

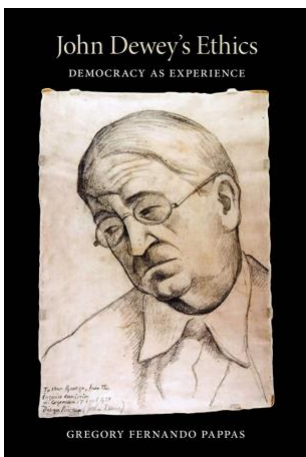
“I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER”



[Gregory Fernando Pappas](#) is professor of philosophy at Texas A&M University. He works within the Latinx, American Pragmatist, and Latin American philosophical traditions in ethics and social-political philosophy. He is the author of numerous articles on the philosophy of John Dewey and Luis Villoro, as well the author of [John Dewey's Ethics: Democracy as Experience](#) and editor of [Pragmatism in the Americas](#). He is the editor-in-chief of the [Inter-American Journal of Philosophy](#) and a former president of SAAP.

What does American philosophy mean to you?

I am proud to be one of the few scholars who has insisted on using “American” in an inclusive hemispheric sense. I am a proponent of this wider understanding and of the importance of rehearsing creative philosophical *contrapunteo* between US and Latin American philosophers as a way of doing Inter-American philosophy.



Philosophy in the Americas, like Latin Jazz, comprises sister traditions with similar historical roots. These traditions share enough assumptions and commitments to make experimentation worthwhile: i.e., we can learn from their resonances and differences, which are then sources of insights for addressing contemporary problems.

This is especially the case for philosophies in the Americas committed to lived experience (i.e., “La Vida”) and radical democracy. These include some Indigenous philosophies, Pragmatists, and Latin American and Latinx philosophers. I see my work emerging from the views of Jane Addams, W.E.B. Du Bois, John Dewey, Luis Villoro, Eugenio Maria de Hostos, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Paulo Freire.

The resonance between philosophies of La Vida is more obvious once we compare their views of reality, knowledge, and values to predominant views in Western philosophy. In the American philosophers there is an emphasis on the integrity of everyday life and "local" contexts, settings, places, situations, and circumstances that determine how we experience the world. For them philosophy must start *and* return to the concrete praxis, context, and struggles of lived experience.

How did you become an American philosopher?

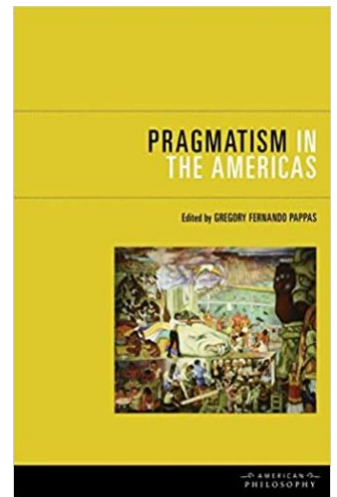
I'd rather answer how I became an *Inter-American* philosopher. My dad's books and my exposure to Latin American philosophy at the University of Puerto Rico in Mayaguez were key for changing my college major from math to philosophy. From the very beginning I was drawn to philosophers interested in La Vida, such as Unamuno, Ortega, Hostos, Nietzsche, Hesse, etc.

My first exposure to pragmatist thinkers was in graduate school. I was first interested in reading more existentialism. However, after taking a graduate course where we read William James it became obvious that you don't need to go to Europe to read philosophers whose starting point is lived experience. Moreover, to me, figures like Nietzsche and Sartre lack much that is important, including enough on community.

The big turning point for me was during my PhD studies at the University of Texas where I wrote a dissertation on William James. There I met Charles Hartshorne and David Miller, philosophers influenced directly by Whitehead and Mead. I learned plenty about Quine and Sellars via Daniel Bonevac and about James via Robert Kane. I also had the great fortune to have John McDermott and Larry Hickman nearby as mentors, and who soon became my dear colleagues.

However, the most important influence was my PhD director, Douglas Browning. He made me aware that my interest in the pragmatist tradition and philosophers in Latin America was actually based on a shared metaphilosophical commitment to both lived experience (or "La Vida") and democracy. I've spent my career exploring this commitment in ethics and socio-political philosophy.

I also owe much to distinguished mentors and colleagues such as Jorge Gracia, Ofelia Schutte, Carlos Pereda, and Guillermo Hurtado. They encouraged my decision to expand my horizons to Latin American and



Inter-American philosophers such as Gloria Anzaldua, Maria Lugones, Risieri Frondizi, Paulo Freire and Luis Villoro. I must also mention how much I've learned from a long line of excellent PhD students and through my participation and invitations to many conferences in Latin America.

I became an Inter-American philosopher by living in between the Americas. For many years I felt very lonely and out of fashion. My sort of walking "in between" traditions in the current academic world goes against the emphasis on specialization and group-identity mania. However this has changed. There is a new generation of scholars that are now doing what I have tried to do. Over the last twenty years, scholars in both Latin American philosophy and American philosophy have produced original work on inter-American philosophy. These scholars include José Medina, Carlos Sanchez, Eduardo Mendietta, Kim Diaz, Alex Stehn, José-Antonio Orosco, Chris Tirres, Manuela Gomez, Sergio Gallegos, Lara Trout, Albert Spencer, Jacoby Carter, Daniel Campos, Pablo Quintanilla, Alejandro Strong, Grant Silva, Andrea Pitts, Lee McBride, Jose Mendoza, Federico Penelas, Carlos Pereda, Stephanie Rivera, Daniel Reyes Cardenas, Mauricio Beuchot, Guillermo Hurtado, and Terrance MacMullan.

