



PROJECT MUSE®

White Imagination in Search of a Canon

Kevin J. Harrelso

The Pluralist, Volume 16, Number 2, Summer 2021, pp. 39-58 (Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/795283>

White Imagination in Search of a Canon

KEVIN J. HARRELSON

Ball State University

I. Introduction

Tommy J. Curry's *Another white Man's Burden (AwMB)* presents a rigorous intellectual history of Josiah Royce's essays on race. Curry explains the several arguments that Royce made on this topic between 1900 and 1908, and he situates these within Royce's social philosophy and some contemporaneous literatures on racism. The result is a comprehensive theory of cultural assimilation informed by an idealist metaphysics. Royce, namely, disdained segregation and rejected biological accounts of racial difference. But Royce scholars have wrongly taken these observations, Curry argues, as evidence that their hero held progressive views on race. Royce rather began from the premise of Anglo-American cultural superiority, and only on that basis did he ask how Americans should confront the issue of human diversity. His answer was a very unequal brand of assimilation: we Anglos must inculcate in "foreigners" a loyalty to *our* causes. The American republic, Royce hoped, could become a Great Community more successful than the British Empire by being more thoroughly an Empire of the Mind.

Curry's methodology is heavily contextualist, and his intervention in the Royce literature is welcome for it. He presents Royce not as anyone wishes to see him, but rather as someone immersed in nineteenth-century ethnology would be prone to do. The contexts to which Curry appeals will be informative for most, so much so that he gives a few warnings and near-apologies on this point (*Another white Man's Burden* 42–43). In the course of presenting a unified portrait of Royce on race, *AwMB* also provides an introduction to nineteenth-century ethnologic theories, as well as briefer primers on related topics: the differences between southern and northern contexts of racial integration, the various senses of equality advocated by Black authors, the differences between

British and American contexts of colonization, and many others. That readers of *AwMB* will be *educated* by it is, I hope, a compliment worthy of such a thorough historiographic performance. That readers will be *convinced* by it, on the other hand, is something about which Curry expresses much skepticism (*Another white Man's Burden* 185–92). For my part, however, I find the account of Royce's social philosophy to be fair and accurate in its general outline, and more than sufficiently precise in its finer details.

Another white Man's Burden does more than just correct the record about the real meaning of Royce's theory of race. It also offers a thorough rebuke, running through various debates with Royce scholars, of certain interpretive strategies common to discussions of racism in the history of philosophy.¹ The analysis largely concerns the racial dynamics of interpretation, and this will be the focus of my commentary. Why is it that white scholars wish to protect white philosophers from charges of racism? What are the effects of their doing so? Curry's reflections on these questions introduce a number of conceptual tools (e.g., *ideo-racial apartheid*) that should give us pause when defending canonical philosophers against charges of racism. In outline, what Curry claims is that rescuing white philosophers from such accusations enables us—white historians of philosophy—to insulate our canons from challenges by non-white thinkers, and thus to promote a curriculum of exclusively white authors for our own edification and, more insidiously, the easy exclusion of non-white philosophers from the profession.

These charges are profound, and I wish to take them seriously in the following. My plan is first to follow a brief summary (sec. II: Contextualization) of Curry's theses and methodology with a review (sec. III: Sanitization) of common defensive strategies of interpretation. I conclude that while Curry lacks a basic semantic justification for his methodology, he does offer three successful pragmatic arguments that helpfully illuminate his rhetorical situation. I then consider (sec. IV: Canonization) Curry's objections to the integration of Royce into an American Canon. Finally, I will consider (sec. V: Imagination) some of Curry's remaining methodological remarks in light of problems pertaining to authorship. These reflections call for a more detailed, scientifically defensible theory of the white imagination as it pertains to the study of long-deceased authors.

