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Points of Necessary Return: A Feminist-Pragmatist, Place-Based Approach to Social Justice

Abstract

This paper promotes an inclusive, place-based approach to addressing past and present injustices and argues that the 2019 Feminist-Pragmatist Colloquium in Rochester, New York—though certainly not perfect—offers one example of such an approach. The Colloquium revisited various Rochester-area historical sites to highlight advancements in social justice while also interrogating past and ongoing harms associated with these locations. The author suggests that ameliorating past and ongoing harms requires that we revisit relevant spaces, places, and events and that we do so with a feminist-pragmatist orientation. Approaching issues in this way can lead to learning, healing, and movement towards more socially just communities.

Keywords

white feminism and humility, historical reckoning

Points of Necessary Return: A Feminist-Pragmatist, Place-Based Approach to Social Justice

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Abstract: This paper promotes an inclusive, place-based approach to addressing past and present injustices and argues that the 2019 Feminist-Pragmatist Colloquium in Rochester, New York—though certainly not perfect—offers one example of such an approach. The Colloquium revisited various Rochester-area historical sites to highlight advancements in social justice while also interrogating past and ongoing harms associated with these locations. The author suggests that ameliorating past and ongoing harms requires that we revisit relevant spaces, places, and events and that we do so with a feminist-pragmatist orientation. Approaching issues in this way can lead to learning, healing, and movement towards more socially just communities.

Keywords: *Feminist-pragmatism, Feminist-pragmatist Orientation, Place-based, Problem-based, Social justice, Social ethics, Feminist-Pragmatist Colloquium*

[S]ocial ethics is not attained by traveling a sequestered byway, but by mixing on the thronged and common road in order to see the extent of one another's burdens.

— Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics*

I am a white, cis-gendered woman philosopher. I believe understanding past harms, addressing current injustices, and progressing towards a more just society is best achieved through problem-based, place-based, and inclusive inquiry. My feminist-pragmatist orientation suggests that by extending, expanding, and deepening our circles of experience, we have the potential to effect positive change toward more socially just conditions. Doing so ethically requires inclusive participation and adopting specific qualities and dispositions welcoming to marginalized or otherwise

missing perspectives. These qualities and dispositions include a problem and place-based approach, a commitment to working "with" others rather than "doing to" or "doing for" others, an empathetic disposition characterized by humility, and a focus on gradual progress towards the amelioration of present situations and conflicts. When informed by these qualities and dispositions, returning to past places of injustice and conflict may facilitate the understanding and growth needed to realize a more just society. It was this orientation that informed the 2019 Feminist-Pragmatist Colloquium.

This Colloquium, which focused on the theme *Looking Back to Move Forward*, occurred November 14-17, 2019, at St. John Fisher University and Rochester area historical sites. This was a "traveling" conference with multiple historical venues utilized for conference activities, discussions, performances, and tours. Rochester, NY, is an ideal location to host the Colloquium as it was the home for



Figure 1. Feminist-Pragmatist Colloquium Attendees at the Elizabeth Cady Stanton House, Seneca Falls, New York, November 16, 2019.

both Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass. Rochester is within short distance of Seneca Falls, where the first Women's Rights Convention occurred. In addition, Rochester and Seneca Falls are also within the traditional Haudenosaunee (Iroquois)

territory, which is not only the oldest living participatory democracy but also a matrilineal confederacy that inspired first-wave feminism.



Figure 2. Mt. Hope Cemetery, Susan B. Anthony & Frederick Douglass gravesites, November 14, 2019.



Figure 3. AKWAABA Living History Presenters, St. John Fisher, presenting "A Gathering of Women," November 15, 2019.

Though these sites and historical figures associated with them are often lauded for their role in advancing social justice, these were also individuals and events that marginalized and perpetuated injustices toward others. For example, the work of the first-wave feminists at Seneca Falls marginalized women of color. It failed to fully advocate for all women's right to vote and, until recently, has been unable to give due recognition to the role Indigenous culture played in the formation of our Western democracy and in inspiring the work of the first-wave feminists. Some might argue that, because of these injustices, returning to these sites serves to perpetuate the marginalization, sanitize the history that occurred, erase past wrongs, and thereby perpetuate these wrongs into our present day. I acknowledge that this could result from some efforts, especially those that gloss over history and offer only uncritical and laudatory remembrances of historical events and individuals. However, the fact that this might occur does not mean we should avoid returning to these historically complicated sites. Instead, because of these complicated histories, we must revisit these locations, the events, and the historical figures associated with them, and we must do so in a certain way and with a particular orientation. I believe feminist-pragmatism offers an effective and ameliorative orientation for this purpose. It is this orientation that informed the 2019 Feminist-Pragmatist Colloquium.

