial feeling in the Harlem Renaissance, Gaskill focuses primarily on Nella Larsen and Claude McKay, but he also notes briefly *Plum Bun*’s alternative to primitivist discourses on color: “It trades the sensory revelry of [Carl Van Vechten’s] *Scarlet Creeper* [in *N****r Heaven*] for a ‘nice feeling of colour’ (with a *u*!) linked to cultural refinement” (214).¹⁴⁸

In the only extended treatment of Black women’s literary pragmatism to date, Gregory Phipps (2018) argues that African American women writers of the late 19th and early 20th century “offer some of the fullest and most provocative representations of how pragmatism understands democracy creatively” (4-5). Phipps reads Fauset alongside Larsen and Hurston in the lineage of earlier Black women’s philosophical pragmatism as well as evincing “pragmatist

¹⁴⁸ The ‘u’ isn’t a detail worth reading into, but rather a vestige of publication history. Fauset wasn’t putting on airs: *Plum Bun* was first published in the U.K. with London press Elkin Mathews and Marrot due to difficulty in placing the book domestically. Frederick A. Stokes used their sheets in the book’s first printing and, curiously, retained British spellings when resetting the text (Zafar). In her three other novels and her magazine publications, words like “color” and “labor” appear with standard American spelling.

influence” from male contemporaries, including Du Bois and Dewey. Phipps observes that the case for Fauset’s pragmatism is not only retrospective tradition-building: “Among literary writers, Fauset arguably was closer than any of her contemporaries to the movement. Her intimate relationship with DuBois is well known and,” he adds, “the influence of Dewey’s thought on *Plum Bun* (noted by Kathleen Pfeiffer) gestures toward a larger pragmatist orientation in her work [although] scholars often consider Fauset a conservative and bourgeois author” (230). From the men, he says, Fauset engages “theories of the relationship between experience and truth” and from Black foremothers, he says, she comes to “rework some key themes” of African American women’s writing—particularly the black maternal archetype and construction of black women’s communities (114).

My study extends these projects, with which I broadly agree, and its focus differs in substantial ways. Pfeiffer’s, Harker’s, and Gaskill’s varied accounts of Jessie Fauset’s pragmatist contexts are all relatively brief, as is George Hutchinson’s earlier engagement of Fauset in his still authoritative account of interracial pragmatism in *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (1996). I therefore build most directly upon Phipps’s recent work. Like Phipps, I place Fauset in a Black feminist pragmatist lineage and network. I enhance the existing intellectual genealogy by further developing biographical connections, in addition to conceptual ones, and by explicitly noting the historical intersection of multiple pragmatisms often segmented by race and gender. I directly compare Fauset’s writing to passages from her pragmatist contemporaries. Most significantly, my attention to Fauset’s editorial nonfiction, and specifically to her stance on art and science as integrated endeavors, uniquely grounds my approach to the theoretical character of her fiction and my claim that her fiction develops pragmatist ideas, not just embodies them.

It is no great stretch to consider fiction as a site for the development of theory, and scholarship has long marked the heterogeneity of Black feminist writing.¹⁴⁹ To fully account for Black women's intellectual contributions, we must look where black women were writing, both by choice and by the constraints of exclusion from many institutions and public fora. Even so, Black feminist intellectual historian Brittney Cooper has described the field of African American women's intellectual history as still "strewn about with unrecognized Black female genius" (139). Systemic sexism and racism motivate the problem, but undervaluation of diverse rhetorical settings also helps it to persist. Traditional categorization has long treated female thinker-activists such as Ida B. Wells Barnett and Jane Addams first as activists, while male activist-thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois and John Dewey receive primary credit as thinkers. Even when collaborating on the same project, men are more reliably recognized as public intellectual figureheads. Hazel Carby, in 1998, described this as women's relegation to the realm of "domestic intellectual labor" (*Race Men* 194).¹⁵⁰

More recently, Brittney Cooper and others have argued that "the intellectual contributions of race women thinkers still remain greatly understudied, often because this work is included under the guise of autobiographical writing or writing about organizational work" (16). "Turning to the places where Black women made Black female-embodied experience visible," Cooper continues, "complicates a respectability narrative that casts them as wholly parochial and gives Black women thinkers credit for the complexity of their theorizations of both race and gender

¹⁴⁹ Phipps glosses this recognition shared by Black feminist and pragmatist approaches to criticism of African American women's literature: "A literary pragmatist approach to black women's writing includes the observation that their texts are inherently heterotropic and interdisciplinary...the form matches the content" (9).

¹⁵⁰ For excellent recent work in Black American women's intellectual history, see: *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women* (2015, ed. Mia Bay et. al.), Brittney Cooper's *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (2017), *Black Intellectual Thought in Modern America: A Historical Perspective* (2017, ed. Brian D. Behnken et. al.), *Bury My Heart in a Free Land: Black Women Intellectuals in Modern U.S. History* (2018, ed. Hettie V. Williams), and *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds* (2022, eds. Carol B. Conaway and Kristin Waters).

identity” (23). Jessie Fauset falls squarely within all these categories. She was a race woman grounded in organizational work led by a more visible male figurehead, who wrote stories rooted in her own lived experience, and who has gotten caught up in shorthand academic discourse on respectability politics. She was also, I contend, a significant pragmatist public intellectual who made novel contributions to feminist pragmatist aesthetic thought.

A Pragmatist Biography

What are often broadly labeled the “classical” pragmatism of white American men and the “visionary” pragmatism of Black American women are distinct and autonomous intellectual traditions, focused on different sets of primary concerns that have yielded unique sets of insight. While white male self-identified pragmatists in the classical era had primary institutional home bases in academic philosophy, the women now recognized as pragmatists from this era were more often building their conceptual frameworks from home bases in applied work. Differences in lived experience and agenda created different pragmatisms. Black feminist pragmatist writers in the classical era are, as Gregory Phipps sums it up, “less concerned with establishing the principles of a philosophical school than...with enlisting a reciprocal interplay between experience and truth to bring forth complex depictions of how African American women understand democracy as a cultural enterprise” (36). As Black feminist pragmatism attends to the material conditions that promote and obstruct individual flourishing, it starts first with the lived experiences of those who are oppressed and marginalized. Grounding in the lived experiences of Black women shapes its social analyses and informs its primary concerns.

Despite growing in parallel more than in tandem, Deweyan and Black feminist pragmatisms were nonetheless far from isolated in their development, and they share many

orientations in common. Both concurrently commit to imagining radical change and to effecting gradual change. Both take lived experience seriously as a site of knowledge and regard the improvement of people's experienced lives as the purpose of theoretical work. Both reject a division between theory and praxis. Both judge ideas according to the consequences they produce, knowing that those consequences are situationally particular and ever evolving. Both strive toward pluralistic societies that promote dignity, autonomy, and growth for all members. Both value individuality but resist subject-object dichotomy in characterizing the individual. This is not a coincidence of convergent evolution in the sociohistorical context of the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century. Rather, idea exchange and collaborative experiments in praxis occurred directly and indirectly through the medium of print culture and across a web of activist organizations, educational institutions, and interpersonal networks, particularly in New York, Chicago, and Washington, D.C.

Jessie Fauset held connections with many of these communities, and the trajectory of her intellectual development and career gestures toward significant shared and mutual influences across schools of pragmatism. In this section, I trace a thread of pragmatist interactions across Jessie Fauset's career and situate Fauset as a public intellectual who was personally and professionally engaged within overlapping pragmatist milieux. Along the way, I observe major principles of Black feminist pragmatism germane to Jessie Fauset's thinking and her fiction, including articulations of intersectionality, standpoint theory, and discussions of the complex social significance of beauty—bodily, domestic, and artistic—for the advancement of Black American women. I also mark important points of historical connection and theoretical alignment between Black feminist pragmatism and Deweyan pragmatism.

Jessie Fauset's long and close relationship with W.E.B. Du Bois represents her most obvious connection to pragmatist philosophy's current established canon. Ironically, however, Fauset's proximity to Du Bois occludes her distinct intellectual contributions from historical view as much as it elevates them. It is easy to treat her thought as an extension of his and to neglect the bidirectional influence of constant professional and personal conversation, much undocumented. Du Bois continues to receive credit for some work at *The Crisis* that Fauset likely produced in whole or in part, either through assumed attribution of unsigned articles or, most commonly, through narratives that neglect Fauset as a thought partner and an editorial leader at the magazine. *The Crisis* was shaped by Du Bois' vision, to be sure, but unlike Gilman's *Forerunner*, it wasn't a one person show. Du Bois himself also deserves partial blame for active erasure. Despite decades of close friendship and of vociferous public advocacy of her work, his public reflections later in life almost entirely omitted Fauset from his record of the New Negro movement and the NAACP's early work.¹⁵¹ What precious little he did say dimunitized both the woman and her work in juvenile and provincial terms. Despite praising her intelligence, his summary of her accomplishment patently ignores a broad swath of her writings and the entirety of her editorial work, while simplifying and sentimentalizing the subsection of writing it does acknowledge. He recalled her only briefly as "a very brilliant colored girl...who was born in Philadelphia and has written some lovely things about Philadelphia Negroes," who

¹⁵¹ A suspicious reader might reasonably wonder to what extent this was a failure of memory or an intentional understatement. Generally speaking, Patricia Hill Collins notes, Du Bois's "support of the women in his intellectual circle was questionable," despite his political investment in Black women's issues ("Black Public Intellectuals" 24). In Fauset's case, rumblings about a long-term sexual affair could also have motivated Du Bois to gloss past any accounting of their professional and personal closeness as he narrated his own legacy. David Levering Lewis asserts that the rumors were true, based in part on off the record interviews (*W.E.B. Du Bois: A Biography* 305-6). It is, however, a claim that remains contested (Wedin 198).

once said, ‘It’s so nice to start out in Paris and not have to think where you’re going to get lunch.’” (qtd. Sylvander 82).

Jessie Redmon Fauset was in fact born in Camden County, New Jersey in 1882, the same year Oscar Wilde visited America's proto-pragmatist “poet of democracy,” Walt Whitman, there.¹⁵² The seventh child of AME minister Redmon Fauset and Annie Seamon Fauset, Jessie Fauset grew up in a large family with an upbringing that straddled color and class lines.¹⁵³ Annie died shortly after Jessie was born, and Redmon soon remarried Bella Huff, a white widow of Jewish background. The blended family moved to Philadelphia and grew to include Jessie’s three half-siblings in addition to six birth-siblings and three stepsiblings. Both parents were deeply committed to education, and Redmon’s position in the church made him a cultural leader among black Philadelphians, but the family was middle-class more by its social than its economic status. And while Fauset’s family life centered in Black Philadelphia, her secondary and advanced education occurred in institutions that were near-exclusively white. She graduated from the Philadelphia High School for Girls in 1900 as valedictorian and the only African American in her class. After Bryn Mawr College denied her an expected scholarship on the basis of race, she landed at Cornell University as one of its first Black female students.¹⁵⁴ There, Fauset became

¹⁵² For Wilde’s own discussion of his U.S. travels, see *Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews* (2013), eds. Matthew Hofer and Gary Scharnhorst.

¹⁵³ Carolyn Sylvander notes in her still definitive biography of Fauset that factual errors abounded in scholarship in 1981, including misreporting of facts as basic as Fauset’s birthdate. Over forty years later, many of these mistakes persist through replication. Skewed accounts of Fauset’s upbringing are improving but still a problem, assuming her family was far more affluent than it was and neglecting to mention that she grew up in a mixed race household. Any writer or reviewer of work on Fauset ought to consult Sylvander’s biography to ensure accuracy. Unless otherwise specified, this is my source for biographical information throughout this chapter and the next. A forthcoming academic biography from Julia Charles-Linen will hopefully unearth further information on Fauset’s life and work, as well as offer a contemporary interpretive frame (“Julia Charles-Linen”).

¹⁵⁴ In its denial, the administration cited worry that Southern girls would disenroll, a northern excuse for segregation that Fauset deployed in the climax of *Plum Bun* (Sylvander 28).

one of the first Black women in the country to be elected to Phi Beta Kappa, and she was introduced as a sophomore to W.E.B. Du Bois—a connection that came to shape her career.

Fauset's first letter to Du Bois in 1903 points toward a pragmatist intellectual orientation that preceded their personal relationship and persisted across her writing career. In it, she thanks him deeply for writing *The Souls of Black Folk*, declaring that “we have needed someone to voice the intricacies of the blind maze of thought and action along which the modern, educated colored man or woman struggles” (letter to W.E.B. Du Bois, December 26, 1903). This summary of the work of *Souls* prefigures the broad interests that motivate many of her essays and all four of her novels. Fauset devotes herself to puzzling through the psychological complexities of gendered and classed experiences within an evolving society, devoting particular attention to the perspectives and experiences of educated Black women so rarely represented in mainstream American literature. Her emphasis on “thought and action” as joined halves of a “maze” of complexity aligns with pragmatist investments in the interdependence and inseparability of mental processes and physical life. It also echoes Jamesian interest in the terms of mind, perhaps encountered in her recent psychology coursework, that shaped “high” modernism's canon: the stream of consciousness, with its “flights and perchings” (*Principles of Psychology* 243). The letter shows, too, an investment in affect: “It hurt you to write that book didn't it?,” she added with precocious confidence (letter to W.E.B. Du Bois, December 26, 1903).

After college, Fauset spent thirteen years teaching, primarily French and Latin in Washington, D.C. at M Street High School, renamed for Paul Laurence Dunbar in 1916.¹⁵⁵ Many accounts gloss briefly past this experience to focus on the trajectory of her writing, including freelance work for *The Crisis* starting in 1912 that led into her full-time editorial leadership at the

¹⁵⁵ Unable to secure a teaching position in Philadelphia's only nominally integrated schools after she graduated, she spent a year in Baltimore first.

magazine by 1919, at Du Bois's invitation. However, Fauset's career as an educator deserves recognition in the development of her pragmatism independent of her relationship with W.E.B. Du Bois, and in an account of her intellectual influence beyond of her cultural role in the Harlem Renaissance. The first U.S. public high school for Black students, Dunbar boasted a remarkable faculty of thought leaders. Fauset worked in conversation with colleagues that included Carter Woodson, famous today for developing what has become Black History Month, poet Angelina Grimké, and two of the country's most pioneering Black feminists (and Black feminist pragmatists), Anna Julia Cooper and Mary Church Terrell, a particularly close friend.¹⁵⁶ As principal and school board member, respectively, Cooper and Terrell helped ensure that Dunbar taught a college preparatory curriculum, rather than following a vocational model advocated by Booker T. Washington and favored by white powerholders.¹⁵⁷ The school's pedagogy also integrated the teaching of Black history and pan-African culture across disciplines, including in Fauset's and Cooper's foreign language classrooms. Fauset's French classes, for example, discussed events such as the Haitian Revolution, a radical instructional choice for the era.¹⁵⁸

Fauset's proximity to her elder contemporary Anna Julia Cooper is particularly noteworthy because Cooper is, in the words of philosopher Lewis Gordon, "without question the most sophisticated thinker on what is known today as black feminist thought from the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth century" (71).¹⁵⁹ Though now recognized as a

¹⁵⁶ Through Grimké, Fauset also became a longtime friend of poet and playwright Georgia Douglas Johnson (Wall 43).

¹⁵⁷ Maintaining this value required a fight: after nearly twenty-five years at the school as a teacher and then as principal, Cooper was forced out of the latter role for her fierce commitment to a college preparatory liberal arts curriculum. She was rehired in 1910 to a teaching post and returned to the Latin classroom (May 24-27).

¹⁵⁸ Cooper later wrote a dissertation on French attitudes toward the Haitian Revolution when she earned her PhD the Sorbonne, where Fauset also undertook some study (May 33).

¹⁵⁹ Championed first by Black feminist literary scholars and historians including Mary Helen Washington, Paula Giddings, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Cooper is increasingly recognized by philosophers. Vivian May has led that charge and offers scholarship's most thorough reading of Cooper's work to date.

pathbreaking Black feminist and a significant public philosopher, Cooper has long been misunderstood, dismissed with critiques similar to those directed at Fauset. Philosopher and leading Cooper scholar Vivian May writes: “rather than invitations to critical consciousness and action from a radical public intellectual, her interrogatory mode of writing and her intricately textured, complexly encoded voice are frequently interpreted as signs of confusion on her part or even of her having been duped by dominant discourse” (4). Today, Black feminist scholars including May and Brittney Cooper champion Anna Julia Cooper’s work as “foundational to modern intersectionality theory,” a model of “intersectional praxis,” and “a crucial corrective to feminist historiographies that treat intersectionality as a “recent form” of feminist engagement, In particular, Anna Julia Cooper’s work has been championed by scholars like Vivian May and Brittney Cooper as, in Jennifer Nash’s words, “foundational to modern intersectionality theory,” a model of “intersectional praxis,” and “a crucial corrective to feminist historiographies that treat intersectionality as a “recent form” of feminist engagement”, thereby obscuring “the long intellectual and political labor of black women” (Nash 7).