II. Contextualization

The dominant themes of Royce's social philosophy, on any account, are cultural assimilation and social cohesion. Many Royce scholars have seized

on this fact and have attempted to present his philosophy as a resource for their own purportedly anti-racist worldviews. Loyalty, unity, social cohesion . . . these terms at least appear as if they could be employed to promote an anti-racist, humanist outlook. And since much of what Royce wrote on these topics is sufficiently general, scholars have seized on it as a means to promote a social doctrine more to their own liking. Curry argues that all this was a mistake since Royce's whole idealism was tied, *in his own eyes*, to a plan of cultural imperialism. Perhaps more importantly, Royce's conclusions were based upon the premise of an organizational superiority on the part of Anglo-Americans. The temptation to take Royce's idealist theory of assimilation for anti-racist results rather from the fact that we wrongly identify race with biology and racism with segregation. If Curry is right on these scores, it should be harder for white scholars to see Royce *or themselves* as anti-racist as a simple consequence of rejecting, for example, biologism and segregation.²

The student of Royce's assimilationist social theory should seek its origins in *California* (1885) and its apex in *The Philosophy of Loyalty* (1908), and Curry appropriately places the race essays in this context. In the earlier text, a narrative history of his home state, Royce recounts the providential tale of selfish individuals who abandoned their social duties in order to seek riches in the West. They rediscovered in California the need to build communities, and Royce presents these lessons as evidence of a theodicy based on community loyalty and the inevitable failure of selfish motives. Temporary housing settlements repeatedly burn, simplistic mining technologies yield too little gold, and makeshift legal systems fail.³ Success for the Californians comes only after communities arise, and more importantly only for those who cultivate a just sense of loyalty to the collective. For Royce, this sort of process is not only the way of the world, but also the work of the divine. The World Spirit has a cunning nature, as Hegel taught, and for Royce, the stories about his home state were also an abstract of world history. By the time he wrote his essays on race, fifteen years or so after the publication of *California*, his social philosophy had become more general. In *Philosophy of Loyalty*, he would introduce a highest principle, "loyalty to loyalty," the purpose of which is to resolve conflicts among competing loyalties.

In the period between *California* and *Philosophy of Loyalty*, Royce wrote the essays and lectures published in 1908 as *Race Questions, Provincialism, and Other American Problems*. The chief essay from that volume, "Race Questions and Prejudice" (1906), applies Royce's assimilationist ideas specifically to race. Scholars such as Pratt (Introduction) and Kegley ("Josiah Royce on Race") have seen in this essay a more egalitarian notion of cultural unity,

but Curry argues convincingly that they were wrong in this. His argument is that the 1906 essay is “an unapologetic extension” of a lecture that Royce delivered in 1900 at Aberdeen University called “Some Characteristic Tendencies of American Civilization” (*Another white Man’s Burden* 20). In the earlier lecture, Royce explained in greater detail the role that hagiography plays in inculcating loyalty.⁴ If we tell our own story as one of glory and triumph, namely, our fellow citizens will internalize our devotion to the community. The shocking (to some, at least) turn in the lecture is that Royce claimed for Anglo-Americans a special skill in this regard:

But it is well to remember that the special office, the principal use, the social justification, of such mental tendencies [as hagiography] in ourselves lies in the aid that they give us in becoming loyal to our community, and in assimilating to our own social order the strangers that are within our gates. *It is the especial art of the colonizing peoples such as we are, and such as the English are, to be able by devices of this sort rapidly to build up in their own minds a provincial loyalty in a new environment.* (*Another white Man’s Burden* 130; emphasis in original)

Anglo-Americans, on Royce’s account, thus play a special role in the philosophy of assimilation: we are the civilizers who will teach others to think as we think and value what we value. To whatever extent we succeed in this, Royce imagined, our community will be good and just because it will be cohesive in thought, value, and custom. Curry is right to warn that Royce’s recipe here is not one of equality. Non-whites, in Royce’s books, are always *foreigners* or *strangers* who must assimilate to our culture, even in early California when whites were newcomers to the land.⁵ There is too rarely any hint of curiosity about these supposed foreigners, except insofar as they appear more or less fit for assimilation, as Curry at several points also notes.⁶