The Colloquium emphasized the value of philosophy, especially feminist-pragmatist philosophy, in promoting the understanding of our past to address our future. This work requires returning to points of past social injustice but doing so with a feminist-

pragmatist lens to understand the wrongs that occurred and often continue today and to realize an improved future.

The feminist-pragmatist orientation involves engaging in an iterative dialogue and doing so with others and, ideally, doing so on location, at places and spaces relevant to the past and present concerns. Though these efforts will be imperfect, and progress will likely be inconsistent, the alternative—retreating from controversial spaces and places of the past—risks maintaining the status quo and reinforcing social divisions. Therefore, we must return but, when returning, it is essential that we engage with humility and openness to hearing new perspectives in these places of past and possible ongoing harm. This offers an opportunity to understand better and create new, more socially just civic communities. An example from the Colloquium may help.

As part of the Colloquium, we visited locations of past conflict and ongoing controversy. The conference aimed to honor the figures and events of social justice in the Rochester area while also recognizing the missing perspectives, problematic issues, and slowed progress for some. For instance, during a lecture and dinner at the National Susan B. Anthony Museum and House, the museum's President and CEO, Deborah Hughes, and feminist-pragmatist philosopher Marilyn Fischer presented different perspectives on Anthony and race, opening a dialogue for additional voices to be heard. While universal agreement was not reached, all participants were left with an expanded understanding of the issues and the perspectives involved.



Figure 4. Deborah Hughes and Marilyn Fischer discussing feminism, race, and suffrage at the National Susan B. Anthony Museum and House, November 15, 2019.

The next day, the conference attendees visited the Women's Rights National Historical Park in Seneca Falls. To the curated docent-led tours, we added and expanded on voices of those often forgotten when conveying the history and events of the women's rights movement. One of the noteworthy aspects highlighted was the impact of the

Native American Haudenosaunee culture on the formation of the United States democracy and its role in the early women's rights movement at Seneca Falls.



Figure 5. Elizabeth Cady Stanton House, Seneca Falls, New York. Tour and discussion on universal principles and social justice. November 16, 2019.

The Colloquium brought attention to how these elements of the Haudenosaunee culture inspired the women's rights movement in the 19th century. Wakerahkáhtste Louise McDonald Herne, Clan Mother of the Mohawk Nation, and Sally Roesch Wagner, a scholar of feminism and Native American culture, spoke with the Colloquium participants about the Iroquois matrilineal tradition and its influence on the suffrage movement.

Each of these place-based dialogues was marked by a concerted effort to be more inclusive of under-represented voices and perspectives. Though not perfectly achieved, the ensuing discussions resulted in a deeper understanding of the subject, including what was progressive and what was not as progressive about the efforts of first-wave feminists in the 19th century.



Figure 6. Wakerahkáltste Louise McDonald Herne and Sally Roesch Wagner, Seneca Falls, November 16, 2019.

There is always room for improvement and growth in our efforts toward achieving socially just conditions in society. We must continue to strive for even greater inclusivity and representation of more perspectives. However, it is necessary to begin somewhere, even if imperfectly or incompletely. We must begin and continue with humility and with the courage to move forward together.

In the words of Jane Addams, a 19th-century social reformer and co-founder of the Hull House in Chicago, "[S]ocial ethics is not attained by traveling a sequestered byway, but by mixing on the thronged and common road in order to see the extent of one another's burdens" (Addams 7). This is best achieved not by avoiding these sites of past and ongoing controversy but by returning with an orientation that makes possible extended, expanded, and deepened circles of understanding.

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Barbara Lowe earned her PhD from Fordham University. Her scholarship focuses on pragmatism, feminism, and applied contemporary social ethics. Recent scholarly contributions include chapters in *The Oxford Handbook of Jane Addams*, *The Oxford Handbook of American and British Women Philosophers in the Nineteenth Century*, and *Women in Pragmatism: Past, Present and Future*. Her current project is focused on how park-based philosophical engagement can foster community connections. Dr. Lowe is a past board member and program co-chair for the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy. Currently, Lowe chairs the Jane Collective for the Advancement of Feminism in American Philosophy. Honors include the Trustee Award for Distinguished Scholarly Achievement, the Trustee Award for Excellence in Teaching, the Father Dorsey Award for Dedication to the Life of the Student, and the Jane Addams Prize.