Fauset’s writing bears Anna Julia Cooper’s imprint, both in its thematics and in its embrace of “unresolved tensions and ambiguities” (May 4). Cooper develops her theory from facts of lived experience, states that “true progress” must be “growth,” and is keenly invested in the real-world payoff of intellectual work, particularly for the advancement of racial and gender equality (*Voice* 26). Cooper’s most famous work, *A Voice from the South*, was published when Jessie Fauset was ten years old and placed an array of specific social issues within a larger intellectual framework.¹⁶⁰ The book offers direct and forceful theoretical statements on behalf of

¹⁶⁰ For a representation of Cooper’s thought beyond *A Voice from the South*, see *The Portable Anna Julia Cooper* (2022, ed. Shirley Moody-Turner), the first edited collection to also gather variety of essays, plays, poems, previously unpublished letters, and more from 1892 to 1951.

intersectionality, standpoint theory, and the case for evaluating society starting from the experiences of its marginalized and minoritized members, rather than privileged and the majority—or as Cooper puts it, the weak rather than the strong. She argues that the status of Black women is the truest test case for accurately evaluating American culture, supporting the argument with a scientific metaphor: “as the chemist prefers distilled H₂O in testing solutions to avoid complications and unwarranted reactions, so the Black Woman holds that her femineity linked with the impossibility of popular affinity or unexpected attraction through position or influence in her case makes her a touchstone of American courtesy exceptionally pure and singularly free from extraneous modifiers” (93). The book’s most famous line proclaims the same idea in socially applied form: “Only the BLACK WOMAN can say where and when I enter...then and there the whole Negro race enters with me” (31). This idea informed a founding principle and the well-known slogan of the influential National Association of Colored Women (NACW): “Lift as we rise.”

Across “colored,” white, and multiracial circles, schools and club movements functioned broadly as hubs for feminist activism across the country and as germination sites for feminist pragmatist thought. Complex coalitions formed to advocate suffrage; to pursue reform in education and labor; to fight against segregation and lynching; to address the needs of immigrants and the poor; to protest the Great War and imperialist expansion in the Philippines; and much, much more. The networks are far too complex to do justice here, but a few examples may suffice to demonstrate the point of mutual influence and of Fauset’s multilayered proximity to constellations of pragmatists, Black feminist and otherwise. Cooper, Terrell and Fauset were all active leaders in the NACW, which Cooper and Terrell co-founded in 1896, with Terrell as its first president, as were Mary McLeod Bethune and Fannie Barrier Williams. Fauset helped plan

one of the Du Bois-led Pan-African Congresses that Terrell attended; Cooper made it to one, and lamented to Du Bois that she and other women working as educators might have attended further if it were better timed for the school year (May 3). Terrell also worked with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, led in its early years by pragmatist feminists Jane Addams and Emily Greene Balch.

Although Jessie Fauset never lived in Chicago, the city's significance as a nationally influential center of Black feminist activism as well as interracial feminist pragmatist exchange bears noting.¹⁶¹ Work that happened here foundationally shaped the national organizations to which Fauset was devoted, it shaped the thinking of some of her closest colleagues, and it represents a node of complex mutual influence across intellectual and social movements. Chicago was the birthplace of the National League of Colored Women (NLCW), an NACW predecessor, and of the Chicago Association for the Advancement of Colored People (CAACP), an influential NAACP predecessor led by Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Jane Addams. I noted in previous chapters that Gilman and Dewey were both regularly involved at Addams' Hull House, and that its model shaped settlement housing in which Yeziarska lived: Hull House also served as a regular gathering hub for Black feminist activists in the city including Wells-Barnett and Williams, a less remembered but highly influential Black feminist pragmatist, suffragist, and NLCW/NACW leader who helped publicly define ideals of the New Colored Woman. These women worked closely with each other, with Addams, and with Terrell, including in early NAACP work.¹⁶² Addams learned much from the Black feminist leaders with whom she

¹⁶¹ For a full-length discussion, see Anne Meis Knupfer's *The Chicago Black Renaissance and Women's Activism* (2006).

¹⁶² Mary Jo Deegan has documented these interracial networks, with a feminist pragmatist orientation, in works that include "Fannie Barrier Williams, the New Negro, and Black Feminist Pragmatism, 1893–1926," included in the anthology *Roots of the Black Chicago Renaissance: New Negro Writers, Artists, and Intellectuals, 1893-1930* (2020),

routinely collaborated, and their disagreements are as informative as their alignments: Maurice Hamington, for example, has described an exchange on lynching between Addams and Wells-Barnett in the *New York Independent* “as a wonderful example of public pragmatist philosophy. Both women, firmly committed to social improvement through collective intelligent action, used experience to build a rational argument,” with Wells-Barnett using “no ad hominem antagonism in offering a strong and necessary corrective to Addams” and Addams incorporating some of this critique over time as the women remained collaborators in the wake of public disagreement (173).

The feminist wing of the Chicago school of pragmatism also influenced Fauset by way of W.E.B. Du Bois.¹⁶³ Addams and the white female sociologists of Hull House were also closely connected with Du Bois in “a world of profound, creative relationships” that functioned as “an alternate professional infrastructure” to mainstream academic sociology (Deegan, “W.E.B. Du Bois and the Women of Hull House” 301). Addams hosted Du Bois at Hull House; he edited her when she published in *The Crisis*. *Hull-House Maps and Papers* (1895) informed the design of Du Bois’ famous study *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), which included a chapter on Black female domestic workers authored by Isabel Eaton, an Addams affiliate whose graduate fieldwork Du Bois supervised (Deegan 305). As the civil rights movement continued to coalesce its national biracial infrastructure, pragmatist networks provided part of the foundation: Du Bois,

ed. Yarborough et al.), “W.E.B. Du Bois and the Women of Hull-House” 1895-1899 (1988), and “Jane Addams: The Sociology of Race Relations at Hull-House and the University of Chicago” (2002).

¹⁶³ See *The Chicago School of Pragmatism* (2000, ed. John R. Shook) for comprehensive primary source reading on this movement pioneered at the University of Chicago by John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, James Tufts, Ella Flagg Young, Jane Addams, and others.

Addams, Dewey, and Wells-Barnett were all founding members of the NAACP, whose public cultural voice Fauset helped to shape as the organization grew to maturity.¹⁶⁴

She brought academic grounding and authority to that voice, and she worked with significant range as a public intellectual. By the time Fauset arrived in Harlem in 1919 to work full time for the NAACP as Literary Editor of *The Crisis*, she had not only taught but had also reached the pinnacle of educational attainment as yet allowed to and achieved by a Black American woman.¹⁶⁵ Though Jessie Fauset once rhetorically described herself as “the average American done over in brown,” her accomplishments were anything but average, and her academic pedigree helped her to write with substantial authority as a public intellectual (“Some Notes on Color” 76). Summer coursework at the Sorbonne and a master’s degree from the University of Pennsylvania placed her among the most educated Americans of any demographic, and one of the most literarily erudite. Harlem historian David Levering Lewis notes, “With the exception of James Weldon Johnson, she knew a good deal more about the world of literature than the academics and civil libertarians in Harlem quick becoming experts” (*Harlem in Vogue* 121). Of course, an Ivy League degree does not represent an appropriate measuring stick, nor an adequate measure, for intelligence, knowledge, or intellectual significance—not now and especially not for a Black woman of this era. However, Fauset’s education did provide her a tool she could use to be taken seriously and to navigate among male peers as a credentialed equal,

¹⁶⁴ The network had indirect influence on the Harlem Renaissance as well: even Nella Larsen’s education at Wendell Phillips High School in Chicago bore the indelible mark of pragmatist reform by way of Jane Addams and Ella Flagg Young, Dewey friends and allies who led curricular policy and teacher training there, respectively (Hutchinson 48).

¹⁶⁵ Georgiana Simpson at the University of Chicago, Eva Dykes at Radcliffe College, and Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander at the University of Pennsylvania would become the first African American women to hold Ph.D.s, all conferred in June 1921. Simpson was a colleague of Fauset’s at Dunbar and Alexander was a Philadelphia friend (Sylvander 32). Fauset shared the fresh news about all three, with pictures, at the Pan-African Congress in Brussels in 1921 (Fauset, “Impressions of the Second Pan African Congress”). Anna Julia Cooper would become the fourth when she completed hers at the Sorbonne in 1924 (May).

even if it wasn't fully effective to command respect against strong headwinds of sexism and racism.

In addition to her significant editorial work and literary writing, Fauset published essays on domestic and international social issues, such as the lynching crisis and the labor movement in the U.S. and the Egyptian and Indian nationalist movements abroad. She engaged directly with a national and international public through speaking engagements and expansive correspondence. For example, she wrote to a Belgian women's suffrage group circa 1919 with an encouraging report and comparison between Belgian and African American women's movements, two years prior to speaking at the Second Pan-African Congress on the topic in Brussels (Notes on the suffrage of Belgian and African American women). After Fauset's 1927 visit to the U.S. Veterans Hospital in Tuskegee, librarian Sadie Peterson wrote to Du Bois to report how Fauset was met with delight, adding that "[m]y boys here and personnel have read 'There is Confusion' and it has been the most popular book in the library" (letter to W.E.B. Du Bois, July 17, 1927). Fauset supported a range of Du Bois' research and writing projects investigatively, practically, and editorially, and she did routine translation work. The broad scope of her writing included profiles of Black historical figures, for adults as well as for children. The *Brownies Book*, the first U.S. magazine written for children, represents one of Fauset's most significant contributions to American literary culture and education. And, in addition to reviewing fiction, poetry, and drama, she routinely reviewed history and sociology books for *The Crisis* and other outlets.

An eventual souring of the relationship with Du Bois seems to have played a role in Jessie Fauset's departure from *The Crisis* in 1926, and the magazine's literary reputation declined without her. Her own professional fortunes were decidedly mixed. Even with her

extraordinary credentials and extensive network, she struggled to secure another editorial position or even work as a social secretary, despite willingness she expressed to Joel Springarn that “I could, of course, work at home” if race were to be an issue in the case of a role as a publisher’s reader (qtd. *Comedy: American Style* xxii). She returned instead to teaching, and she continued to write. The immediate post-*Crisis* years were her most productive as a novelist, though marked by struggle to get her work to market. Boni and Liveright rejected *Plum Bun*, which Fauset published in the U.K. in 1928 before finally securing an American publisher, Frederick A. Stokes, to distribute the book in 1929. She also married that year, at the age of 47.¹⁶⁶ Stokes dragged his feet about putting out Fauset’s third novel, *The Chinaberry Tree* in 1931, agreeing only after she called in a favor from Zona Gale, who wrote a foreword of endorsement. Stokes also put out Fauset’s final novel, *Comedy: American Style*, in 1933, both with less strife and with less fanfare. Though the novels were generally critically respected, her writing slowed in the face of the frequent obstacles at publishing houses and the demands of a full-time day job. She remained active as a writer of shorter work and eventually returned to the Philadelphia area. She died in Camden in 1961.

Fauset’s lifelong immersion among pragmatists represents a depth of connectedness to pragmatism far richer and more extensive than her first-degree connection to Du Bois and the second-degree connection of his network. Her personal and professional world was full of pragmatists, including and especially Black feminist pragmatists, during intellectually formative years and at the peak of her literary career, when she exerted significant influence as a public intellectual. This close personal interaction should reinforce the strength of the intellectual alignments I articulate in the following sections. The pragmatist umbrella is large, but pragmatist

¹⁶⁶ She took Herbert Harris’s last name, although she continued to publish under Fauset.

resonances in Fauset's work are not simply incidental products of zeitgeist, and they are not merely feminized literary replications of Du Boisian thought.

Placing Fauset within the broader thought tradition of pragmatism also signals the glaring historical oversight of how understudied Black American feminists remain in major accounts of literary pragmatism to date. Genealogies of pragmatism in the Harlem Renaissance still rely heavily on the influence of black men (Du Bois, Locke, and Johnson) influenced by white men (James, Dewey, and Emerson). Despite a solid literary pragmatism subfield, some of which addresses Black female authors (Fauset, Larsen, and Hurston), only Phipps attends to Black feminist pragmatism as a central focus, and a comprehensive account of Black feminist pragmatist literary networks does not yet exist.

Jessie Fauset's Literary Empiricism

In this section, I argue that Fauset's distinct position on the relationship between art, empiricism, and politics represents an early instance of Black feminist pragmatist aesthetic theory. Evincing both pragmatist and feminist principles, Fauset emphasizes the nature of knowledge as individually and socially situated and evolving. And, as a race woman and Black feminist, she highlights the critical importance of valuing Black women's perspectives *specifically* to understand society accurately. Similarly to Gilman and Yeziarska, Fauset also holds that narrative grounded in experience offers distinct purchase on social truths that other forms of investigation cannot. Consequently, she treats literature and social science as integrated endeavors, arguing explicitly that they can offer crucially complementary modes of empirical investigation—if and only if they are “honest” (Fauset “Color and Culture” 125). This is a pragmatist orientation toward literature, just as Nicholas Gaskill distilled one version of it in

2012: “literature must be understood as a species of radical empiricism,” he writes, “a mode of inquiry that illuminates the processes by which our inarticulate feelings take shape within intelligent discourse” (“What Difference Can Pragmatism Make” 385).

Fauset shares this pragmatist orientation not only with creative multidisciplinary Harlem Renaissance writers who remain familiar figures, such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Zora Neale Hurston, but also with John Dewey. Dewey did not only promote pluralistic thinking and practice in general across the range of his work; he also envisioned art and literature as playing a specific role in the process of philosophical investigation, that of a clue to precede and inspire further inquiry (“Poetry and Philosophy”). Reading Fauset’s defense of literary empiricism in relation both to her sociological interests and to a Deweyan aesthetic framework offers one useful method to reappraise her fiction on its own historically situated terms: we can understand Fauset’s novels as works of creative social theory and practical public (pragmatist) philosophy, rather than as sociologically artifactual art primarily.

Though Fauset self-identified as a literary artist and critic first and foremost, she blended her professional work as a public humanist with a deep, integrated engagement of social science. She had academic training in psychology, supported a range of Du Bois’ sociological research endeavors, and routinely reviewed academic books across disciplines for *The Crisis* and other magazines. She did not hesitate to critique professionalized, university-based sociologists as a qualified intellectual equal. Like Yeziarska, she does not mince words when pointing out the glaring shortcomings of academic social science and pseudoscience. But unlike Yeziarska, Fauset does not treat empirical forms of study as inherently opposed to experiential understanding. She isn’t hostile to the social science disciplines themselves, nor toward scientism or rationality more broadly. Rather, she proposes adjustments in method in her argument that

science must respect lived experience and her Black feminist literary pragmatist case for a wider view of what might fall within the umbrella of social science. Like Gilman wanted to see androcentrism removed from these approaches to harness their power, Fauset wanted to root out racist as well as sexist bias in the starting assumptions.

Jessie Fauset and W.E.B. Du Bois both understood a broad scope of her writing as simultaneously literary and scientific, grounded in a mindset of empirical study. When Du Bois recommended Fauset to receive support from the American Fund for Public Service and Individual Creative Work to study racial problems in France in 1923, he made the case plainly for Fauset's interdisciplinary intent: "She wishes to study this contact not simply from the scientific point of view but to make her interpretation of the facts a contribution to literature as well as to sociology," he says. In a characteristically pragmatist refusal of dualism, Du Bois does not assume that literature and sociology must be inherently separate endeavors; disciplinary pluralism generates value in his framework. Literary interpretation of facts enhances what would otherwise be a "simply" empirical study, and rigorous observation grounds the strength of the literary "contribution." Du Bois also resists placing the disciplines in hierarchy; science is not superior here. After recounting Fauset's impressive academic credentials, he continues, "She is a writer of prose and poetry with an unusual gift for keen and subtle analysis and is also a student of social problems." Du Bois' recommendation emphasizes Fauset's literary creativity first and her study of social interests second. She is a writer *before* she is a sociologist, but her capacity for "keen and subtle analysis" links these two pursuits (letter to Anna Davis, May 9, 1923). This recommendation was written just ten months before *There Is Confusion* was published, and three years after *The Crisis* ran the "novelette" that Fauset expanded into *Plum Bun*; Fauset certainly

had social science on her mind over the period of drafting both novels.¹⁶⁷ At least some academic audiences were receptive to her empiricist mission: when *Plum Bun* came out, the *American Journal of Sociology* ran a review alongside a list of nonfiction titles, praising the book “because it is descriptive rather than moralistic and sensationalistic” (“Review of *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* by Jessie Redmon Fauset” 526).

Fauset clearly articulates her expansive take on what might be considered social science in a pointed debate on race and research with the white sociologist Edward B. Reuter, published in *The Survey* in March and April of 1919. She also indicates the high social stakes of that take on standpoint and method, especially for women of color, and the exchange is worth examining in detail. At the time, Reuter was a young academic who had just adapted his University of Chicago dissertation into his first book, *The Mulatto in the United States*. The publication set him on a path toward international recognition for his scholarship on African American people and is representative of trends in white progressive social science of this era. In the 1930s, Reuter would go on to serve as president of both the American Sociological Society and the Sociological Research Association; he concluded his career at Fisk and Charles S. Johnson was among those to write a eulogy when he died in 1946 (“Edward B. Reuter”). However, like other white social scientists and cultural commentators, he frequently reproduced stereotypes as facts, offering academic legitimacy to prejudiced beliefs. The agenda of *The Mulatto in the United States* is to explain “the superiority of the Mulatto” over “the black Negroes,” and Reuter blends his data with an array of racist and colorist commonplaces to make his case, making statements like “[p]sychologically, the mulatto is an unstable type” that always aspires to approach whiteness (102). The book took a then-controversial stance that social rather than biological

¹⁶⁷ The title of that novelette recalls Gilman’s call to feminist consciousness: “The Sleeper Wakes.”

factors generated racial difference, but Reuter defended by another method the same assessments of Black “inferiority” that eugenicists, phrenologists, and others made on spurious biological bases, and at times implicated innate difference in his language.

Fauset wrote a review that took Reuter to task for his dangerous pseudoscience. In it, she frames her critique explicitly in terms of scientific method, rebuking him on the terms of his own academic discipline rather than on the terms of racial prejudice. “Mr. Reuter makes many unsupported statements,” she opens, before proceeding to dissect examples of flawed logic and to refute incorrect facts that undergird faulty conclusions. “There are many...surprises, the result of conclusions drawn *a priori*,” she writes, and “much one-sided reasoning” (Review of *Mulatto* 842). By documenting how Reuter’s work fails to meet basic standards of scholarship, Fauset attacks bad science while reaffirming the value of scientific methods when competently executed.