How would you describe your current research?

I am currently doing extensive research on two neglected but great philosophers: Luis Villoro and Grace Lee Boggs. Just like other philosophers of "La Vida" in the Americas (e.g. Addams, Du Bois, Dewey) they took lived experience as their starting point and their social philosophies reflect the result of actual experimental engagement with concrete, historically situated problems of injustice. Villoro and Boggs listen to, and with, the most oppressed communities as the basis of their theorizing. They saw themselves as contributing humbly to a much larger community of inquiry.

Inspired by these philosophers, I have been working on a book with the tentative title: *Injustice and Democracy: An Inter-American and Community of Inquiry Approach*. This project comes from being concerned with the never-ending problems of injustice (e.g., racism, xenophobia, sexism, inequities of educational and health resources, gentrification, homelessness, and segregation) found all over the United States. These injustices continue to undermine the social fabric of our communities, cities, and what is left of our democracy. In response, I began to wonder what are the common tendencies, national habits, and obstacles that continue to undermine our ways of tackling injustice in the US? What sorts of changes are needed if we are to not just survive, but to live a better life? Where do we go if we want lasting transformation? Where do we look for lessons?

*Injustice and Democracy* taps into the practical wisdom of the “grass roots” communities in the Americas: the Boggs Center (Detroit), Casa Pueblo (Puerto Rico), and the Zapatistas (Chiapas, Mexico). I propose and defend a “community of inquiry” approach guided by a radical view of democracy, as the best way to approach problems of injustice and the erosion of democratic living. The book ends with some proposals for how to approach the present crisis of injustice, i.e. an answer to “where do we go from here?” I describe the principles and virtues we need to live as well as the forms of transformation (material, cultural, institutional) we need to experiment with.

I agree with Grace Lee Boggs and the communities that I have learned from in the Americas that if we want lasting social transformation, less injustices and a democratic *Convivencia* in our societies, then we need “nothing short of reinventing revolution” and a “new paradigm shift in our thinking.”

I argue for a much more bottom-up democratic direction than our current taken-for-granted practice. Merely relying on experts, policy makers, and political leaders fails to encourage or enable a more democratic culture. Moreover, it is epistemically deficient and counterproductive as a response to many problems of injustice.

The rigorous multidisciplinary research in universities on the historical and sociological causes of injustices is necessary but not sufficient. Those most directly affected by the injustice must have an active role in guiding the entire process of inquiry. If universities in the twenty-first century are to serve the public good, they must not just export or apply self-produced knowledge but create knowledge with those outside them.

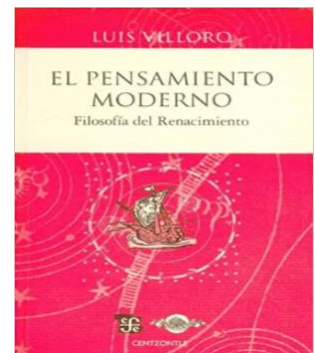
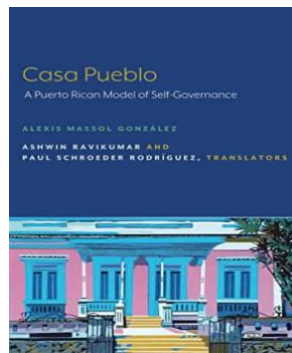
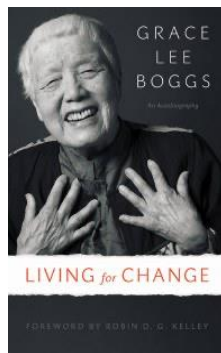
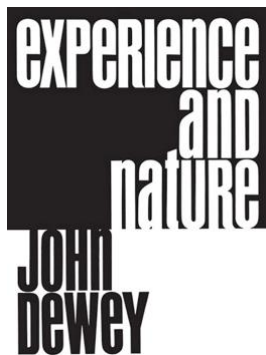
What do you do when you're not doing American philosophy?

I am not a musician, but I love music, especially Jazz and Salsa. I have a huge record collection and support musicians by going to concerts, trying to be a careful listener, and being a music critic (in the humble and constructive sense mentioned by Dewey in *Art as Experience*). I've written in newspapers as well as liner notes in the Salsa and Jazz genres. Sometimes, I am more proud of my music-related publications than of my academic ones (see <http://goyopappas.com/music.html>), so much so that I mention them on my CV.

What's your favorite work in American philosophy? What should we all be reading?

Almost any text by William James, Ortega y Gasset, and Luis Villoro, who are among my favorite philosophers to read. From Dewey: all of his short essays that proclaim the importance of lived experience, especially "Qualitative Thought." Among his books: *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, *Experience and Nature* and *Art as Experience*.

For those who share my commitment to lived experience and radical democracy I recommend the work of activist philosophers such as Grace Lee Boggs and Alexis Massol from Casa Pueblo.



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