Curry’s contextualist arguments go deeper than his emphasis on a few passages from “Some Characteristic Tendencies,” as he traces the origins of each major theme of *Race Questions* to lesser-known debates of the period. His interpretation of “Race Questions and Prejudice” is especially convincing in light of the evidence marshaled from the work of James Frazer and Adolf Bastian (*Another white Man’s Burden* 58–67). These writers, namely, rejected the strict biological accounts of race that earlier Darwinists had emphasized, and they moved from a study of physical characteristics to a study of mental ones. Moreover, they saw “conquest and empire” as an indirect mechanism leading to the spread of civilization: “[T]he great conquering races of the world have commonly done most to advance and spread civilisation, thus

healing in peace the wounds they inflicted in war” (*Another white Man’s Burden* 64–65; quoted from James Frazer’s *Golden Bough*). In other words, *both* Royce’s anti-biologism *and* his belief that imperial management improves the minds of the managed were positions that a student of race theories in the 1890s would have recognized as consistent with recent antiblack literature. Given this fact, the attempts to cast Royce’s position from 1900 or even 1908 as progressive appear to be contextually naïve. Curry concludes that “[r]ather than being an exception, Royce is more a parrot of the times, repeating the research of others he judges congenial to his philosophical ideas” (*Another white Man’s Burden* 65).

More important than Royce’s dependence on such sources, for the curious reader, is the contrast between his position on these issues and a selection of writers that Curry introduces. While he acknowledges, for instance, that Royce rejected biological accounts of race, he compares (*Another white Man’s Burden* 8, 51) Royce’s view on racial inequality to that of Anténor Firmin. Firmin had authored, in 1885, a large tract called *The Equality of the Human Races* (see Curry, “From Rousseau’s Theory”). In other contexts (e.g., *Another white Man’s Burden* 150–51), Curry emphasizes the real, personal risks undertaken by more radical critics of inequality such as Douglass and Delany. The effect of bringing these additional contexts to the fore is that it becomes harder for the Roycean to take a few vague remarks about assimilation and cast them as anti-racist, given that there were real people in Royce’s context who put their reputations and even safety on the line to argue in favor of racial equality. No matter how the Royce scholar may wish to read his texts, then, it cannot be maintained easily in the face of such evidence that Josiah Royce was considered, or plausibly could have been considered, in his own context to be an active proponent of racial equality.

With arguments of this sort (and there are many other such examples in the subsequent chapters), Curry presents a full portrait of Royce’s philosophy of race as (1) rooted in his metaphysical idealism, (2) constructed on the premise of Anglo-American cultural supremacy, and (3) regressive with respect to some ideas about race in the early 1900s. Some details of this thorough contextualization might be open to dispute, but it would be hard to reject the full picture. The defender of Royce would have little room, it seems, to argue that an informed reader in 1908 could have taken *Race Questions* to be expressing a progressive or egalitarian theory. The best available move for the defensive Royce scholar would be to distinguish the philosophy, or at least its political potential, from the intentions of the author and the context in which it was first uttered. Why, after all, must we read a text as it might

have been read at the time of its publication? Curry has arguments against decontextualization in this case, but to assess them, we will have to take a broader survey of issues in philosophical historiography.

III. Sanitization

Philosophers read old texts in search of theories about various topics. In doing so, we distinguish the statements that are relevant to the topic from those that are irrelevant. We wish eventually to attribute a definite and coherent theory (hereafter “T”)—in the form of a set of statements—to an author. In some cases, of course, we appeal to elements of the context that aid us in interpreting the theoretical statements. But in all cases, we draw some kind of line between theory and context. When the topic is race, this issue becomes especially contentious. When should a philosopher’s specifically racist statements impact our interpretation of a theory? This is a question of relevance to which there is no easy, general answer. Hume’s racism probably has little impact on his beliefs about causality. At least, one would need a very good argument to introduce race into a discussion of the theory of causality. Kant’s racism, on the other hand, probably bears some relation to his theory of autonomy, though it is a famous matter of debate how much.⁷ In this section, I wish to assess Curry’s general arguments against excluding racial contexts from theoretical discussions. As a preface, I wish to point out that I have already conceded that Curry’s specific, historical arguments are successful. In other words, Royce’s claims about race and the supposed superiority of Anglophone culture are part and parcel of his social philosophy, and it would be wrong to read the latter without the former.