She elevates the perspectives of Black women in her most strident objection, which is to Reuter’s claims about miscegenation and intermarriage as occurring almost exclusively “even in slavery...between Negroes and the worst class of whites—prostitutes, criminals, jail-birds” on the basis of Black men’s pursuit of white women (Review of *Mulatto* 842). To draw this conclusion, Fauset delicately notes, Reuter must ignore the children born to Black women raped by white men, including under slavery. She flags that this is more than an oversight, quoting where Reuter explicitly rejects these women’s testimony and that of their families: “‘No scientific credence,’ he says, ‘is to be given to the stories of so many mixed-bloods that they are descendants of prominent men.’” (842). In the production of knowledge, Reuter devalues African American oral history; Fauset insists on it. Larger questions of academic method and epistemology lurk in their disagreement: what counts as legitimate empirical evidence? What

kinds of empirical evidence—from whom—are necessary to make valid truth claims? In the absence of certain truth, how do we determine working truth to guide future action and inquiry?

Fauset concludes her review with two sentences I read as an assertion Black feminist standpoint theory in the vein of Anna Julia Cooper, who also critiqued epistemological overreach in both scientific and literary publications by white and male “authorities.” Fauset declares Reuter’s fundamental incompetence to grasp Black perspectives, and she affirms racial political solidarity while challenging the artificial demarcations of the color line, rejecting the distinction that Reuter draws within the race:

The psyche of the Negro, be he black or mulatto, is beyond Mr. Reuter’s ken. It is this which renders his book, with all its array of names and figures, comparatively valueless, and indeed puts it in the class of writings which he ascribes peculiarly to Negroes, that is, biased, unreliable and unscientific. (843)

What most fundamentally renders Reuter’s work “unreliable and unscientific” for Fauset isn’t just sloppiness, but Reuter’s inability to think beyond his own “objective” perspective enough to understand that there might be another. This study, to Fauset, represents a particularly flagrant iteration of what Yeziarska called “the deep, unutterable gulf between the professors who were analyzing” and the racial Others “being analyzed” (qtd. Phelps 906-7). Fauset makes much the same point as Anna Julia Cooper did in rebuking William Dean Howells’s self-proclaimed attempt at “representing *the best colored society*”: “he gives only a half truth, and that a partisan half truth. One feels he had no business to attempt a subject of which he knew so little, or for which he cared so little” (*Voice* 202-3). With a wry sense of humor, Cooper extends her criticism

of Howells into a more general observation about intellectual hubris as a feature of what Tema Okun has called “white supremacy culture”: “Were I not afraid of falling myself into the same error that I am condemning, I would say it seems an *Anglo Saxon* characteristic to have such overweening confidence in his own power of induction that these is no question which he would acknowledge to be indeterminate” (“White Supremacy Culture”; *Voice* 203).

The passage of further time and the added truth halo of scientific presentation adds to the gravity of Reuter’s offense. Anna Julia Cooper extended a prominent rhetorical olive branch to misguided men at the outset of *A Voice from the South*, citing scant public representation of Black women’s perspectives: “our Caucasian barristers are not to blame if they cannot *quite* put themselves in the dark man’s place, neither should the dark man be expected fully and adequately to reproduce the exact Voice of the Black woman” (*Voice* iii). But in Fauset’s estimation, Reuter doesn’t deserve this degree of grace over twenty years later. His subjects’ voices were available to hear, but he failed and even stubbornly refused to listen. Reliable sociology requires both the recognition that the standpoint of lived experience might provide a clearer, closer view of things and the intellectual humility to acknowledge the limitations of what can be known and packaged with neat authority. Without these things, social scientific apparatus amounts only to bells and whistles that distract from the actual truth—“valueless” at best and harmful at worst (Review of *Mulatto* 842). Or as Dewey put it in his case for publicly engaged academic method, “[t]he only guarantee of impartial, disinterested inquiry is the social sensitiveness of the inquirer to the needs and problems of those with whom he is associated” (*Reconstruction* 123). Reuter, Fauset declared, had not nearly enough of this sensitivity despite

the availability of resources and contacts to cultivate it.¹⁶⁸ None too happy to be panned, Reuter wrote a dismissive response that ran the following month alongside a rebuttal from Fauset.

When Reuter defends his method with a denigration of Fauset's in affective and literary terms, Fauset doesn't bite. Instead, she keeps the conversation narrowly empirically focused before offering a provocatively wide definition of science that, in pragmatist fashion, rejects a bright line between disciplines and between "rational" and "emotional" thinking. Published under the banner "Color and Culture," both Reuter's and Fauset's letters to the editor center on scientific methodology (125). Reuter complains that Fauset misread his "painstaking, scientific investigation" of "facts [that] are not pleasant." He argues for the neutrality of his science before dismissing *her* method as rooted in wishfully "sentimental fiction" and cheap ad hominem rhetoric: "The method of criticism becomes rather crude at the point where Miss Fauset attacks my statement in regard to the failure of Negroes to support the more radical movements for their betterment." Fauset yields no ground, responding claim-by-claim, with meticulous citation, to statements that Reuter makes in error or without sound evidence. For example, she says that Reuter understates NAACP membership by an order of magnitude, citing 9,500 members rather than over 45,000 at the time of the book's publication, and she notes the complete lack of support behind his declaration that racially mixed marriages "are frequently marriages of mulattoes with the poorer and lower class of white women" (even if "the groom is of some importance") and that distinguished orators don't provide evidence of Black intelligence because "oratory is an abdominal rather than a cerebral exercise" ("Color and Culture" 125; *Mulatto* 288). She punctuates her rebuttal with this unifying criticism: "My objection," she reiterates, "is

¹⁶⁸ As a member of his research team in the summer of 1918, Anzia Yezierska made similar though much more ambivalent accusations against Dewey's own approach to sociological research in immigrant communities, questioning whether methods of "disinterested" inquiry would ever be up to the task of reaching a requisite level of sensitivity (see, e.g. "Wings" and *All I Could Never Be*).

to his unscientific method.”

Strikingly, Fauset does not directly object to Reuter’s critique of *her* method as a “crude” iteration of “sentimental fiction.” Instead, she questions whether such an accusation has any practical import, regardless of whether it is levied fairly or not. “What difference does it make if it is crude if it is honest, which I take to be synonymous with scientific?,” she quips. In contrast to her meticulous preceding paragraphs, this provocative equivalence nearly feels glib. But her careful draft manuscript makes clear that Fauset didn’t simply dash this letter off. The handwritten draft reveals strong feelings that remain textually intact save for dialed back punctuation in the final version, e.g. “What does make a difference though is that Mr. Reuter feels he is being abused (!) for not knowing of the rapid growth of the N.A.A.C.P. But it is his business to know” loses its underline and exclamation point in publication but does not get reined back otherwise (letter to Paul U. Kellogg, April 5, 1919). Fauset’s epistemological claim is deliberate, and it deserves real consideration as a statement of belief.

By equating honesty and science, Fauset posits a radically expanded sense of the field in which legitimate, serious knowledge production can occur. As I noted earlier, Fauset’s argument anticipates the language that John Dewey uses to ground *Art as Experience*. “Even a crude experience, if authentically an experience,” he says in the first chapter, “is more fit to give a clue to the intrinsic nature of esthetic experience than is an object already set apart from any other mode of experience” (9). Dewey’s “crude,” qualified by “authenticity,” mirrors Fauset’s “crude,” qualified by “honesty.”¹⁶⁹ Both thinkers frame lived experience as the appropriate starting point for investigating truth, be it aesthetic or social. If science is the process of verifying (in the

¹⁶⁹ Dewey contributed four articles to *The Survey*, and he was actively engaged in sociological study in 1919—in fact, he had recently finished the Polish study in which Yeziarska took part (Boydston 73). It is entirely plausible to consider that Dewey encountered Fauset’s argument as a reader of the journal. One might even fancy that her phrase stuck in his mind.

Jamesian sense) what is true, that can and must happen by multiple methods across multiple sites—sometimes better by “crude” ones than “sophisticated” ones. A sledgehammer aimed squarely at a large nail does far more good, and less harm, than a surgical scalpel improperly directed. The particular “crude” and weighty method that Fauset defends is that of bringing Black people’s lived and reported experience to bear—for example, in understanding the class dynamics that motivate and disincentivize interracial marriages in early 20th century America. And although Fauset defends her mode of criticism and not her method of artistic production in the Reuter exchange, her use of “honesty” as a key term leaves critical space to *also* consider imaginative art as a potential site of science, by Fauset’s definition. Fiction is, by definition, not entirely factual and not an exact reproduction of real-world events: it might, however, represent elements of life honestly or dishonestly, with empirical validity or without, as science or not.

To read Fauset as implying such a bold claim is more natural in the intellectual context of early 20th century pragmatism than it might feel in today’s intellectual culture. John Dewey consistently wrote against the separation of literature from science across his long career, describing how he understood their interaction in great detail. In “The Logic of Judgments of Practice” (1915), for example, Dewey relates scientific and other forms of knowing as all projects of inference, all mediated by language—a point he demonstrates literarily, with repeated reference to the famous footprint in *Robinson Crusoe*. One of his strongest statements on the relationship between disciplines is his earliest work of aesthetic commentary, “Poetry and Philosophy” (1891), where describes “[t]he present separation of science and art, this division of life into prose and poetry” as “an unnatural divorce of the spirit” and an “unnatural wound.” To heal it will be particularly to the science’s advantage, he argues, because literary art has well preceded technical fields in providing certain kinds of insight. Humankind’s organic movement

toward unity, he says, “has found expression by anticipation in poetry” and “must find expression by retrospection in philosophy” (116). Anna Julia Cooper argued for a similarly intertwined relationship in the inverse, regarding literature as “the expression of what is permanent and best” from other disciplines, including “religion, science, art, and economics” (*Voice* 57).

While Fauset, Cooper, and Dewey agree on the idea of a holistic pursuit of truth, Black feminist and Deweyan pragmatisms diverge somewhat in their characterizations of ideal science. Fauset sounds like Dewey but even more like Cooper, who goes a step further than Dewey in bucking “dominant theories of her day” and demonstrating “how the natural and social sciences are ‘inside’ culture, not apart from it” (May 142).¹⁷⁰ Though Dewey desired a bridge between poetry and science, he nonetheless envisions them as strictly distinct entities and the latter as the exclusive purview of “highly specialized” experts who are, in the ideal case, methodologically secure from bias (“Logic of Judgments” 268). Though elsewhere highly attentive to the pervasive ramifications of individual perspective, he argues that “[s]cience or theory means a system of objects detached from any particular personal standpoint, and therefore available for any and every possible personal standpoint” (“Logic of Judgments” 269). For Dewey, the “depersonalizing” activity of scientific knowledge-making allows “repersonalizing in new and more fruitful modes of practice” (“Logic of Judgments” 269). Cooper is more skeptical that such depersonalization is either possible or desirable. “No man can prophesy with another’s parable,” she says: “It is only through the unclouded perception of our tiny ‘part’ that we can come to harmonize with the ‘stupendous whole’” (*Voice* 176-167). For her, the specificity of African

¹⁷⁰ Contemporary feminist and pragmatist philosophers of science are more apt to follow Cooper’s prescient lead than to maintain Dewey’s rigidity. For a theoretical and genealogical account of critiques along this line, see Jane Duran, *Philosophies of Science/Feminist Theories* (1998). For a recent and highly accessible version, aimed toward practitioners, see Matthew Brown, *Science and Moral Imagination: A New Ideal for Values in Science* (2020).

American women's experiences provides both insight and evidence for what cannot otherwise be established, and the individual standpoint is an indispensable tool in the formation of knowledge. And even if "personalization" weren't an active aid, to feign "depersonalization" is a dangerous exercise.

Cooper routinely elevates the potency of cultural conditioning, inherited ideology, and vested interest. She argues that what feminist philosopher Sandra Harding would later term "strong objectivity" tends to miss critical truths in ways that support prevailing structures of power and inequality.¹⁷¹ "The extent...of the optimism in my philosophy," she wrote to Charles S. Johnson, "is that (Statisticians and Social Science Research compilers to the contrary notwithstanding) the solutions of our problems will be individual and not *en masse*; the habit of generalization and deductive logic has done its worst." ("My Racial Philosophy" 237). So-called objective science has a long history of supporting white supremacy and other forms of domination, inadvertently and very often with clear and pointed intent, and over her long career Cooper remarked on the ongoing contortions of supposedly neutral inquiries and conclusions. "Efficiency experts contrive attractive sinecures in officialdom, toothsome sops for Cerberus, guaranteed to keep that beast off at the approved distance from all movements in the life stream," Cooper wrote of institutional gymnastics to uphold separate but (un)equal education in the late 1930s, for example ("Angry Saxons and Negro Education" 148).

. Both Fauset and Cooper shrewdly observe how ideologies of objectivity often slip into rhetorics of objectification. Like Cooper, Fauset demonstrates how "'discoveries' or 'findings' about the nature of reality" such as Reuter's frequently represent "the outcome of ready-made assumptions about the 'natural' social order, about inherent and immutable differences in kind

¹⁷¹ See Harding's "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is 'Strong Objectivity'?" (1992).

between groups of humans, and about the ability to measure and quantify biological superiority or inferiority” (May 142). Because these ready-made assumptions were overwhelmingly the product of institutions segregated by gender as well as race, Cooper argued in a vein similar to Charlotte Perkins Gilman that “there is a feminine as well as masculine side to truth” in all disciplines (*Voice* 60). Cooper saw these sides “related not as inferior and superior, not as better and worse, not as weaker and stronger, but as complements—complements,” she emphasizes, “in one necessary and symmetric whole” (*Voice* 60). Women’s oppression and exclusion had left representations of truth far from symmetric, and thus far from whole. Speaking at the NACW’s national convention in 1922, Fauset sounded a pragmatic note in her characterization of the suppressed half: “The sincerity, the determination, the forthrightness of womanhood are in this N.A.C.W. and that quality which makes women so much more so than men realize that *the practical good is in the last analysis the thing to be secured*” (qtd. Wall 51, italics mine).

Fauset’s idea of science as honesty is more radically democratic and disciplinarily flexible than Dewey’s view of science, and her accounts of “honesty” and “truth” together represent an extension of Black feminist pragmatist epistemology into the realm of literary aesthetics. “Truth” is a key word for Fauset when she discusses her own writing; she clearly valued and prioritized it as an author. In a 1932 interview with *Southern Workman*, for example, Fauset describes how she, Walter White, and Nella Larsen all drew motivation to write out of affront at white author T.S. Stribling’s popular 1922 novel *Birthright*. Sympathetically intended but ill-founded, Stribling’s representation of a Harvard-educated “mulatto” man’s struggles were received by many white readers as a genuine account of how Black Americans experienced the “race problem.” In the face of rampant stereotyping and misrepresentation on page and stage, empirical accuracy within literary representation carried significant stakes for the advancement

of Black people. In the language of logic and empiricism, she explains, “We reasoned, ‘Let us who are better qualified to present the truth than any white writer, try to do so’” (Starkey 219). She emphasizes furthermore the authenticity of her own work, which many white readers found hard to believe, including those who had a degree of social and professional contact with the kind of educated Black women and men on whom Fauset focused her work.¹⁷² “All of my novels have been taken from real life,” she says, before underscoring, “Yes, as stories they are literally true” (Starkey 219). In other words: conveying and interpreting the raced and gendered lived experiences of African American women is a core aim of Fauset’s fiction. This is Black feminist work.

It is also work that many white critics of the period considered incompatible with aesthetic achievement: accusations of “propaganda” were a go-to dismissal of Black writing just as accusations of “sentimentality” were a go-to dismissal of women’s writing across the racial spectrum. Mary Church Terrell bemoaned in *A Colored Woman in a White World* (1940) that “Nobody wants to know a colored woman’s opinions about her own status or that of her group. When she dares to express it, no matter how mild or tactful it may be, it is called ‘Propaganda,’ or labeled ‘Controversial’” (qtd. Harker 61). As Fauset recounted in 1922, “A distinguished novelist said to me not long ago: ‘I think you colored people make a great mistake in dragging the race problem into your books and novels. It isn’t art’” (“Some Notes on Color” 76). W.E.B. Du Bois aimed to defang white accusations of “propaganda” by radically redefining the scope of the word with his famous, much debated, and frequently misunderstood claim that “all art is propaganda and ever must be” (“Criteria of Negro Art” 296). There is no such thing as

¹⁷² Even Mary White Ovington, a co-founder of the NAACP who interacted regularly with Du Bois’s “talented tenth” seemed to marvel in disbelief at the fact of a Black upper or middle class. In her review of *There is Confusion* she asked, “Is this colored world that Miss Fauset draws quite true?” and doubted that “the story of the Negro [was] interesting without much reference to his relation to the white race” (qtd. Sylvander 72).

disinterested creative work, he argues, and the agenda of his own he defines as “propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy” (296). Fauset, however, was deeply unwilling to cede the terms of the debate by reclaiming the word: “good heavens,” she told the distinguished novelist, it’s not propaganda to discuss the race problem in literature: “it’s life, it’s colored life” (“Some Notes on Color” 76). She was pleased to have her debut novel advertised as “a new sort of book about colored people—no lynchings, no inferiority complexes, no *propaganda*,” with that last absence emphasized (qtd. Harker 70-71).

