

Re-reading Dewey Through a Feminist Lens

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I wanted to begin this feminist inspection of Deweyan thought with something real, tangible, and in my backyard. Something that I could see and touch. Something that lived and breathed both theory and praxis. And so it was that I found myself at Palama Settlement on a muggy, summer day, looking for John Dewey in its hallways. For many in Honolulu, Palama Settlement is a landmark. Its distinctive, early twentieth century white clapboard buildings stand in contrast to its younger neighbors, mostly squatty, concrete walk-ups and public housing complexes. Over its 118-year history, Palama Settlement has grown, struggled, and transformed. It has intersected with and changed for the better the life stories of generations of urban Honolulu residents (among them, two Hawaii governors), all in fitting with its greater social service mission to offer a hand up to those in need. The settlement was and is a place for recreation, for health care, and for education; it was and is a community gathering place.

Palama Settlement grew out of Palama Chapel, founded in 1896, and was part of America's Settlement House Movement, arguably one of the greatest social services reform efforts in modern America (Nishimoto, 2000). The movement traces its roots to 1889, when Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr founded Chicago's Hull House out of a philanthropic drive to give low-income immigrants from neighboring communities philanthropic assistance rather than charity (Daynes & Longo, 2004). Hull House, which now operates as a museum, created Chicago's first public playground and first kindergarten and offered everything from English classes and day care services to an employment bureau. It was revolutionary and a working, thriving, organic example of the power of pragmatic philosophy put into practice.

John Dewey made his first visit to Hull House three years after it opened its doors, as he prepared to take a position at the University of Chicago (Daynes & Longo, 2004). He later told Addams of that visit, "I cannot tell you how much good I got from the stay at Hull House. My indebtedness to you for giving me insight into matters

there is great. ... Every day I stayed there only added to my conviction that you had taken the right way" (qtd. in Daynes & Longo, 2004, p. 9). Eventually, Dewey became a pillar at Hull House, lecturing at its club, teaching at its university extension, and serving on its board of trustees. At the same time, settlement houses began to pop up across the nation—by 1900, there were one hundred scattered across the United States, by 1910, there were more than four hundred (Nishimoto, 2000).

Addams' influence on Dewey—and Dewey's influence on Addams—has been the subject of scholarly work, and their shared interests and philosophical approaches are worth noting given Addams' role as a founding mother of American pragmatist thought and as a thought leader in the more recent emergence of feminist pragmatism. Dewey saw Hull House (along with subsequent settlement houses) as a model of the many educational and societal ideals he wrote prolifically about—the power of enriching community education programs, of service learning, and of the notion of a school as "social center" or community settlement. It is instructive, therefore, to (re-) consider Dewey's work in light of Addams' considerable imprint on pragmatism. Indeed, there has been much work in recent decades to *recover* the role of women like Addams in the pragmatic tradition and to look anew at the considerable contributions of the Settlement House Movement.

However, I do not discuss Addams' collegial relationship with Dewey—or the Settlement House Movement more broadly—to elicit a conclusion. Rather, I believe Palama Settlement, Hull House, Addams—they all provide portals through which to begin to explore the growing thought gardens of feminist pragmatism. After all, it is Dewey's proximity to the practical—the applied—with such social projects as Hull House and his own lab school that make him a particularly appealing figure to feminist theorists, including pragmatists. Dewey did not lock himself up in the ivory tower, but sought out venues with which to bring (his) philosophy to practice. Likewise, feminist

researchers are concerned with disseminating theory into the public sphere and *making it real*—with consciousness raising and by seeking social justice.

It is also worth noting that in this brief review I am not explicitly seeking to assist in the work of unearthing the voices of women pragmatists of Dewey's day—or consider their impacts *per se* on Dewey and his writings (though their whispers no doubt will be heard in these pages). Rather, I am interested in keeping those potential influences front-of-mind while presenting modern feminist re-readings of Dewey, constructing a narrowly-focused and succinct literature review of thinkers who have donned a feminist lens to analyze Dewey's approaches to education, learning, and democracy or to employ Dewey's works in theorizing on gender and education and on gender in society. In this piece, I first explore Dewey as both an ally and a problematic figure in feminist literature and then investigate the broader sphere of feminist pragmatism and two central themes within it: valuing diversity and diverse experiences and problematizing fixed truths.