Fauset felt strongly that advocacy should not take precedence over aesthetics; her feminist literary pragmatism opposes Gilman’s in this respect. And though Fauset, like Du Bois, considered truth one of the critical “tools of the artist,” her beliefs also sat at a healthy distance from his on the inherent relationship between art and agenda (“Criteria”).¹⁷³ The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive for her, but she draws a distinction between art that delivers socially significant accuracy and art that directly deploys it for a particular political aim. In her *Crisis* reviews, she routinely bristles at literature she judges to prioritize making a social point or ethical argument over making an aesthetic experience, whether she agrees with the point or not. Even works appearing in explicitly activist venues are not exempt: “The workmanship of Miss Burrill’s play is good, but it is written too obviously to point a moral,” she wrote of a one-act play published in *The Birth Control Review*’s “Negro Number” in 1919 (“The Looking Glass” 343). She also consistently disavowed any personal interest in producing even well-executed social problem novels or stories. “The problem story simply isn’t my *genre*,” she told *Southern Workman*, adding that “It is not my concern to solve a problem, but to tell what strikes me as a

¹⁷³ Like Dewey, Du Bois distinguished between scientific and artistic truth: the artist does not engage truth “as a scientist seeking truth, but as one upon whom truth eternally thrusts itself as the highest handmaid of imagination.” (“Criteria of Negro Art”).

good story” (Starkey 219).¹⁷⁴

For the pragmatist, a “good story” is that which is aesthetically moving. ““Art throws off the covers that hide the expressiveness of experienced things; it quickens us from the slackness of routine,” writes Dewey (*Art as Experience* 109). Imagination and art clarify everyday lived experience by enlivening it, and embrace of messy subjectivity brings one closer to a sort of complex pluralist objectivity, which Dewey often characterizes as movement toward unity in his revision of Hegelian synthesis.¹⁷⁵ And, because art and life aren’t separate, a “good story” (that which has the artistic quality to produce aesthetic feeling or intensified experience) carries other power—including ethical and epistemological. This idea isn’t exclusive to pragmatists, of course. It’s foundational to 19th century women’s political fiction in the sentimental tradition, to the Harlem Renaissance project of cultural representation, and to the craze for utopian speculative fiction in this period—as well as the dystopian warnings more popular today. However, pragmatists do take a unique angle of approach toward the relationship between aesthetics, ethics, and experience. As George Hutchinson has summarized, “artistic values aren’t set ‘with primary regard for moral effect’ (Locke) but ‘to the pragmatist all aesthetic experience ends up having a moral effect. Indeed it is the most effective means of achieving moral development because it trains the sensibilities upon which ethical consciousness depends’” (48).

Beyond the power to convey experience or to generate an affective response, a “good story” also carries the power to break new intellectual ground, particularly around the muddier mysteries of lived experience. As I noted earlier, Dewey contends that a story or a poem can

¹⁷⁴ Nonetheless, Guy Reynolds uses her as an anchor for his chapter on the interwar social problem novel in *Twentieth Century American Women’s Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (1999).

¹⁷⁵ The first chapter of Robert Westbrook’s intellectual biography of Dewey addresses this (“The Hegelian Bacillus,” *John Dewey and American Democracy*) or for an extended discussion, see James A. Good’s *A Search for Unity in Diversity: The ‘Permanent Hegelian Deposit’ in the Philosophy of John Dewey* (2006).

offer a kind of investigative philosophy, generating a “clue” that more traditional philosophical retrospection” can follow (*Art as Experience* 9). “The philosophy of Shakespeare and Keats,” says Dewey, “accepts life and experience in all its uncertainty, mystery, doubt, and half-knowledge and turns that experience upon itself to deepen and intensify its own qualities—to imagination and art” (*Art as Experience* 35). William Braithwaite described Fauset’s novels in adjacent terms, as animated by “the philosophy of a tremendous conflict; the magnificent Shakespearean conflict of *will* and *passion*...created imaginatively from the realities” (26). As Nicholas Gaskill has elegantly summed up translational and intensifying function of art in a pragmatist framework: “mediation facilitates immediacy” (*Chromographia* 36). This immediacy mattered to Jessie Fauset, and her leading priorities for a “good story”—that it be “honest” and that it offer artistic force *uncompromised* by agenda (though not necessarily without it)—are pragmatist aesthetic criteria. In her pragmatist aesthetic framework, these qualities enhance rather than diminish a story’s ethical and epistemological power.

Conclusion: Literary Vision

Pragmatism’s prevalence within the Harlem Renaissance has been compellingly documented.¹⁷⁶ However, the prevailing account still relies heavily on tracing genealogies of influence from male thought leaders with footholds in academia. W.E.B. Du Bois was a self-

¹⁷⁶ Still nowhere has this been done more thoroughly than in George Hutchinson’s seminal account of the movement’s interracial affiliations and intraracial diversity in *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (1995). Hutchinson builds on influential scholarship by Houston Baker, Cornel West and others. Tracing the influence of philosophy on literature, Baker argues in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1989) that pragmatism initiates American modernism. Walton Muyumba’s *The Shadow and the Act: Black Intellectual Practice, Jazz Improvisation, and Philosophical Pragmatism* (2009) and Michael Magee’s *Emancipating Pragmatism: Emerson, Jazz, and Experimental Writing* (2004) are other notable titles on the tradition of African American literary pragmatism, both with masculine focus.

avowed pragmatist and a mentee of Willam James.¹⁷⁷ Philosopher Alain Locke, another trainee of James and Josiah Royce at Harvard, crafted what Leonard Harris has called a “critical pragmatism,” characterized by a theory of value that resembles and in many respects predates John Dewey’s. Charles S. Johnson was a close reader of Dewey, and he was trained directly in both Dewey’s and James’ academic lineages through the sociologist Robert E Park, who championed a tightly interwound relationship between literature and sociology (Huchinson 58).

¹⁷⁸ Boasian anthropology offers another close touchpoint of mutual influence. Franz Boas and John Dewey worked together closely at Columbia, where they co-taught a seminar together (Hutchinson 66). Boas’ prominent literary-minded students included Zora Neale Hurston, as well as Jessie Fauset’s half-brother, Arthur Huff Fauset (70). The interdisciplinary, multi-generic approach of writers such as Du Bois and Hurston has been of particular interest to literary scholars; it is one of pragmatism’s signature visibilities in Harlem Renaissance writing, but it has not been as prominent in accounts of Fauset’s work.

Fauset remains peripheral despite historical credentials that make her very plausibly viable for wide recognition as a public intellectual. Previous scholarship has established that Jessie Fauset echoed, engaged, or narratively represented the nearly ubiquitous current of pragmatist influence in progressive activism and social thought, but it has so far stopped just shy of identifying her writings as instances of novel pragmatist theory or Fauset herself as a

¹⁷⁷ Cornel West was the first to reclaim Du Bois as a pragmatist, and he traces the philosophy’s own literary lineage, starting with Emerson, in *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (1989).

¹⁷⁸ See also, e.g., “The Intertwining of Culture and Nature: Franz Boas, John Dewey, and Deweyan Strands of American Anthropology” by Gabriel Alejandro Torres Colón and Charles A. Hobbs (2015) and “Diasporic Identities: The Science and Politics of Race in the Work of Franz Boas and W. E. B. Du Bois, 1894-1919” by Julia E. Liss (1998).

pragmatist.¹⁷⁹ As the connections I have traced show, this next step to take is not a large one, considering her intellectual network and the substance of some of her overlooked nonfiction writing.

Adding Jessie Fauset to the ranks of recognized Black feminist pragmatist thinkers enriches literary and intellectual history's still incomplete record of American pragmatism's development in its "classical" era, particularly on aesthetics. Fauset's acute awareness about the difficulty and slow pace of social progress and her outsider's eye on social science differentiates her pragmatism—like that of other black feminist pragmatists—from Dewey's sometimes abstract optimism. Her combination of skepticisms and hopes contributes to her investment in a pluralistic approach to advocacy and activism, one that roots itself in experience to find use in different modes and modalities of intellectual reasoning and emotional appeal, some of which appeal to people's sense of commitment to a community, others which appeal to individualist motives, as I will discuss in the next chapter. Fauset shares a belief with her contemporary pragmatist and civil rights contemporaries that art carries ethical potential, but her account of its power is ambivalent relative to her peers. Much like Yeziarska's ambivalence characterizes her complex relationship of enthusiastic but skepticism-tinged alliance with Dewey's ideas, Fauset's particularly differentiates her from W.E.B. Du Bois, the mentor and colleague whose titanic influential contributions to American thought and society often engulf Fauset's wholesale.

¹⁷⁹ Gregory Phipps comes closest to such a claim, but he distinguishes between 19th century theory and 20th century fiction. He characterizes his work as tracing a "literary pragmatist narrative," defining literary pragmatism as "a series of reading practices that track long threads that run across diverse forms of writing—a method of exploration that does not actively blur disciplinary boundaries so much as it seeks instances of blurring, opposition, influence, and synthesis in the narratives that wind through the works of authors, philosophers, essayists, and activists" (239, 4). "[L]iterary elements," he says, "ultimately emerge as the aesthetic shapes of pragmatist principles" (10).

In affirmatively approaching Jessie Fauset as a philosophical pragmatist, I offer a small contribution to a much larger project in intellectual history to appropriately recognize the contributions of Black women writers and thinkers. I heed Brittney Cooper's arguments that the "story of serious Black women's intellectual thought is not solely the province of Black women on the radical left" and that race women have often been underestimated in the "the range of ways that they sought to throw off the dictates of Black respectability politics, to create new formulations of gender, and to offer new ideas of what a Black public might look like" (29, 139). I mark Mia Bay's observation that Black women thinkers remain largely neglected outside of literary criticism, and I observe literary criticism's own not insubstantial thin spots, including in its pragmatist wing (1). I also note calls in contemporary Black feminist philosophy, including from V. Denise James and Kristie Dotson, to think more broadly about the "set of legitimate questions, methods, and sources for our philosophical pursuits" (James "Reading Anna Julia Cooper with William James" 35). Feminist literary pragmatism, I suggest, offers an avenue to draw literary criticism's attention to Black women thinkers into a philosophical frame, while also offering literary critics an angle for approaching the modernity and intellectual boldness of writers who, like Fauset, have been underestimated.

I believe Fauset's case suggests that scholars can continue to search fruitfully for others in the realm of literary art and that literary historians can continue to gather the writers who have already been identified into a meaningful collective literary tradition. The feminist literary pragmatist themes of knowing and feeling also suggest promising connection points to recent interventions in Black feminist intellectual history and theory, including around extending the history of intersectionality and Black feminist standpoint theory, and in epistemological centering of affect. Brittney Cooper has argued that race women like Fauset sought "to give

shape and meaning to the Black body in social and political terms, to make it legible as an entity with infinite value and social worth. In doing so, they hoped to create livable terms upon which Black women could be both known epistemologically, and upon which Black women could live and engage socially.” (21). Jennifer Nash has sought to “imagine black feminism as an affective project—a felt experience—as much as it is an intellectual, theoretical, creative, political, and spiritual tradition” and “to craft alternative genealogies of affect theory that recognize and center the long attachment of black feminist theory to the felt life” (Nash 30). In the mode of feminist pragmatist recovery, what kind of genealogy might Fauset help scholars reconstruct?

The Black feminist pragmatist thought tradition more broadly is a major one, with many points for beginning and connecting. Though Black feminist pragmatism is a nascent field of academic study under the broader rubric of philosophical pragmatism, the word “pragmatism” has long been a touchstone in Black feminist praxis and theory. Its relevance in the common-use sense of practicality is obvious: in the face of serious oppression, the need to effect change is high-stakes and urgent. However, the pragmatism of black feminism should not be mistaken for sober compromise, concession, or focus on short-term goals. Black feminist scholarship has defined specific forms of *philosophical* pragmatism as a core element of black feminism across its many formulations, along with other major pillars including intersectionality and standpoint theory. In their influential collection *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women* (1993), Stanlie James and Abena Busia influentially staked a claim for “visionary pragmatism” as the heart of Black feminist thinking:

Black feminists are simultaneously envisioning incremental changes and radical transformations not only within Black communities but throughout the broader society as

well. Ultimately, the humanistic visionary pragmatism of theorizing by Black feminists seeks the establishment of just societies where human rights are implemented with respect and dignity even as the world's resources are equitably distributed in ways that encourage individual autonomy and development. (3)

Incremental change is necessary to improve lives now and to pave the way for future change; incremental change also does not suffice to attain justice or future flourishing in inequitable systems, quickly enough or ever. Building on James and Busia, Collins describes the challenging balance as “creative tension”:

A creative tension links visionary thinking and pragmatic action. Any social theory that becomes too out of touch with everyday people and their lives, especially oppressed people, is of little use to them. The functionality and not just the logical consistency of visionary thinking determines its worth. At the same time, being too practical, looking only to the here and now—especially if present conditions seemingly offer little hope—can be debilitating. (*Fighting Words* 188)

Literary art is a powerful tool for envisioning both incremental and radical change, and for assessing the present state of things in intimate terms, as felt in everyday lives. It is also good at presenting creative tension, making it tangible for practical consideration. This staging in order to inspire thought and action is something feminist literary pragmatists like Gilman, Yeziarska and Fauset do in abundance. In the spirit of empirical investigation, Fauset’s storytelling is pointedly pluralistic, rigorously exploratory rather than solution-oriented, and descriptive more

than prescriptive—but not without implications for action. Fauset does not simply bear competent witness to Black middle- and upper-class femininity in the United States just past the turn of the 20th century in her fiction; she observes, interprets, and hypothesizes, employing artistic method as one form of empirical investigation. Put another way, solving a problem is not the same thing as staging or investigating one, and Jessie Fauset's novels stage and investigate abundantly. The lens of Black feminist pragmatist literary empiricism can enrich our understanding of what Fauset's contested literary politics are. It can help shed light, for example, on what kind of Black feminism a novel like *Plum Bun* might offer if it is, as Fauset instructs us in her subtitle, *A Novel Without a Moral*.

Chapter Four: Ethics and Aesthetics in *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*

“To be a colored man in America...and enjoy it, you must be greatly daring, greatly stolid, greatly humorous and greatly sensitive. And at all times a philosopher...”

-Jessie Fauset, *Comedy: American Style* (1933)

“[T]he structure of the future...is a question to be decided each day by every one of us”

-Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* (1892)

Introduction

“Shall the literature of American Negroes seek the bizarre, the unusual, and the exotic, or shall it seek the truth?” W.E.B. Du Bois asked the readers of *Book Review*’s April 1929 issue. He posed the rhetorical question in a review of Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* that centers less around a discussion of the novel’s quality than a defense of the novel’s premise. He describes the book as an interesting tale of two sisters that captures the truth of ordinary African American life as, in fact, “just ordinary human life” (“Review of Plum Bun by Jessie Fauset”). It was the kind everyday female bildungsroman depicting modern “girls’ struggle for independence,...struggle with filial duty, [and] struggle with domestic limitations” that Charlotte Perkins Gilman had called for in 1915, with the promise that such stories “would be eagerly read by innumerable women” (“Coming Changes” 235). But, Du Bois anticipates resistance from white readers uninterested in the “ordinary human life” of middle-class Black Americans and unwilling to engage with “certain unpleasant and controversial subjects.” Delicately skirting these unnamed subjects, he puts a silent racist question out in the open in order to reply: “Why then one asks, should Miss Fauset write meticulously and carefully of a little family of colored folk in

Philadelphia whose two daughters, one white and one black, come to New York?” His answer is that Fauset’s literary method draws out generalized insights predicated on specific ones. “It is because [with] all its likeness to all human life there are subtle and interesting differences arising because of color caste,” he notes, “[t]hus one gets, with thought and study, new lights on human character” (“Review of Plum Bun”). One gets, he says, truth—more than one.

Du Bois suggests that Fauset’s precise and subtle writing offers at least two kinds of interconnected truth, and he invites readers to look for both in her work (albeit defensively). The first is its documentary truth in representing its demographic and the social consequences of “color caste”: sociology with what he calls a “human touch,” or what Yeziarska might have described as the “flesh and blood” of literary personality (Du Bois “Review of Plum Bun;” Yeziarska “Prophets of Democracy”). The second is something more philosophical: “new lights on human character,” for the reader who chooses to respond to Fauset’s careful nuance with their own carefulness, giving the work “thought and study” (“Review of Plum Bun”). In short, Du Bois asks readers to approach Fauset’s work in the spirit of what I described in the previous chapter as her Black feminist literary empiricism, an approach to literature as a site for empirical investigation and philosophical inquiry that prioritizes aesthetics, rather than subordinating them, in a search for truth rooted in Black women’s experience.

As I noted previously, Jessie Fauset is best remembered—when she is remembered—less as a thinker or even as an author than she is as “midwife” to the New Negro literary movement, for the profound influence of her editorial work at *The Crisis* and her generous and attentive mentorship of other authors (Hughes 219). Langston Hughes included Alain Locke and Charles S. Johnson on his shortlist of literary midwives along with Fauset, but the label stuck to her differently than to these men, its feminine associations commingling with assessments of her

femininity and that of her work. Claude McKay, for example, called her “prim and dainty as a primrose” in his autobiography and griped in private that he found her “schoolmarmish,” obviously gendered slights (*A Long Way From Home* 112; qtd. *Harlem in Vogue* 124). However, metaphors of midwifery in the Harlem Renaissance from two of its most important thought leaders, not just from Hughes, suggest a different frame for the concept. Philosopher Alain Locke described himself as “more of a philosophical mid-wife to a generation of younger Negro poets, writers, artists, than a professional philosopher” (qtd. Kallen “Allen Locke and Cultural Pluralism” 121). Locke is sly with this strategic self-effacement: in it, he implicitly compares himself to Socrates, who in Plato’s *Theaetetus* characterizes himself as helping men to birth ideas, a midwife for the soul as his mother was for the body (150b-151b). Du Bois similarly positions himself as giving intellectual birth, thereby midwifing further thought and thoughtful action in others, in “The After-Thought” of *The Souls of Black Folk*: “Hear my cry, O God the Reader; vouchsafe that this my book fall not still-born into the world-wilderness. Let there spring, Gentle One, from out its leaves vigor of thought and thoughtful deed to reap the harvest wonderful” (165). Interpreted philosophically rather than administratively, Fauset’s gendered “midwife” designation does not need to be as diminutive as it has now come to feel.

In this chapter, I ask a question about Fauset’s “midwifery” not as an editor, but as an aesthetically-minded, politically motivated writer: if we understand Fauset as a Black feminist pragmatist public intellectual from her nonfiction and her biographical contexts, what then can we see her deliver as a novelist? This chapter examines *Plum Bun*, Fauset’s best known novel, in order to demonstrate the potential fruits of feminist literary pragmatist reading in an intellectually significant, historically underappreciated text whose interpretation remains contested despite being, as Cherene Sherrard Johnson has characterized, Fauset’s “most

straightforward” novel in addition to her best known (*Comedy: American Style* xv). I suggest that the rubric offers a fresh lens on sticky debates about what to make of Fauset’s careful and subtle approach to social critique in her literature, at both conceptual and stylistic levels.¹⁸⁰ Informed by Fauset’s sociological critique and statements of artistic method and intent, I understand *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* as a project of artistic truth-seeking, balancing the careful, honest scrutiny of a “scientific point of view” with radical attention to subjectivity within the container of what Fauset simply called a “good story”—again, as literary empiricism (Du Bois letter to Anna Davis, May 9, 1923; Starkey 219).¹⁸¹ In the pragmatist aesthetic model, an honest story, well told, is not without ethical consequence.

Fauset clues readers to her project by saying up front what she refuses to deliver while also queuing a lens for reading. As a title, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* is a metaphor of sexual marketplace followed by a provocation. Scholarship has given much attention to the former, but quite little to the latter, which I consider an essential rubric to understanding the novel. In a moment of heated public debate about whether “race writing” might ever be considered full-fledged art rather than merely as moralizing “propaganda,” Fauset demands to be read otherwise. The announcement is all the more striking given that the novel is a

¹⁸⁰ Significant 21st century reconsiderations of *Plum Bun*—all influential to my reading—include Kathleen Pfeiffer’s “The Limits of Identity in Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* (2002), which introduces pragmatist contexts; Susan Tomlinson’s “Vision to Visionary: The New Negro Woman as Cultural Worker in Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *Plum Bun*” (2002), which considers the novel as an intersectional feminist, anti-racist project that represents the convergences and contradictions of the New Negro and New Woman movements; Sharon L. Jones’s *Rereading the Harlem Renaissance: Race, Class and Gender in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, and Dorothy West* (2002), which considers Fauset’s “multidimensional and complex” efforts at a “reconfiguration of...the folk, the bourgeois, and the proletarian” aesthetics against a constraining marketplace (3); and Cherene Sherrard-Johnson’s *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance* (2007), which offers an in-depth look at the multiple significations of “the mulatta as an iconographic coalescence of visual and literary maneuvers” across representations, including Fauset’s (18).

¹⁸¹ Here I recall Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s distinction between morals and ethics, in which she characterizes the former as a matter of backward leaning reliance on habit and tradition and the latter as a science that relies on empirical observation to look forward in assessing right action.

bildungsroman that revolves centrally around the lightning-rod issues of Black female sexuality and racial passing as its young, light-skinned African American female protagonist Angela Murray explores both.¹⁸² However, Fauset nonetheless invokes morality and invites readers to approach *Plum Bun* through the lens of moral or ethical philosophy by titling the book *A Novel Without a Moral*, and I take that subtitle seriously as a point of entry. Fauset engages questions of ethics throughout the novel, but *Plum Bun* actively resists dogmatic forms of moralism and rigid adherence to social convention.

Rather than a fixed or singular moral, or a call to action, I argue, *Plum Bun* instead offers a vantage point from which readers can critically appraise a variety of social and ethical rules, habits, and structures according to the logic they display and the consequences they produce. As Dewey wrote in “The Development of American Pragmatism” (1925), “irrationality is incorporated in our beliefs and institutions. There are bad traditions as there are good ones: it is always important to distinguish.” (12). I agree with Carol Allen that a key “critical function of [Fauset’s] texts” is to “prompt us to reassess our alliances in an intricately webbed world” (74). I add the pragmatist gloss that this is not just a social or ethical stance, but every bit as much an aesthetic one. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey argues that the “moral function of art itself is to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, perfect the power to perceive.” However, he emphasizes, the “individual who has enlarged and quickened experience is one who should make for himself his own appraisal. The way to help him is through the expansion of his own experience by the work of

¹⁸² As Cheryl Wall observes, even in the context of a fairly severe judgment that Fauset stages a “retreat into domesticity, and...denial of difference, which ultimately cripple her fiction,” the topics Fauset is willing to broach are radical for the 1920s: she “dramatizes issues of gender politics, including interracial romance and ‘free love,’ in ways that belie Fauset’s reputation for propriety” (84, 73).

art” (338). Art realizes its moral potential not by moralizing, but by enhancing an individual’s emotional, intellectual, and informational resources to understand something for themselves. Fauset provides provocations and techniques for thought.

In my reading of *Plum Bun*’s amoral ethic, I build and branch from the one detailed pragmatist reading of the novel that currently exists, from Gregory Phipps. I agree with his identification of pragmatist themes Fauset dramatizes and with his assessment that “Fauset’s depictions of femininity and racial identity invoke fundamental pragmatist concerns such as experience, individuality, and social amelioration, bringing a literary perspective to the important but critically underrepresented field of black feminist pragmatism” (227). I take as a jumping off point, especially, his argument that “[w]ithin a genealogy of creative democracy, *Plum Bun* reflects a transition from a Christian ideal of virtue to an aesthetic ideal of beauty” (119). Fauset explicitly treats Angela’s “curious mixture of materialism and hedonism” as amoral (207). Her joint attraction to material beauty and experiential novelty propels Angela in multiple directions, “bad” (e.g. a “shameful” but not immoral affair) and “good” (e.g. personal and career development as a self-sufficient artist). Angela’s approach to living is experimental and oriented toward self-expansion. As Phipps interprets, she “seems to embody a distilled version of pragmatism that stands for no specific ideals or theories beyond the growth of more experience” for the bulk of the book (122). The mixed consequences of Angela’s aesthetic and experiential pursuit test the limits of Deweyan esteem for heightened experience. However, Fauset nonetheless maintains an attitude similar to Dewey’s with regard to the power of aesthetic feeling, the primary force shaping Angela’s amoral development along traditionally moral lines.

Beyond the guiding contexts of Fauset’s life and nonfiction that I discussed in the previous chapter, and the precedent in literary pragmatist scholarship, there are additional

elements of *Plum Bun* itself that lead me to treat this psychological scrutiny as distinctively philosophical work in a Black feminist literary pragmatist modality. *Plum Bun* wears its analytical interests openly as it explores the potential and limitations of individualism in the sociological context of a world in which resources and social privilege remain arbitrarily and inequitably distributed. It approaches social and ethical questions directly, but rather than provide definitive final answers, it scrutinizes the rational and affective processes of thought as characters speak and act out answers. The novel stages intellectual conversations, dramatizes a lecture, and includes explicit analyses of privilege, power, and prejudice in its narration and in the voices of characters' dialogue and thoughts, and it triangulates those perspectives with its authoritative third person omniscient narration.

The first section of this chapter discusses *Plum Bun*'s analytical narrative voice and how it presents and interacts with a protagonist who is centrally characterized by her analytical mind and aesthetic instinct. I argue that Fauset chooses a light-skinned Black female protagonist whom she crafts as an ambitious, self-reflective analytical thinker with honed aesthetic interests and instinct in order to triangulate ethics, aesthetics, and gendered lived experience at the edge of the color line. Angela Murray is shrewd, self-aware, and intensely self-focused in her determination to expand the horizons of her experience and her scope of control over life. She is also a painter with a taste for adventure and for creature comforts. In her artistic endeavors, she is fascinated primarily by the correspondence between external appearance and internal truth, and in her lifestyle pursuits she is drawn to beauty in a range of consumerist and domestic forms.

After establishing *Plum Bun*'s analytic tone and the Black feminist characterization of its highly rational, aesthetically sensitive lead, I turn in my second and third sections toward the novel's engagement of its two major ethical subjects: "sex morality" and racial passing. When

Angela chooses to use the currency of her whiteness in the sexual marketplace, and when she retreats from that choice, the novel explicitly frames these choices as amoral. The novel marks that race and sexuality are inextricable in together setting the standards and the minefields that constrain black women uniquely, along with class as another vector of power. Though the status of black women had changed radically from the mid-Victorian era—which, in America, saw the Civil War and the first decade of Reconstruction—the figure of the mixed-race individual remained an important site for problematizing racial distinction and seeking racial justice, particularly as the 20th century “problem of the color line” saw that line becoming rigidly entrenched in new ways: the demographic category of “mulatto” left the U.S. census in 1900, Jim Crow segregation laws proliferated, and legal restrictions against interracial unions were implemented or increased in many states. Sherene Sherrard-Johnson parses the dominant visual iconography of “identifiably mixed-race women” in the early 20th century as contradictory, with the “tempestuous Jezebel, flapper, or transgressor of the color line often counterbalanc[ing the mulatta’s] image as an exemplar of ladyhood and respectability” in New Negro periodicals (10-1). *Plum Bun* offers both representations in one character as Angela drifts from one model of New Negro Woman to the other and moves through the world of white bohemian New Women as well (Tomlinson).

I argue in the second section of this chapter that Fauset’s attitude toward sexuality prioritizes freedom of choice and assessment of consequences: she charts a middle ground on the question of sex outside of marriage, valuing freedom of choice without valorizing all choices. Embracing the pragmatist mindset of resistance to dogmatism in all its forms, Fauset refuses to endorse either the “old-fashioned” restrictions of Christian moralism or the “free love” ideology of the white bohemian new woman, which she presents as highly vulnerable to manipulation and

abuse by exploitative white men. She is very clear about holding no objection to extramarital sex in principle, if an affair provides either satisfaction or efficacy to dignify it by making it worthwhile. However, she observes that successfully and openly veering from sexual norms is challenging, and it can carry practical drawbacks and risks for women living in a social system of subordinate status and restricted independence. Read in light of this morally neutral stance and in conversation with Anna Julia Cooper, *Plum Bun* represents a development in a tradition of Black feminist pragmatist writing across genres on Black women's sexuality and morality.

In the third section of the chapter, I note that even more than sexuality, Fauset treats the question of passing as a practical issue, premised in the artifice of race as a social construction and the injustice of the segregation and prejudice that accompany that construct. Any ethical complications of racial nondisclosure are precisely that: complications, not violations. I argue that the novel is far more interested in the relationship between sexuality and morality than in the moral status of racial self-identification. Angela's sexual choices and her choices about racial affiliation are closely entwined, and both are indirectly catalyzed by an activist encounter that taps into desire for beauty as a compelling force. It is this aesthetic appeal, rather than an ethical one, that moves Angela to change her mind. Racial pride emerges as an unexpected antidote to a range of choices that yield shame (Fauset's far preferred term for discussing choices that Angela regrets) but that Fauset defiantly refuses to call immoral or unethical.

In this analysis, I diverge somewhat from Phipps's assessment that organic growth is primarily "unpredictable" and "working more through the frustration of immediate objectives rather than the fulfillment of them" (133). It depends on whose perspective and objectives you consider. Phipps argues that Angela's motivations throughout the novel are consistent with "Dewey's pragmatist valuation of "creative experience over habit and routinization" in addition

to “his belief that the individual should occupy many communities within the broader society,” shifting in weight from the former toward the latter over the course of the narrative in response to the former’s failures (118). I find this analysis sound and smart. Where I disagree is with Phipps’s claim that while “apprehension of beauty leads to reconstruction of black women’s communities...the key point is that this development is an *unexpected* consequence of Angela’s experiences” (133). It’s a development that’s unexpected to Angela but that grows in part from seeds that others have sown intentionally. By presenting the indirect ethical fruits of art and activism, Fauset suggests that activists and artists can expect, and therefore value, amoral transitions like the one Angela undergoes as they craft their work with reluctant individualists in mind.

The lens of Fauset’s literary empiricism undergirds my literary critical case for reading *Plum Bun* as rationalist rather than moralist; it also prompts my philosophical case for the novel’s further implications as an early Black feminist contribution to pragmatist aesthetic theory. I am particularly interested in *Plum Bun*’s integration of ethical and aesthetic thinking as united within the psychological parameters of gendered, raced, and classed lived experience. Fauset closely scrutinizes processes of thought and habituation, and her protagonist’s growth emerges not as the result of ethical appeals but through a combination of her experience, her capacity to think logically in ways that balance intellect and emotion, and her reappraisal of beauty.

Within a Black feminist pragmatist framework, Fauset presents ethical, aesthetic, and epistemological forces as effectively inseparable psychologically: this is the novel’s major contribution to pragmatist aesthetics. Reciprocally, these forces shape and are shaped by everyday encounters and thought, as in Dewey’s conception of experience as “transaction:” the

particular shape of their entanglement is variable and inevitably inflected by both social identity and individual character. Fauset uses the form of the novel to scrutinize the intersection, focusing specifically on the lived experiences and individual felt lives of educated African American women. As Jacquelyn McLendon puts it, Fauset “places black women at the center of critical inquiry in order to examine their psychological reactions under conditions of sexual and racial socialization” (29). This focus, coupled with Fauset’s thoroughgoing investment in increasing the social liberty, material security, and mental wellbeing of Black women collectively, is a Black feminist orientation —no less feminist for being, as some have pooh-poohed, “feminine.”

Parsing multiple strands of pragmatist logic in the novel across multiple specific issues, I ultimately argue that *Plum Bun* proposes a mutually reinforcing relationship between experience, aesthetics, and ethics that undergirds a pluralistic approach to advocacy and activism. Within a Black Feminist pragmatist imagining of what social change can look like at the scale of the individual mind, *Plum Bun* pays particular attention to the motivating power of beauty, both in artistic and consumerist forms, and to the relationship between aesthetic sway and moral suasion. In so doing, Fauset suggests that an experience-based aesthetic appeal to and for the black woman can complement—and precede—prosocial moral action for the otherwise politically disengaged individualist. *Plum Bun* addresses the difficult process of social change and transformation at the scale of individual psychology: it’s hard to change minds.

Analytic Voice, Aesthetic Mind

What DuBois described as Fauset’s characteristically “keen and subtle analysis” anchors *Plum Bun*’s content and defines its narrative voice (letter to Anna Davis, May 9, 1923). The third-person omniscient narration does not hesitate to pass authoritative judgment on situations,

but it does so in pointedly pluralistic ways, presenting truths as not necessarily singular or stagnant.¹⁸³ Steering a pragmatist middle course between absolutism and relativism, Fauset routinely triangulates perspectives in her presentation of social facts and matters of belief and choice. Enacting standpoint theory, she frequently presents multiple views of a situation as validly coexisting, often mediating and highlighting inconsistencies between standpoints with an embrace of ironic humor. As in other comedies of manners, that sense of humor also serves the function of social critique. The narrative often presents its synthesis of perspectives and its assessments as sound, thoughtfully considered, open-minded—and correct.

Plum Bun's first pages offer a good example of the novel's frequently wry analytical tone, its investment in aesthetics, and its pluralistic sensibility. Fauset begins by introducing the tiny, respectable middle-class Black neighborhood in southwest Philadelphia in which her protagonist is coming of age, feeling restless and stifled. *Plum Bun*'s comedic opening sentences evaluate the humble block of apartments as objectively unimpressive and unremarkable, notable mostly for all the things it is not: "Opal Street, as streets go, is no jewel of the first water. It is merely an imitation, and none too good at that. Narrow, unsparkling, uninviting," it is an "[u]npretentious little street lined with unpretentious little houses, inhabited for the most part by unpretentious little people" (11). Angela Murray feels comprehensively "fettered" by its drabness, its strict codes of propriety, its satisfaction with mere respectability, and —critically — by the consequences of racist social segregation it embodies. All these factors restrict her freedom and her access to beauty. Nonetheless, Fauset observes that a small home on a modest street means different things to upwardly mobile members of two different generations, neither

¹⁸³ In the recent article "Mind, Body, and Race in Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun*" (2021), Marijana Mikić describes this as "double-voiced discourse," arguing that the omniscient narrator uses "dissonant thought report – not only voicing the characters' consciousness, but also quite deliberately evaluating it – to highlight how race may impact and endanger individual and social cognition." (680).

of which is entirely wrong. Small and drab though it might be, the home they rented-to-own on this street represents the “*ne plus ultra* of ambition” to Angela’s parents, “who had known poverty and homelessness” (12).

Fauset doubles down on the analytical grounding of the novel by crafting a protagonist whom she characterizes repeatedly and from the outset as highly rational: “no sentimentalist,” possessed of a “coldly reasoning instinct” and “native good sense” (142, 73, 243). Angela is presented as having unusually astute powers of perception, which display themselves in precocious social awareness and self-reflectiveness.¹⁸⁴ “At a very early age,” Fauset tells us, for example, Angela “had observed that the good things of life are unevenly distributed; merit is not always rewarded; hard labour does not necessarily entail adequate recompense” (12).¹⁸⁵ Angela also observes that the distribution can change in an instant according to how others observe and categorize her. With “creamy” skin and “softly cloudy, chestnut” hair, Angela is frequently read and treated as white by peers at school, and she comes to associate what Fauset describes as “mere whiteness” with the finer material things of life while convenience-passing with her mother Mattie on Saturday afternoons (14). Simultaneously, she endures recurring experiences of rejection and shock from white friends who learn that she is “coloured” for one reason or another, often through meeting her “rosy bronze” younger sister Virginia, who serves throughout the novel as a “foil who recalls, critiques, and at times deconstructs the literary tradition and social history against which Angela defines herself” (14; Pfeiffer 83). As these experiences

¹⁸⁴ Anna Julia Cooper wrote that the Black woman is “[d]elicately sensitive to her pore to social atmospheric conditions” (Voice iii); Fauset, too, wrote about the psychological sensitizing effects of constantly anticipating prejudice, including at the scale of what we now call microaggressions, as an exhausting and sometimes disorienting act of vigilant self-protection (“Some Notes on Color”).