Given all that, you might still be puzzled about my decision to begin this paper on the doorsteps of Palama Settlement. I can't offer an academic answer. Rather, I visited Palama Settlement for more egotistical reasons: I was there for inspiration; for a taste of Dewey. I wanted to see a settlement house up close and *here*. When I visited Palama Settlement, a group of teens was gathered in the parking lot during a break, laughing and snapping selfies with their smartphones. Paula Rath, great-granddaughter of the settlement's first head worker and a volunteer at the settlement, tells me the teens attend high school equivalency diploma classes at the nonprofit. "They're given a second chance here," she says. She then leads me to the settlement's archives, a small room crammed with annual reports, photos, newspaper clippings, and annuals. More in-depth articles could be written on Palama based on that treasure trove of material, and perhaps they will be. But in my short visit, I only had time to pick through the top layers of Palama's history. After reading through annual reports, I came across a passage that helped inspire me in my scholarly pursuit—a passage that I believe underscores the best of Palama Settlement. I found it in the settlement's 1921 annual report, in which first head worker James A. Rath, Sr., writes about the settlement's progress over the preceding twenty-five years:

To attempt to detail all the activities started or in progress would take up more spaces than is wise in a report. . . . *Every new phase of work was introduced in response to a need or a demand by the people of Palama*¹. Our neighbors at first did not always appreciate what was being done. They were not used to American social ideals and were somewhat suspicious of their neighbors and what to them seemed "their fads." Nor were the Palama neighbors the only ones to view the new features introduced as fads; a large number of those living Waikiki of Nuuuanu stream were inclined to the same opinion and were far from enthusiastic in their support. It was in the midst of this sort that the first nurse entered upon her work (Palama Settlement, 1921, p. 7).

And therein lies the beauty of the settlement houses then and now—their attentiveness to community needs. Their overarching goal always: To seek social justice one person and one community at a time.

Dewey as Feminist Ally

Was Dewey a feminist? It is a playful and a deliberately provocative question, but perhaps worth asking nonetheless as part of an effort to contextualize feminist re-readings of Dewey. Weiler (2006) argues that Dewey's (public and private) actions and writings on women and gender were *complicated*. *He supported women's* suffrage and coeducational experiences, appeared to believe women and men should be treated as equals, and respected the opinions of many female colleagues—all progressive positions for his time. Further, as Seigfried (2002) notes, Dewey's philosophy was a philosophy of emancipation from prejudice, aligned *then with other emancipatory philosophies that work to undo, question, or overturn oppressions*.

And yet, in his canonical writings on dualism, Dewey never criticized society's hierarchal juxtaposition of male and female (as superior-inferior), at least not explicitly, even though he wrote at length about other aspects of social identity (Weiler, 2006). For feminist theorists, the relative absence of gender in Dewey's discussions on diversity is problematic. Weiler (2006) goes as far as to consider it a "fatal weakness" in his work. She argues, Dewey accepted gender divisions as *always already* constants and failed to see, for example, the patriarchal structures of the very university systems where he spent his time and made his name. In fact, Seigfried (2002) argues, Dewey appeared wholly

uninterested in unpacking the role of power in human affairs. She points to a passage in *Democracy and Education*, in which Dewey criticizes Aristotle's philosophical separation of that which is intellectual and that which is practical. Dewey attributes this flawed dualism to Aristotle's time and place, writing when most men and all women performed what was menial labor and were used as a means to intellectual ends. To end the separation of intellectual and practical, Dewey urges the development of curriculum that uses intelligence and theory as "a guide of free practice for all." To this, Seigfried counters: "Both his genetic account of the origin of the separation of theory and practice in the inequalities of class and gender and his liberatory intent to transform education to be inclusive are feminist positions worth developing. They are insufficient, however, insofar as they fail to name the patriarchal appropriation of slave and women's labor as one of exploitation or oppression or to follow up by exploring how the working classes and women are affected by such oppression" (2002, pp. 56–57). Indeed, Dewey stops short of examining the underpinnings of exploitation, oppression, and prejudice. In the absence of such an inspection, how can we truly understand how to overcome the separation of theory and practice?