¹⁸⁵ Words like “labor” and “color” appear with standard American spelling throughout Fauset’s other novels and periodical writing alike. *Plum Bun* was first published in the U.K. due to Fauset’s difficulty getting a domestic publisher, and the copy remained unaltered in U.S. printings.

accumulate from all sides, Angela comes to the assessment that “all the things which she most wanted”—freedom to move and associate as she pleased, access to beautiful spaces, a fair shot at becoming an artist —“were wrapped up with white people,” even the most “broad-minded” of whom treated people of color differently (*Plum Bun* 73, 63).

The fact of Angela’s “coldly reasoning instinct” serves as a challenge to sexist and racist discourse treating Anglo-Saxon men as the only fully rational Americans—and as the people most likely to be out of touch with warmth of heart (73). If that Black feminist statement weren’t strong enough itself, Fauset pointedly introduces Angela’s icy rationality in the middle of a direct statement against white power as in any way a signal of white supremacy. The reason white people possessed a disproportionate abundance of the things Angela wanted? “Not, some coldly reasoning instinct told her, because they were white. But because for the present they had power and the badge of that power was whiteness” (73-4).¹⁸⁶ And if this still weren’t clear enough, Fauset explicitly reminds readers that Angela’s capabilities aren’t related to her white skin or “white blood”: “After all, the same blood flows in my veins in the same proportion,” remarks Virginia, who encourages her sister to use her appearance to say to the world, ‘Look here, this is what a mixture of black and white really means!’ (79).

The fact that Angela’s powers of perception extend into a natural talent for aesthetic observation is a parallel statement of Black women’s full-fledged intellectual capacity and cultural development. When the events of the novel begin, readers meet Angela as a nascent visual artist with a good eye for line, expression, and color, blessed with “the instinct for self appraisal” (13). At the turn of the 20th century, a trainable aesthetic sense signaled both cultural

¹⁸⁶Cheryl Harris later makes a seminal argument for understanding “whiteness as property” in the *Harvard Law Review* in 1993, extensively documenting the long legal history of what it has meant to possess this “badge” in the United States, as historically legitimated in U.S. law (“Whiteness as Property”).

development and intellectual capacity. As Nicholas Gaskill describes, the concept of “color sense” was particularly significant: it “denoted a cultivated talent for seeing and feeling colors...thought to improve with training, decay with neglect, and vary across human populations based on cognitive and social attainments.” It was, in short, regarded as a “badge of civilization” (*Chromographia* 23). Angela has color sense in abundance, and even more than that, a sense of taste that reads as impeccable in upper class white circles. These aesthetic attunements make a statement about Black women’s mental capacity and “Americanness,” as much if not more than her family’s rise to middle class comfort and her general education. Angela’s keen eye for fashion first attracts peers and then baffles them: the fact that she “dresses in better taste than anybody in the room” alone casts so much doubt on her racial disclosure that, in one instance, a man preoccupied by prurient disbelief even secretly follows her home to verify the fact of her “colour” (72-3). Along multiple vectors, Angela learns repeatedly that aesthetics are arguably raced even more rigidly than they are classed; matters of taste represent yet another realm of racial policing in which “incorrect” presentation can carry some form of punishment.

Fauset is consistently careful to distinguish between Angela’s accurate observations and her less definitively reliable inferences, however. “Seemed” is often a key word for the narrative to distinguish itself from its protagonist. For example, the narration notes that “[c]olour or rather the lack of it seemed to the child the one absolute prerequisites to the life of which she was always dreaming” (13). Lacking her mother’s “keener sense of humor” about the absurdity of segregation, Angela fails to recognize that “if the economic status or the racial genius of coloured people had permitted them to run modish hotels or vast and popular department stores her mother would have been there” (15, 17). And, when white peers again and again characterize their unearthed racial prejudice as startled offense at not having been *told* about Angela’s race,

Angela's responses vary in logical validity. In the first instance, she reasons her way from premises to conclusions that are all neither wholly wrong nor wholly right: "Definitely she said to herself 'Mary withdrew herself *not because* I was coloured but *because* she didn't know I was coloured. *Therefore* if she had never known I was coloured she would always have been my friend" (46, italics mine). It is true that known "coloured" status rather than physical appearance caused Mary's withdrawal. However, the "not because I was coloured" is presumptive and even if it weren't, the "always" is childishly shortsighted, too: many childhood friendships are not permanent, even if this one was cut short early, violently, and cruelly by racism.

Angela's thoughts about her circumstances represent a significant portion of the novel, and her analysis of external social forces propels the movement of its plot. After Mary Hastings' rejection, Angela "began to wonder which was more important, a patent insistence on the fact of colour or an acceptance of the good things in life which could come to you in America if either you were not coloured or the fact of your racial connections was not made known" (46). She decides on the latter. To pursue a life characterized by "light, pleasure, gaiety" and most especially "freedom," Angela sets out to make her way as a professional artist in training in New York City, deciding she will not speak about her race (12-13). Angela has no qualms about intentionally passing as white; she has "white blood" along with light skin and rightfully finds it absurd to go out of her way to announce her racial status (to "placard" herself) in effective demand for exclusion and inferior treatment (81, 244). She takes precautionary measures to avoid detection by seeking a bachelorette apartment in Greenwich Village rather than in Harlem and by telling one white lie, Frenchifying her name into Angèle Mory. She succeeds at crossing a color line she knows is absurd and quickly falls in with a circle of white bohemian women artists at art school and in the Village. Her one Black classmate keeps at a chilly distance.

At times, Angela serves as a Fauset stand-in for staking certain major theoretical claims, articulating a specific version of Black feminist intersectionality. One of the most direct is when the narrative spells out that Angela “knew that men had a better time of it than women, coloured men than coloured women, white men than white women” (88). Notably, Fauset’s assessment here does not set up a linear hierarchy in which she claims white women fare better than men of color or vice versa; she refuses to pit the oppression of these two groups against one another, instead restricting her feminist observation to that which is clearly true about the status of women within racial groups. Rather than argue over the degree of oppression, Fauset turns to an analysis of kind, drawing a distinction between the different vectors of advantage and oppression that race and gender confer as identity categories. Upon analysis, Angela draws the conclusion that whiteness primarily confers freedom; maleness primarily confers power. It’s a shrewd distinction between two intertwined but distinguishable forms of privilege, distinctly visible and distinctly felt from the perspective of a Black woman who can never access the force of masculine authority but who can, with limits, access the liberty of being recognized as “free, white and twenty-one” (88).

From this careful intersectional analysis and feeling of potential, Angela again draws a conclusion of dubious value. A brief fantasy of *being* a white man (if she were, she could be president, she muses) slides into the goal of *marrying* a white man: “Power, greatness, authority, these were fitting and proper for men,” she mulls, “but there were sweeter, more beautiful gifts for women, and power of a certain kind too. Such a power she would like to exert in this glittering new world, so full of mysteries and promise” (88). While some read this moment as a retreat toward 19th century domestic ideals of True Womanhood from Fauset, I read it as a retreat from Angela, who balks at her own interest in embodying the violent power of white

masculinity. In a move of psychological self-protection, Angela continues “Not that she envied them [white men],” before again thinking, “Only it would be fun, great fun to capture power and protection in addition to the freedom and independence which she had so long coveted and which now lay in her hand” (88-89). She emphatically does not wish to devalue “coloured” womanhood in her pursuit of radical possibility.

As Angela moves from thinking toward action, Fauset marks that the process is both rational and affective. Angela’s cool analysis blooms into a warm feeling of personal potential as she considers the possible application of her insight: she feels “this sense of owning the world, this realization that other things being equal, all things were possible” (88). Fauset subtly conflates the affective “sense” and the intellectual “realization” through apposition, using the same rhetorical technique Yeziarska employs to equate “head” and “feelings” (“America and I” 160). Angela turns her insight into a course of action by shifting the weight of her feeling-thought back again toward logic. Under existing conditions of inequality, Angela determines to pass in pursuit of the freedom of whiteness; she seeks to marry in pursuit of the pleasure of power associated with masculinity. As she does, Fauset marks how hesitating feeling shapes the experience of reason, marking pacing and pausing in thought with the slow easing of an ellipsis and sudden interruption of an em-dash: “again she said to herself... ‘I might marry—a white man. Marriage is the easiest way for a woman to get [position, power, and wealth], and white men have them.” (*Plum Bun* 112). Her warm desire and her process of thought, with its “cold-bloodedness,” together lead Angela toward an attempt to manipulate the sexual marketplace through her racial presentation that Fauset ultimately presents as both perceptive and misguided (263).

Free Love and Free Choice

“In popular speech, morals usually signifies matters of sex relationship,” John Dewey observes in his 1930 essay “What I Believe” (27). He continues by characterizing prevailing sexual mores as both patriarchal and changing. Much as Gilman did at length in her discussion of “our androcentric culture,” he considers that “[p]resent ideas of love, marriage, and the family are almost exclusively masculine constructions.” These, he says, involve a strange “combination of convention and an exhausted legal system with sentimentality” (*The Man-Made World*; “What I Believe” 27). He imagines that “[t]he growing freedom of women can hardly have any other outcome than the production of more realistic and more human morals,” but declines to comment on what exactly he thinks those new morals might be. His tentativeness on the subject reflects discomfort with the subject and a lack of interest in pursuing the impact of feminism on sexual norms further, but it also reflects an openness to that which is beyond his comfort zone. He argues that the new ethical norms will be marked by a new freedom, but also by a new severity” because “enforced by the realities of associated life as they are disclosed to careful and systematic inquiry (27). Put one way: moral guidelines that are backed by evidence have more power behind them than rules that are arbitrary. Put another: the proof is in the (plum) pudding.

Sexuality is the moral issue that is of greatest significance to Fauset in *Plum Bun*, and a key issue on which she refuses to point *A Moral*, much like Dewey with a personal tentativeness that belies a radical intellectual openness. Though the subtitle cues the reader to look for a moral by denying its presence, Fauset seems to stay true at least to the label of *A Novel Without a Moral* by rarely invokes moral value explicitly, and when it does, the context is more often than not a consideration of sex. Fauset uses “right” and “wrong” fairly frequently, but upon inspection, these words are just as likely to apply to a social faux pas or a tactical misstep as to a

question of character. “Ethical” makes a single appearance; this has to do with the question of racial passing (337). Framings of morality and virtue, however, are tied up exclusively with extramarital sex. The words “moral,” “morals,” “morality,” and “immorality” are each used just once: all four usages refer to questions of chastity (245, 199, 66, 29). The same is true for Fauset’s three uses of the word “virtue,” which she renders once as “verjous” in working class dialect from minor character, the Murray family housekeeper, Hetty Daniels (29, 65). Hetty is a highly significant figure in Angela’s psyche. She represents the narrowness of mind that Angela is eager to escape in her Opal Street home, and she serves as a foil to the many white New Women whom Angela encounters and often admires, if with reserved shoc—most notably Paulette Lister, who practices free love so openly that a man’s shaving set is out on the counter in her bathroom (104).¹⁸⁷ Together, the pair represent two sexual extremes which Angela considers but ultimately navigates between.

Fauset’s send-up of both characters suggests her distaste for both extremes. Hetty is both a comic and a tragic figure in the narrative, defined in large part by her “great fetish [of] sex morality” (66). She takes pride in her own virginity and guards the Murray sisters’ propriety as self-appointed home chaperone. “Then young fellers was always ‘round me thick ez bees; wasn’t any night they wasn’t more fellows in my kitchen then you an’ Jinny ever has in yore parlour,” she tells Angela, “But I never listened to none of the’ talk, jist held out agin’ em and kept my pearl of great price untarnished. I kept my pearl of great price untarnished then and I’m continual to aim to be a verjous woman” (66). However, Fauset depicts this commitment as something that has rendered Hetty emotionally “starved” and desperately repressed (204). In the most brutal

¹⁸⁷ Tomlinson offers an excellent read on Paulette as a character. Other figures in the novel sometimes talk a bigger game than they ultimately walk on ideals including free love, like the socialist Martha Burden, who married despite not believing in marriage. “Martha, made of the stuff which dies for causes, was constantly being torn between theory and practice,” Fauset writes in a critique of radical posturing, however sincere the posture (195).

moment of Fauset's characterization—a more damning indictment of Fauset's partially blinkered class awareness than is her sometimes critiqued choice to write about educated bourgeois figures—she describes how posing for Angela satisfies for Hetty an “unquenchable vanity in her unloved, empty existence” (65). When she tells the story of her virtue, Fauset writes that “[h]er unslaked yearnings gleamed suddenly out of her eyes, transforming her usually rather expressionless face into something wild and avid” (66). Fauset later makes the connection between the desire Hetty denies and the desire Paulette pursues: “Her [Paulette's] face for a moment was all desire. Beautiful but terrible too. ‘She actually looks like Hetty Daniels,’ thought Angela in astonishment. Only, alas, there was no longer any beauty in Hetty's face.” (126-127).

Angela mostly evaluates her sexual options practically and rather dispassionately, considering them in terms of preference and power. The question of sex morality does concern her rather acutely, but she doesn't approach it with the devout fervor of Daniels' “fetish.” Though she admires the bold freedom her bohemian female friends exercise, she doesn't see the “masculine” foundations of Paulette's sexually open lifestyle as particularly personally appealing as she listens to Paulette describe a personal “philosophy” that involves adopting “the qualities of men” as Gilman might also have summarized them: “tenacity and ruthlessness” (104-105). An “innocent,” Angela also retains psychic awareness of taboos with which she was raised (117). Furthermore, she understands the power she can wield by withholding sex, and she determines instead to set her sexual “price” as marriage. Her body provides her with two forms of currency, the visual badge of whiteness and sexuality as commodity, and through the spending power of both she hopes to secure material advantage and a safe position of social status.

Angela finds an obstinate target for this aim when she eventually falls into an on-and-off affair with a white man, Roger Fielding, whose charm primarily emerges from his access to his

father's vast fortune. Her foray with Roger does offer fun, but ultimately very little power and no protection whatsoever. Even the pleasure plays out to be short lived and rather hollow as Roger reveals himself to be a vicious white supremacist, who goes routinely out of his way to thwart any Black people he can who cross his field of view. His entitlement also extends to a sexually exploitative attitude. For much of the relationship, the couple battles antagonistically over the idea of a "free love" arrangement, with Fauset's use of the phrase playing on contradictory associations of freedom and on the market value of sex as a source of feminine power and vulnerability. When Angela finally accedes to Roger's aggressive badgering for sex—in a classic melodramatic climax complete with a thunderstorm and a cut away at the moment of seduction—she nonetheless refuses to allow him to support her financially.

The narrative tone registers resignation and ambivalence about Angela's choice, but not judgment. Using free indirect discourse, the narrative speaks for Angela and endorses her self-assessment: "She was naturally cold; unlike Paulette, she was a woman who would experience grand passion only once, perhaps twice, in her life and she would always have to be kindled from without; *in the last analysis her purity was a matter not of morals, not of religion, nor of racial pride; it was a matter of fastidiousness*" and Roger's gradual encroachment "had not offended that fastidiousness" (199, italics mine). This assessment registers the many codes that might intersect for the idea of purity to hold psychological sway over Angela—individually held moral values, religious rules, respectability politics—and dismisses them all as active considerations, despite having been formative ones. In these conditions, Angela's resistance to extramarital sex emerges as a matter of exacting personal preference that Fauset presents as morally arbitrary, even if an outgrowth of morality-based conditioning: "all my training was against it, you can't imagine how completely my training was against it," Angela tells Roger (320).

Eventually, Roger does propose to Angela some months after she breaks things off with him for the last time. Her rejection of that marriage proposal is uniformly regarded as a triumph by critics; for many and obvious reasons, Fauset intends it as such. However, when Angela ultimately rejects Roger, her change of heart is explicitly framed as amoral. It is worth quoting and examining in detail the narrative description of Angela's lessons learned from the affair:

Angela's brief episode with Roger had left no trace on her moral nature; she was ashamed now of the affair with a healthy shame at its unworthiness; but beyond that she suffered from no morbidness. Her sum total of the knowledge of life had been increased; she saw men with a different eye, was able to differentiate between the attitudes underlying the pleasantries of the half dozen young men in her office; listening, laughing, weighing all their intentions, accepting none. In truth she had lost to a degree her taste for the current type of flirtations (245).

Angela's transformation is explicitly not a moral one, not even by a "trace." Though she feels "ashamed" with "healthy shame" (emphasized in its doubling), it is not a shame of guilt or moral regret that comes with the weight of "morbidness" or repentance. Rather, it's the shame of failure to recognize earlier the "unworthiness" of the affair as a source of satisfaction. In addition to embodying egregious racist cruelty, Roger was also aggressive, unpleasant, and even cowardly, choosing to depend on his father and sacrifice freedom rather than "joining battle with life when the odds were already so overwhelmingly in his favor" (207). The material pleasures Angela briefly derived from their arrangement failed to outweigh these facts of character. Recognizing that, Angela shifts not her morals but her preferences. Now able to discern the

potential for love from the likelihood for sexual exploitation, she finds herself to have “lost to a degree her taste” for men’s flirtations that she recognizes as merely sexually motivated (245). Her shame is accompanied by a level of peace delivered by the value of having learned from experience, increasing her “sum total of the knowledge of life” and sharpening her perspective on men (245).

In accepting sex with Roger, Angela had not chosen to defy conventions of sexuality to fulfill her own desires; in rejecting it, she also had not fallen prey to a great moral failing. She had simply made the wrong choice for her—not morally wrong, just personally unfulfilling. “Theoretically ‘free love’ or whatever you choose to call it, is all right. Actually, it’s all wrong,” she explains to Roger when she dumps him for the last time (320). But despite having no objection in principle, in the wake of her unfulfilling experience of the relationship and its structure, “I don’t want any such relationship with you or with any other man in this world” (320). *Plum Bun* is decidedly not the story of a reformed and redeemed mulatta Jezebel. Fauset is less interested in women’s specific sexual choices than she is invested in a woman’s right to define her own parameters for sexuality, unpressured by threat, by men’s desires, by stereotypes, by the choices of white women in the “ultra modern set,” or by images of what the New Negro Woman must be in order to serve as a credit to her race.

In portraying Angela’s seeming repudiation of the “free love” lifestyle along with her final repudiation of Roger Fielding, Fauset seems neither to fully embrace the sexual liberation of the bohemian New Woman nor to demand the sexual purity expected of the New Negro Woman to earn her respectability.¹⁸⁸ *Plum Bun* offers both representations in one character as

¹⁸⁸ I say “seems” because the terms at the end of the novel of Angela’s reunion in Paris with her ultimate love object, Anthony Cross, remain ambiguous, though they clearly gesture toward a positive romantic future. Fauset leaves open the strong likelihood of marriage but also the possibility of a long-term unmarried relationship with “the

Angela drifts from one model of mixed-race woman to the other, and also moves through the world of white bohemian New Women. Susan Tomlinson considers Angela to represent “the convergence of two conflicting feminist projects” in a “fractured” identity as, alternately but never simultaneously, New Woman and New Negro Woman (97).¹⁸⁹ While I disagree with the assessment of fracture, I agree that Angela’s process of exploration and resolution represents a middle ground for the woman who feels constrained by conventional sexual purity mores but who nonetheless ultimately prefers to leave “free love” to other women. As Tomlinson observes: “Concurrent with the white female egoists’ rejection of chastity codes is the New (Negro) woman’s desire for inclusion in its definition of female; the ideology which upheld white women as virtuous, black women as licentious, was being challenged with both sides demanding the right to define their sexuality, the one as sexually autonomous, the other as potentially chaste, neither as sexually objectified” (96-7). Fauset’s feminist objection to objectification, which pairs movement toward future ideals with practical assessment of current realities, places her soundly within the tradition of Black feminist pragmatism.

At the heart of Fauset’s discussion of Black women’s sexual choices and preferences are undercurrents of power and vulnerability that contextualize both moral code and experiential conditioning. As Brittney Cooper has argued, “in our contemporary feminist critiques of respectability and elitist class politics, often we do not acknowledge the sexual vulnerability that animated [some race women’s] calls for ‘refinement.’” (15). Fauset surfaces in fiction this concern that Anna Julia Cooper addressed in treatise form. In 1892, Cooper presents Black

dignity, the graciousness of an affair of long standing, of sympathy, of mutual need” that was absent from her relationship with Roger (224).

¹⁸⁹ On ethnicity and cultural representations of the New Woman, see also Magdalena Zaborowska’s *How We Found America: Reading Gender Through East European Immigrant Narratives* (1995), especially her Yezierska chapter; Martha Patterson’s *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915* (2005); Cherene Sherrard-Johnson’s *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance* (2007); Charlotte J. Rich’s *Transcending the New Woman: Multiethnic Narratives in the Progressive Era* (2009).

female beauty as a symbol of potential for uplift that is nonetheless haunted by the specter of sexual danger. She describes these girls as not only characterized by “unconscious and marvelous beauty” but also as a “fatally beautiful class...shivering like a delicate plantlet before the fury of tempestuous elements, so full of promise and possibilities, yet so sure of destruction” (32, 24). When Fauset approaches Black women’s beauty and sexuality in *Plum Bun* in the late 1920s, she is forced to navigate the history and present day realities of white sexual violence against Black women while also negotiating increasingly divergent sexual norms for the cutting-edge New Negro Woman and her white flapper counterpart, complicated further by the complex cultural significations of visible mixed race. Where is “best” to land for Fauset is a question of how one’s personal preferences intersect with, and are shaped by, transaction with one’s circumstances.

Fauset demonstrates the sometimes self-reinforcing historical contingency of moral codes and the personal contingency of social ideals by giving the backstory of Angela’s mother, Mattie. A fictional member of Cooper’s generation, she found herself in a highly precarious and vulnerable situation while working for a white actress, Madame Sylvio, who did not consider chastity a personal value and who cared even less for the values of her assistant: “ideals and personal self-respect were too abstract for her slightly coarsened mind to visualize, and at any rate they were incomprehensible and even absurd in a servant, and a coloured servant to boot,” Fauset writes. Believing “all coloured people are thickly streaked with immorality” and “naturally loose,” Sylvio takes the very existence of a “a perfectly white n****r” like Mattie as evidence for this belief—much like Reuter interprets his data about mixed-race people according to his preexisting ideas about miscegenation. This belief translates into direct threat of rape for Mattie as a young woman when Sylvio repeatedly sends her on errands to a politician

with a known reputation for serial sexual assault and a clear interest in Mattie (29-30). Angela's future father Junius comes to the rescue, and "[i]n her [Mattie's] eyes his colour meant safety" (31). She is less vulnerable as a clearly married Black woman than as a single apparently white one. The result is a happy marriage, but one in which Junius' paternalism of "Biblical proportions" and Mattie's nearly salvific adoration renders her utterly dependent on him (22). The domestic ideal represents progress for Mattie; it does not represent an ideal endpoint for Black womanhood, much like the house on Opal Street both is and is not truly a "*ne plus ultra* of ambition" (12). The meaning of "colour" and the meaning of sex inflect one another, according to one's lived experiences: racial pride and sexual shame are related feelings.

Racial Pride and the Ethics of Passing

While questions of sexual ethics are fraught and open-ended in this novel, those of racial passing are much more clear-cut. The novel stresses repeatedly that there is no logical ethical violation in the act of racial passing, incidentally or intentionally.¹⁹⁰ Fault lies fully in "the fallaciousness of the social system which stretched appearance so far from being" and "prejudice based on silly, time-worn tradition" (58, 139). Angela cannot opt out from irrational and unjust circumstances of racial caste that compel her to engage in mental and social gymnastics of one form or another; or, to use Fauset's framing of these gymnastics in *Comedy: American Style*, Angela cannot avoid compulsory philosophy (208). Fauset repeatedly stages situations where it would be clearly both socially bizarre and self-defeating for Angela to announce her race.

¹⁹⁰ McLendon assesses: "Passing may be wrong in Fauset's eyes, but she nevertheless approves Angela's quest for self-definition" and although "she plainly rejects the prizes for which Angela strives, she affirms her right to try for them" (39).

Beyond that, when Angela first asks herself “Was there something inherently wrong in ‘passing’?” intentionally, she concludes no (73). When Angela *does* feel an impulse toward shame in the build-up to her final declaration, “that clear mind of hers warned her again and again that there was nothing inherently wrong or mean or shameful in the stand which she had taken” (332). There are no “seems” or other qualifiers to question Angela’s logical assessment of the institution of racial boundaries and hierarchies, whether those come in “hard” institutional forms or “soft” interpersonal ones. Violating morally bankrupt codes is not immoral. However, just as practicing free love as a woman within the power structure of patriarchy is not without complications, neither is fighting against a pervasive dominating racial system, no matter how absurd.

Fauset shows how tightly systems of race and gender are linked in part by framing the development of Angela’s relationship with Roger as something that alternately catalyzes and follows the unfolding shifts in her attitude toward public racial identification. What causes her first “to waver” in her choice to pass is an incident of pretending not to know her sister at the train station so as not to “out” herself to Roger, when she was supposed to meet her upon her first arrival in New York City (159). “In ‘passing’ from one race to another she had done no harm to anyone,” except Virginia: “it was the one really cruel and unjust action of her whole life” (308-309). While Angela’s passing involved no “inherent wrong,” it did create complications that amounted to practical wrongs, hurting her sister and also herself (355). Angela laments the cost of passing to her connectedness and to her self-concept: “Surely no ambition, no pinnacle of safety was supposed to call for the sacrifice of a sister. She might be selfish,—oh, undoubtedly she had been selfish all these months to leave Jinny completely to herself—but she had never meant to be cruel” (159). “Clearly it is not the sacrifice of sex but the

sacrifice of self that is so costly” McLendon argues, connecting the costly “‘game’ of passing” with “the ‘game’ of ‘sexuoconomics,’ to use Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s term” (43, 41). When Angela ends her period of passing, it happens right on heels of rejecting Roger, in a complementary but not causal climax near the end of the novel. Very shortly after Angela rejects Roger’s proposal in narrative time, and a few years later in fast-forwarded character time, Angela publicly announces herself as a woman of color.

The announcement is an emotional one that emerges from extensive reasoning, but not as a conclusion of that reasoning: it’s a less clear-cut version of the thought first, feeling second model of mental change that Gilman models in *Moving the Mountain*. Angela and a Black classmate at Cooper Union, Miss Powell, have both won prizes to study art in France. However, Miss Powell’s scholarship is revoked for explicitly racist reasons—the presumed discomfort of white women to travel with her.¹⁹¹ Angela initially considers joining the somewhat half-hearted efforts of her white friends to help advocate for Miss Powell, but doesn’t. Angela’s engagement with the question of how to act is brief and inconclusive. She drifts aimlessly from recollection of a childhood mystery book into a moment of explicit philosophizing about racial solidarity:

“‘Just what is or is not ethical in this question of colour?’ she asked herself. And indeed it was a nice question....granted that Miss Powell had lost out by stroke of ill-fortune, did that necessarily call for Angela’s loss? If so, to what end?

Unable to answer she fell asleep.” (338)

¹⁹¹ As Pfeiffer has succinctly recounted, this incident is based on a real one that happened to African American sculptor Augusta Savage (87). I recall here also Fauset’s own withdrawal of admission from Bryn Mawr, explained to her as premised on the presumed discomfort of Southern students, and Fauset’s statement to her readers: “All of my novels have been taken from real life...as stories they are literally true” (Starkey 219).

Angela minimizes the importance of the question in deeming it merely “nice”: she treats it as a field to explore her own sense of self and as a matter for half-idle contemplation, rather than with the urgency of a matter of real stakes for Miss Powell. Fauset further highlights the impossibility of the question for Angela by setting its lack of resolution apart in its own line. Angela doesn’t even decide not to make up her mind about the question; she’s saved from the choice by the intervention of slumber.

Angela finds herself acting “quixotically,” then, when she does announce her race on Miss Powell’s behalf in short order (346). In a room of journalists, a man who acts as her mouthpiece in supporting the scholarship revocation; Angela’s choice as a white woman not to share a state room with her Black classmate speaks for itself, he suggests.¹⁹² Though Angela might otherwise have remained silent, she’s placed squarely in the hot seat when her silence is explicitly identified as consent, evidence for a claim that is “foolish and fallacious, yet containing enough truth to make it sting” (346). Facing Miss Powell’s calm gaze and recognizing her own identity as unwelcome, Angela doesn’t announce the truth of her “colour” from reasoned resolve, but from emotionally broken resolve: “Some icy crust which had formed over [her] heart shifted, wavered, broke and melted” (346).

She later explains her hasty action not in moral terms, but in terms of psychological burden as obstruction to artistic flourishing: “You can’t fight and create at the same time,” she says (354). She is happier when she finds creative fulfillment in her artistic work than when she absorbs herself in hedonistic pleasures that come at high personal cost; she only sees herself as able to create when not draining her psychological reserves in maintaining pretenses. That includes passing, but it also still includes the “fighting” work of political resistance and activism,

¹⁹² Posnock reads this moment as a “whim” emblematic of “modernist joking” on Fauset’s part (81).

in which Angela retains no interest. She continues to resent the idea that anyone should be obligated to provide as sacrifice “the burnt-offering of individualism for some dimly glimpsed racial whole” (117). Her sacrifice was not for the race; it was for herself. Angela remains morally ambivalent and avoidant through the end of the novel; she even escapes the dilemma of American racism entirely by going to France, an idealized site of self-determination in which she expects to put “all problems of colour and their attendant difficulties behind her,” at least “in their present form” (340).

Fauset presents the sacrifice, whoever for, as substantial indeed. The immediate social and professional fallout of Angela’s disclosure is both predictable and drastic. Newspapers run scathing articles under headlines that include “Socially Ambitious Negress Confesses to Long Hoax” and with chilling conclusions, among which is the take that “[s]uch incidents as these make one halt before he condemns the efforts of the Ku Klux Klan and its unceasing fight for 100 per cent. Americanism” (352). Angela gets fired from her job with “cruel immediacy” for “deceit” (353). Some of her white friends stick by her; others (including her one Jewish friend, who speaks often on the oppression of her own group but lacks interest in other social issues) simply disappear without a word. As for the prizes, not only does Miss Powell not have hers reinstated, but Angela’s is also taken away, under a different but equally meager disguise for blatant racism.¹⁹³ The sponsor claims an interest “not in Ethnology but in Art,” backed by the unspoken assumption that a person of color could not possibly produce capital-A Art, despite having already been recognized for that ability (359). Although Fauset rewards Angela by placing her, eventually, in France with a romantic happy ending that would otherwise have been impossible, this tidy happy ending is clearly unrealistic.

¹⁹³ See Catherine Rottenberg’s *Black Harlem and the Jewish Lower East Side* (2013) for historical context on interracial interaction in New York’s neighborhoods.

Angela's transformation thus presents African American racial identification, for the light-skinned woman who might choose otherwise in a culture that forces an artificial binary, as worthwhile on its own terms, immediately, as rewarding—or at least better than the alternative. Susan Tomlinson describes Angela as representing “an organic feminist project. Rather than renouncing the commodification of women, she naturally outgrows it” (92). That Angela outgrows sexual self-commodification in tandem with outgrowing racial self-commodification represents not just an organic feminist project, but an organic Black feminist project. This idea of organic development aligns closely with Pragmatist conceptions of truth and value as always emerging in process, and it reflects a pragmatic investment in mobilizing the individual(ist) who may not otherwise be motivated to feminist or antiracist action out of interest for the collective.

This organic growth in what appears to be a surprising direction for Angela is not random, however, and raw lived experience alone is not quite enough to direct this development: it takes reflection occasioned by a heightened aesthetic experience. The closest catalyst for Angela outgrowing both sexual and racial self-commodification is her attendance at a public talk by the internationally famous Black intellectual Van Meier, a character who serves as the novel's fictional counterpart to W.E.B. Du Bois. Van Meier speaks on the topic of “racial sacrifice” and “urge[s] the deliberate introduction of beauty and pleasure into the difficult life of the American Negro,” but notes that some of this introduction might need to be deferred for some in order to help others. Angela likes the aesthetic idea better than the ethical one. She actively dismisses Van Meier's direct call to “look back and render service to our less fortunate, weaker brethren” but listens receptively to his description of a “pride that enables us to find our own beautiful and praiseworthy...that loves its own as the French love their country, because it is their own” (218-219).

It is the independent recognition of beauty, focused slightly by the content and amplified by the delivery of the speech, that moves Angela. She had already been in long pursuit of the world of art, and she had marveled immediately prior at the beauty of the people of Harlem before the speech started, and the aesthetic force of Van Meier's "clear, deep, bell-like" voice was itself without "equal for beauty, for resonance, for culture" (218). The effect of rhetorical and embodied beauty is far beyond the effect of argument and evidence alone.¹⁹⁴ Fauset underscores this point with a gesture toward how un compelling a cold, didactic, sociological way of speaking can be. As Angela waits for Van Meier to begin, she overhears a group of "tall, dark, sleek young men...speaking with a curious didactic precision" and "quoting all the sociologists in the world." Angela's friend Martha explains that they're with a small magazine that publishes "articles written occasionally in a spirit of mean jealousy but usually in an effort to gain a sort of inverted glory by carrying [Van Meier's] great name on its pages" (217). In the form of what seems to be a quick dig at Alain Locke and at Charles S. Johnson's magazine, *Opportunity*, Fauset makes a sub-argument for the power of the empiricist art she seeks to produce.

Near the start of the novel, Angela had proclaimed, "No, I don't think being coloured in America is a beautiful thing. I think it's nothing short of a curse," and she rejects Jinny's glass-half-full take that "being coloured often does spur you on" (54). By its end, she hasn't let go of being "sick of this business of always being below or above a certain norm"—whether a confining racial norm or a prescriptive sexual one—or pleading for the "right to be happy simply, naturally?" (53-54). But, impressed by Van Meier, Angela becomes "conscious of a swelling pride" in African American beauty, and just one page later, she finds herself pondering

¹⁹⁴Angela, listening and only partially receiving the content while nonetheless fully enraptured by the words, in a way parallels the factory workers listening to John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* that Yezierska described in "Prophets of Democracy."

the source of stagnation in her life. “[W]ith her usual instinct for clarity, for a complete understanding of her own emotional life,” she concludes from “probing her own inner consciousness” that the problem “was bound up in her relationship with Roger...For some reason he had lost his charm for her (222-3, ellipsis original). By the end of the book, she has come to respect both the beauty of her darker-skinned kin as well as the beauty of character in what she calls the “wealth of courage it took for these people to live!” (326). The burgeoning artist remains a thoroughgoing individualist, but an embrace of the idea that Black is Beautiful directs her toward collective affiliation.