At the same time, it cannot be ignored that Dewey *was* clear on the importance of women's experiences and on the necessity of a diversity of voices to a vibrant democracy and to fulfilling educational experiences. It was Dewey who said, "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" (qtd. in James, 2009). James, who analyzes Dewey through a black feminist lens, argues that Deweyan philosophy values the "revision of old ideas" with new experiences, as part of a process of resisting stagnation "so commonly found in philosophical and scientific problems" (2009, p. 98). Applying this to black feminist social theory (or other critical approaches) offers the potential for—and the necessity of—a scholarship that is rich with the experiences of minorities, and of other un-heard/under-heard communities.

Thus, despite a lack of explicit discussions in Dewey's work around women, gender roles or patriarchy, there's little doubt that Dewey's work provides ample material for feminists, who seek to not only disrupt and dismantle sex-

ism but to place value on the experiences and contributions of women. Central to both pragmatism and pragmatist feminism is the practical use of philosophical ideals or approaches (Whipps, 2013). As James (2009) notes, feminists need not employ Dewey to justify the importance of their work, but can consider him "a powerful ally in the construction of theory" (p. 94).

Critique of *a priori* theory and knowledge

Feminist critiques of *a priori* knowledge are grounded in a larger project to end traumatic silencing of de-privileged/oppressed voices and to deconstruct the false barrier between theory and practice (praxis). As Duran (2001) writes, in "A Holistically Deweyan Feminism," feminists and Dewey are aligned in railing against "rationalists" and in valuing experience when considering how we know what we know, together providing "arable soil for the development of theories that can be tied to actual modes of human living and endeavor" (p. 280). Indeed, Dewey dedicated considerable real estate in his prolific works to the primacy of experience and to appreciating diverse ways of knowing the world. He considered the mathematical, the scientific, the everyday, the utilitarian, and the instrumental as "points along a continuum," Duran (2001) writes, and appreciated a discourse of relevance in his philosophy that sought not only to come out of people's lives, but to apply to them. Duran continues: "Dewey provides us with a platform for a modest feminist epistemology, because such an epistemology cannot function with the logically airtight and no-holds-barred kind of theorizing that has been so characteristic of twentieth century theories of knowledge. The gynocentric emphasis on connectedness and the world of having-and-doing, as opposed to the world of divorced speculation, is completely consistent with much of what Dewey does" (p. 282).

Thayer-Bacon (2003) further pursues Deweyan epistemology, writing that modern pragmatists are "qualified relativists" who maintain that all inquiry is rooted in culturally-bound philosophical assumptions. No one is free of those bonds; no one is objective; no one can philosophize from nowhere. However, Thayer-Bacon (2003) writes, "We can compensate for our cultural embeddedness by opening our horizons and including others in our conversations" (p. 419). We can acknowledge and embrace our own experience in order not to be blinded by it. Thayer-Bacon (2003) turns to Dewey's *Democracy and Education*

to underscore her point, noting that Dewey described experience as something that can be active or passive, something that we do or something that is *done to us*. In Chapter Eleven, Dewey writes, "The connection of these two phases of experience measures the fruitfulness or value of the experience. ... Experience as trying involves change, but change is meaningless transition unless it is consciously connected with the return wave of consequences which flow from it" (p. 351). Experience for Dewey, then, is about learning and growing; it is about making and re-making connections in the world. Knowledge and experience do not occur in vacuums, but are *relational*.

Feminist theory embraces a similar notion of experience in seeking to counteract/deconstruct hegemonic institutions. Qualified relativism, Thayer-Bacon argues, offers us a panoramic view of "communities-always-in-the-making" where we are embedded, limited, and embodied, but where we are also "striving to communicate with a plurality of others" (2003, p. 429). Qualified relativism also provides a locus from which to question assumptions of man-made constructs and frameworks as *natural* or always already in existence. Thayer-Bacon eloquently enunciates this notion: "Feminists as qualified relativists begin and end with experience. This is because in an androcentric world much of what women experience remains unnamed and cannot be reduced to its articulated meanings. ... For feminists, the indeterminacy of experience is what makes 'experience' so important to their world" (p. 428).

Such an epistemology is non-dualistic (something Dewey would approve of) in that it considers the borderlands of conflicting difference as important sites for negotiation and growth, rather than as entry points for dominance and assimilation. Perhaps more fundamentally, pragmatism and feminist pragmatism *are of the body*. *That is, experience is embodied, lived, and relational*. Sullivan (2001) compares the pragmatist tradition of "transactional knowing" through lived experience to what she calls a "pragmatist-feminist standpoint theory," an epistemology which considers diverse transactions/relationships that involve both the physical self and the social environment. In this way, pragmatist-feminist standpoint theory, Sullivan writes, incorporates "multiple marginalized perspectives" and learns the greatest lesson of earlier feminist theory that, in activating one group of women, silenced another.