Beauty, Fauset suggests through Van Meier’s speech and through Angela’s story, might be the most compelling form of appeal to many an individualist who has good reason to be skeptical or pessimistic that righteous action will lead to justice. For the political pragmatist, a philosophical pragmatist orientation toward enriched individual experience represents one strategy of appeal. Thus, in addition to a nonjudgmental account of female sexuality in so-called “respectable” or “liberated” instantiations, *Plum Bun* offers an avenue toward female independence and race pride that is not based on sacrificial morality, and a picture of what non-moralizing activist art can be and do.

Conclusion: Midwifing Change Through Thought

If ethics and aesthetics are enmeshed, as Fauset suggests in *Plum Bun*’s pragmatist narrative, that holds implications for social change movements, both in tactical matters of persuasion and in ethical matters of substance. As Anna Julia Cooper put it, “Men are not ‘drawn’ by abstractions. Only sympathy and love can draw” (*Voice* 41). Or, as Dewey lamented, “One great defect in what passes as morality is its anesthetic quality. Instead of exemplifying

wholehearted action, it takes the form of grudging piecemeal concessions to the demands of duty” (*Art as Experience* 41). The demands of external pressure and an internalized sense of duty do motivate action, he observes, but for any “practical activity” to carry intrinsic motivation, it must, he argues, “have esthetic quality” (*Art as Experience* 41). For Cooper, this means that “the literary women, the thinking women, the strong, earnest, irresistible women” are “lieutenants and captains” in the mission of societal progress (*Voice* 85). As a literary woman, Fauset esteems art with “esthetic quality,” and she produced fiction that readers received as aesthetically compelling. And as a thinking woman, she takes keen interest in probing, through her art, what does and does not “draw” beneficial “practical activity.” Narratives about what is true about the world engender consequences for action, most effectively when they unite emotive power with empirically accurate fact, the pragmatist argument goes.

Fauset’s goal was the aesthetic presentation of truth, viewed carefully and with attention to perspective, and that’s what Du Bois praised her for in reviewing *Plum Bun*. This was also the focal point of what is perhaps the most enthusiastic printed evaluation of her work, from William Braithwaite, who characterized this accomplishment as a subtle but powerful form of philosophy. It was ironically in the very same issue of *Opportunity*, January 1934, in which Alain Locke panned Fauset’s final novel, *Comedy: American Style*, as “too mid-Victorian” and “sentimental” in a withering critique that stuck, that Braithwaite lauded Fauset as a finer writer than Willa Cather, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Edith Wharton, among others (“The Saving Grace of Realism” 9; “The Novels of Jessie Fauset” 24). He said that “after many decades of authorship by white women novelists...Jane Austen’s genius [was] bequeathed” to Fauset, “the American woman who could wear it most gracefully” (26). This didn’t necessarily help her case in the long run to be remembered among influential modern and modernist artists: though Braithwaite considered

her “front rank,” he aligned her only with other women, and more with the old guard than the cutting-edge (24). But what makes her writing so fine for him is, he says, her deftness in conveying something new. He praises her for the introduction of a novel theme to the body of American literature and for the philosophy “underlying the narrative,” not overlaid on top of it:

The philosophy in this latest novel, as in the three earlier ones, is not, and never was intended to be an imposed thesis upon the surface of the story. Miss Fauset is too good an artist to argue the point; to engrave a doctrine upon so intangible an element as Truth, or to array with a misfitting apparel of rhetoric the logic which like a pagan grace or a Christian virtue should run naked as the wind through the implications that color and shape the lives of her characters and their destinies. (26-27)

Although Fauset does not *argue* a point, truth unadorned with “misfitting apparel” can offer its own powerful point. Braithwaite argues that the rhetoric usually associated with philosophy would function as distracting window dressing, detracting from the clarity of a natural “logic” that Fauset is able to make innate in narrative. In Fauset’s case, Braithwaite characterizes that point as a “philosophy of *rebuke* to an inhuman principle, elevated to an institution and safeguarded by both law and public opinion” stronger than any since Hawthorne. Both authors, he writes, present “types of human lives” as in and of themselves “a brooding, passionate rebuke” to customs which have “denied early happiness and fulfillment, the sense of joy and beauty, to the people.” (26-27). As Carl Van Doren put it at the Civic Club dinner held on the occasion of Fauset’s first novel, rather more clearly and succinctly than Braithwaite, “The facts

about Negroes in the United States are themselves propaganda—devastating and unanswerable” (145). They speak for themselves.

In presenting some of these facts in fiction, Fauset may not be interested in providing an answer to a social problem, but she *is* keenly invested in apprehending and communicating the complex contours of lived experience under a specific set of social conditions that involve “*being* a problem” (“Some Notes on Color,” italics mine). Cheryl Wall writes that the spirit of her writing was to get readers to “consider the actuality of multiple, contradictory, and competing truths about black people's lives” (69). To document those contours in a nuanced, targeted, and resonant way for a public reading audience is work that the literary form of the novel is particularly well-suited to do. And to treat lived experience as both a primary source of truth *and* as a measuring stick for rationally evaluating the broader, mutable value of social ideas is a fundamentally pragmatist orientation. *Plum Bun* presents lessons that are practical, plural, and contingent. The distinction between a practical lesson and a moral one isn't merely a nitpick about synonyms; it's a pragmatist orientation that explicitly accounts for contingency, flexibility, and growth, for a society as much as an individual.

Though Fauset has long been criticized as a proponent and enforcer of respectability politics, the novel quite clearly critiques the confining restraint of bourgeois black respectability politics and other forms of singular, prescriptive belief. Angela is eager to leave a social environment that she finds stiflingly narrow in belief, with the most educated and affluent Black Philadelphians no less narrow in mind than those just breaking into the middle class: “their thoughts, their actions were still cramped and confined; they were sitting in their new, even luxurious quarters, still mental parvenus” (67). However, Fauset's depiction of Angela's individualism also does not recode the “new morality” of the 20s (at which Mary Church Terrell

grumbled, among others) into the paragon of female independence as a modern virtue (Phipps 78). Rather, Angela's individualism is depicted primarily as selfishness more than empowered self-determination for the large majority of the novel. Angela is not a wholly sympathetic figure—sometimes she's a downright frustrating one, and she less resembles 19th century sentimental character types than she does a character like Edith Wharton's Lily Bart. Like Bart, she openly maneuvers for comfort, freedom, and power through marriage to a wealthy white man, and brazen materialism motivates her as she snubs her sister while tolerating, for a time, her boyfriend's aggressive entitlement and vicious white supremacy. But it is nonetheless an individualism to which she is entitled, and one within which she grows, practically.

Fauset's tempered hope about the difficulty and slow pace of individual social progress differentiates her pragmatism from more consistently optimistic mainstream iterations, and her skepticisms contribute to her investment in a pluralistic approach to advocacy and activism—one that roots itself in experience to find use in different modes and modalities of appeal, some of which appeal to people's sense of commitment to a community, and others which appeal to individualist motives. I see Fauset's work in *Plum Bun* as playing out an exploration of change and transformation at an individual scale, exploring the potential and limitations of "individual autonomy and development" in the context of a world in which resources and social privilege remain arbitrarily and inequitably distributed (James and Busia 3). The novel stages the correspondence between the values of philosophical pragmatism and the practice of hard-nosed pragmatism (in the common use of the term) for Black women seeking social mobility, access, and community by whatever means possible. Both offer potential, but only to a point; Fauset's work capitalizes on the advantages of each while critiquing both. This approach to morality in Fauset's work contributes clarification to the ongoing debate about the ambivalence of her

politics, in particular around the roles of feminism, femininity, and sexuality in *Plum Bun*'s engagement with New Negro Womanhood.

Conventional categorization treats *Plum Bun* as apparently paradoxical in its literary historical positioning, even though scholars of Black women's writing have already made various compelling cases that a lens of continuity with the 19th century best serves full appreciation of black female authors of the early 20th century. For example: Carol Allen advocates a model of "migration" over "renaissance." Jacquelyn McLendon shows consistent motivation by "a politics of resistance." And Meredith Goldsmith argues that Fauset's work, specifically, "reveals just how 'mid-Victorian' American culture in the early twentieth century still was" ("Jessie Fauset's Not-So-New Negro Womanhood" 12). Nonetheless, Fauset's work still fits uneasily in current periodization models even after several decades of movement toward softened and expanded subfield boundaries. It still gets overlooked as anachronistic in the rupture-defined era of "make it new" literary modernism, the New Negro, and the New Woman, but Fauset's historical position in the heart of the Harlem Renaissance has also largely kept her beyond the long 19th century's reach.

Pragmatism—as scholars like Phipps, Lisi Schoenbach, Jessica Feldman, and others have argued—offers another way into understanding the timeliness of the in-between. Fauset's version of philosophical pragmatism also represents an iteration of literary modernism. She shifts the dominant register of sentimental moral appeal commonly associated with women's activist fiction in this era into modernist psychological and sociological terms. *Plum Bun* depicts its decidedly modern, independent Black female protagonist while employing many of the structural and stylistic conventions of the previous century's passing narratives and romance plots, both realistic and melodramatic. However, it bracingly and even surprisingly reworks the didactic

message frequently associated with the tragic mulatta trope and the passing mulatta's voluntary return to her race and to the propriety of marriage in earlier passing novels.¹⁹⁵ Without "a moral" but with the lens of feminist literary pragmatism, Angela's process of thinking through multiple personal, experiential lessons takes a different cast from the novel's literary predecessors while remaining in thoughtful conversation with them.

In her foreword to *The Chinaberry Tree*, Fauset yet again emphatically restated her intention to produce honest work of artistic quality, not to make a point: "Nothing,—and the Muses themselves would bear witness to this,—has ever been farther from my thought than writing to establish a thesis" she insists. Rather, she says, she writes about African American people "partly because they are the ones I know best" and partly because "[t]o be a Negro in America posits a dramatic situation" inherently (xxxix). Restated in the terms I noted in the previous chapter, Fauset chooses her subjects on the basis of her ability to portray them honestly and on their potential to make "a good story." By the end of the short foreword, however, Fauset does, in fact, also reach a tight two sentence thesis about the "Negro in America" as "a citizen of the United States whose ancestors came over not along with the emigrants in the Mayflower, it is true, but merely a little earlier," in 1619: "Briefly he is a dark American who wears his joy and rue very much as does the white American. He may wear it with some differences but it is the same joy and the same rue." It is a similar summary to the one Du Bois made in his review of *Plum Bun* as a picture of "just ordinary human life," but with an emphasis its affective dimensions, the "joy" and "rue" that fiction can convey most honestly and movingly if it avoids

¹⁹⁵ Claudia Tate describes the shift this way: "stories of domestic affirmation became domestic tragedies in the works of Grimké and domestic parodies and tragic satires in those of her contemporaries Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen" (15).

moralizing. Fauset understands the irony. Content to allow contradictions, she pauses, and after a paragraph break concludes: “So in spite of other intentions I seem to have pointed a moral” (xxxii). But, pragmatist aesthetics suggest: a moral is inevitable, and there will inevitably be more than one to keep considering.

Coda

Feminist literary pragmatism seeks to build bridges academically between feminist pragmatist studies and literary pragmatist studies. It seeks to consider the places where thought, art, and activism have historically intersected in the United States, focalizing the multifaceted work of diverse women who have not gotten clear and appropriate recognition for their contributions. In this dissertation, I have argued for the intellectual significance of female novelists as public philosophers in the early twentieth century, engaged in meaningful thought on a wide range of social, aesthetic, and epistemological issues. I have identified a network of mutual intellectual influence in a specific historical moment and provided an account of the multivalent, enduring significance of this cross-pollination on literature, philosophy, and intersectional activism.

My subjects are among many turn-of-the century women and ethnic writers who have resisted stable categorization within traditional narratives of literary history. To literary studies, my project offers a novel angle of approach to current periodization debates around the porous, contested boundaries of modernism(s) and what Jed Esty and Colleen Lye have termed “peripheral realisms.” Competing categorization claims preoccupy scholars: Yezerka’s status as nuanced modernist or straightforward sentimentalist, Fauset’s debated “mid-Victorian” misfit within the Harlem Renaissance movement she helped birth, Gilman’s misrepresentedly limited claim to enduring fame through her short story “The Yellow Wall-Paper.” A pragmatist approach situates all three as solidly “of their time”—robust thinkers underserved in intellectual history by

gendered division between activist-artists and public intellectuals—and clarifies the modernity of their fictions’ forms as well as the fictions’ conceptual content and political stakes.

To pragmatist studies, my project seeks to open a new avenue for feminist recovery, by illuminating contexts for pragmatism’s established canon, suggesting new figures to consider for inclusion, and offering new sites from which further work may begin. Literary writers engaged practical and theoretical questions in different ways than the feminist pragmatists working within the academic establishment and in non-literary genres of writing. This overlooked dimension of pragmatism’s significance as a coherent throughline in U.S. cultural demonstrates literary women’s overlooked theoretical contributions in a compelling shared tradition of thinking about lived experience, democracy, and the roles head and heart play in individual and collective change. I believe the concreteness of the literary formulations offer exciting tools with which to think.

Some of the key challenges facing the United States today resemble circumstances a century ago in certain basic contours, including a crisis of growing wealth inequality, a reactionary surge of white supremacist nativism, a rethinking of gender, a widening reckoning with environmental damage, and, and the double-edged sword of hope and fear inspired by rapid technological change. Under these conditions, and in the current political environment of entrenched division, few social questions seem more urgent than those of how to respond to change, effect change, embrace it, and direct it—materially and culturally—in a pluralistic democracy.

I find value in revisiting early 20th century theorizations of American democracy advanced by diverse literary women. Their contributions (and resistance) to current paradigms remain under-credited, and to better understand how we got where we are, we need a more

complete story. Feminist literary pragmatist writing illuminates the genealogies of thought behind 21st century attitudes about the relationship between lived experience and truth; about collective change around women's rights, race, immigration, labor, and the environment; about the role of art, literature, and media in social change; and more.

The literary theorizations include rich, concrete, affectively engaged representations of their historical context: they make the relationship between ideas and situations clear. Many of the specific issues and situations look familiar. Gilman's and Yeziarska's arguments for universal early childhood education resemble many current ones, and Fauset's insistence that representation of Black life can be truthful art without being inherent "propaganda" calls to mind current culture war around African American history and critical race theory. History's rhymes offer lenses on present-day experience with an inherent degree of critical distance, while the aesthetic framing of narrative prioritizes personal resonance within an approachable medium.

Early 20th century feminist literary pragmatism also prompts modes of thinking that can be of use. For example, Gilman suggests the value of utopian imagination in a moment of dystopian zeitgeist. Yeziarska provides a reminder not to underestimate the importance of feeling, and she models, for better and for worse, a commitment to wrestling with irresolvable puzzles. Fauset provides a way of thinking about art with a purpose that doesn't treat it—from the perspective of the creator or the audience—as having an axe to grind, to be assessed by whether it has "good" politics, but that also doesn't have disregard for its interaction within a larger, social world. All three valorize thinking reflectively about one's own experiences and beliefs and urge listening receptively to the experiences of others, rationally and with compassion.

In a moment when so much public discourse seems simultaneously stuck and unmoored, it is worth recalling that pragmatist philosophy was arguably a direct response to dealing with the impasses and disorientations of an unprecedented time. Louis Menand has interpreted it as a pivotal force within an American effort to “find a set of ideas, and a way of thinking, that would help people cope with the conditions of modern life” in the United States after “The Civil War swept away the slave civilization of the south [and] almost the whole intellectual culture of the North along with it” (x). This is just one among many glosses of how pragmatism emerged in a moment of radical epistemological change driven by acutely felt upheavals in social life coupled with more abstract, but equally profound, transformation in scientific understanding of the world. “Whether this nineteenth-century way of thinking really does have twenty-first century uses is not yet clear,” Menand reflected in 2001 (442). Writing in 2024, I am convinced that it does—if it can be harnessed in relevant and inclusive ways in public life.

Some of these ways must be, and already are, directly political. For example, political scientist Deva Woodly has argued that radical Black feminist pragmatism is the intellectual engine of the Movement for Black Lives. Environmental ethicist Ben A. Minteer has argued for the recovery of early 20th century pragmatist models to think beyond the “moral schism” of an “overgrow[n] anthropocentric-ecocentric legend” that continues to stymie urgent environmental decision-making, sometimes around the very same land use issues that were controversial a century ago (1-2). And, as I noted in the introduction, feminist pragmatists are already engaged in a thinking on a wide array of specific issues. Literature and fictional art in general offer a complementary way in, with the power to engage specific experiences of living and to reach audiences in meaningful ways.

Story can be especially useful in cases where direct political and policy conversations might be non-starters for one reason or another—cases of ossified opinion, slack public interest, or diffuse cultural norms to interrogate rather than specific problems to solve. The 2023 summer blockbuster *Barbie* offers one example of a successfully sparked national conversation. When I went to see it, the auditorium at the Ypsilanti, MI Cinemark was filled with pink—pink hijabs, pink cowboy hats, pink everything—and it was abuzz with whoops, laughter, and applause throughout the screening. I might have been the only person who howled at the joke about a discontinued Proust Barbie, but one moment that got broad cheers was when Lawyer Barbie argued in front of the Barbie Supreme Court and declared, “I’m getting emotional and I’m expressing it. I have no difficulty holding both logic and feeling at the same time and that does not diminish my powers; it expands them!” It was a moment of live collective feeling around the central cultural concern that animated feminist literary pragmatists’ storytelling a century ago: how to surface and transcend gendered binaries between affect and reason that shape our lives philosophically, politically, personally, and practically.

American public discourse is often described as polarized, but another adjective that seems just as important to me, and just as useful, is that it has become brittle. It needs unstiffening of both thought and feeling. It needs pragmatism. It needs it in many forms, from many perspectives—and, I would argue, served with a dose of aesthetic pleasure and power.

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