Problematizing 'Truths'

In "Where are the Pragmatist Feminists?" Seigfried (1991) writes about Dewey's allegiance to disruption—to problematizing "truths" and questioning positivist notions of constants or *the way things are*. She argues, "Whereas contemporary philosophers often privilege physics as the most rational model of science, one which should be imitated by philosophers, pragmatists consistently use biological models and examples from ordinary experience and the human sciences. Pragmatism's pervasive metaphors are often as characteristic of women's experiences as of men's. Dewey's are organic and developmental; many were drawn from his involvement with early childhood education" (1991, p. 13). Later, in the introduction to *Feminist Interpretations of John Dewey*, Seigfried (2002) points to Dewey's criticism of the (still-popular) notion of philosophy as unbiased or objective. Indeed, Dewey unabashedly accused some of the world's most revered thinkers—Aristotle and Plato among them—of "insecurity, on the grounds that they have 'professed complete intellectual independence and rationality' while generating systems 'in behalf of preconceived beliefs'" (Seigfried, 2002, p. 6).

Problematizing alleged constants is vital to feminist and/or pragmatist theory in two central ways: It allows for questioning the notion of seemingly natural hierarchal and hegemonic frameworks, which oftentimes are used to solidify patriarchy; and it gives voice to theories that chip away at positivist conceptions of our societies, our systems, and our social relationships, dominant representations of which so often fail to take into account the experiences of the oppressed or non-dominant classes. Importantly, as Thayer-Bacon (2003) notes, Dewey rejected any theory of truth, and argued that more important than agreeing on any universal constant was devoting critical inquiry to the process by which we examine epistemic claims. Such inquiry allows us to recognize our own central role in constructing the experiments, the labs, and the scientists by which we test and consider truth. Likewise, pragmatist feminists place quotation marks around knowledge to signify its fallibility, its fluidity, and its subjectivity and concern themselves instead with the forces of power at play in knowledge creation and construction (Thayer-Bacon, 2003). "They turn to pluralism to help us compensate for our individual and social limitations," Thayer-Bacon writes. "They turn to others to help us become more aware

of the power structures within dominant discourses and to help us find ways to subvert and change these structures” (2003, p. 434). And they make way/make space for a diversity of women’s voices in philosophy, in education, in politics as a way of not only offering nuance and context through lived experience, but of challenging phallogocentric theories of knowledge.

Finding Dewey

As a student of feminist critical theory (with much yet to learn), I must admit to being somewhat taken aback to find such a rich and resourceful friend in John Dewey (a white man of privilege writing at the turn of the twentieth century). I concur with Duran (2001), who in closing her presentation of what a “holistically Deweyan feminism” might look like, she quipped that the greatest task for the feminist seeking to appropriate Dewey is not the work of theorizing or of picking and choosing themes to explore, but the breadth and richness of Dewey’s writings. Indeed, pragmatist feminists have much to mine as they seek to further Deweyan thought, make it their own or weave it into broader feminist projects.

They also have real-life examples of his theories in practice. They have places like Palama Settlement, forever woven into the fabric of cities and of people’s lives. I went to Palama Settlement because I wanted to make Dewey real. I did not hear his name there; I did not walk through a John Dewey Hall or a wing bearing his name, but I found him in its programs, in its mission, in its strong links to social justice *everyday and in every which way*. Dewey’s notions of experience and of knowledge-making and knowledge-makers make him particularly appealing not only to pragmatist feminist theorists but to those seeking to address oppression, poverty, and other social injustices. His philosophy allows for diverse ways of knowing the world and interacting with it, and for an appreciation of a multiplicity of experiences—for a pluralism that appreciates, acknowledges, and gives space to women; to racial minorities; to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning peoples; to those who are oppressed, silenced or othered; to underserved neighborhoods and their all-too-often forgotten peoples. Deweyan philosophy, pragmatism, and pragmatist feminism place experiences in the here and the now and in the real, offering a blueprint for forming a relational

community always already in formation and, one can hope, helping to offer support to important community projects, like Palama Settlement.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Italics are my own.