Curry nonetheless hopes to highlight a general phenomenon regarding the abstraction of philosophical theories from racist contexts: his worry is that philosophies of the past get “absolved of their historical terrors when presented as *theory*” (*Another white Man’s Burden* xvii). This is hardly a groundbreaking observation, however, and revisionists will point out that it is at times perfectly legitimate to examine a theory without reference to the context in which it was first formulated. This issue arises throughout *AwMB*, but most clearly in Curry’s debate with Matthew Foust (*Another white Man’s Burden* 142–47). Foust had claimed, in his *Loyalty to Loyalty: Josiah Royce and the Genuinely Moral Life* (2012), about Royce’s assimilationist ethics, that “[s]uch a position could very well be put forth by a racist colonialist, but it could just as plausibly be put forth by a person wishing for the harmonious coexistence of diversity and unity” (Foust 117). Foust is right in this much,

given the modal character of his claim: the theory *could plausibly be put forth* by a person other than the actual one who did put it forth. But Curry is also right that the actual person in question, Josiah Royce of Harvard, was of the former rather than the latter variety. The debate hinges not on an interpretation of a theory, since on this point there is agreement, but rather on the significance granted to the context in which that theory was produced.

Curry and Foust are not the first to have this debate, and it is a classic trope in intellectual history. Occasionally, historians have attempted to make a general objection to appropriating theories from old books, but they have some plain facts about language and thought against them. Practices such as Foust's—whereby a theory proposed by a racist is converted into a one with friendlier sentiments—are labeled “presentist.” A general argument against presentism, however, requires a criterion of correct interpretation. The most famous proposal is Quentin Skinner's claim that we should attribute to an author only what they could be brought to accept (28). This also requires a modal claim, but adds an even more dubious epistemology: What basis do we have for guessing what Royce or Kant could be brought to accept? To my mind—and I am on record as having defended an interpretive pluralism (Harrelson, “Inferentialist Philosophy”)—all such arguments as Skinner's have failed. The differences between a legitimate and an illegitimate presentism come into play only when we examine the reasons for our interest in a particular author, or the effects of our abstracting the specific theories in the manner that we do so. If a presentist history is to be objectionable, I have argued, there need to be *specific* reasons against it. For his part, however, Curry does provide us with such reasons, although at times he seems to think that contextual analysis on its own suffices to carry the day.

In a similar context concerning Kant, Charles Mills acknowledges the limit of any broad semantic argument against the aggressively retrospective interpretations common to racial apologists (Mills, “Kant's *Untermenschen*”). The defender of Kant could say, Mills would allow, that “Kant indeed believed theory T, which includes a race theory, but we have modified this into the correct egalitarian theory T*.”⁸ But even this move would concede to Mills that attribution of belief should be entirely *de dicto*, and once we acknowledge that intention and belief may be attributed *de re*—arguably, the foundational insight of contemporary philosophy of language⁹—the Kantian may dispute that Kant's moral theory (T) includes the racist statements precisely because any theory such as T or T* (unless a literal transcription of texts) is attributed by the interpreter to the author. Mills is aware of these points, which is why, in a reply to his critics, he insisted that a further discovery of “how

language really works” would be needed—he and Curry both need a strongly contextualist theory of meaning¹⁰—before we could declare victory against the sanitizers.

Curry, on the other hand, often writes as if the specific contextualist arguments (e.g., Royce’s uses of term *j* means what text *S* defines it as) reveal that Royce scholars simply failed to understand the meaning of Royce’s terms.¹¹ But this holds only if we accept that the meaning of the terms is supplied by the exact context that Curry illuminates. While I am compelled by the actual contextual arguments Curry gives, for these reasons, I am less sure than he is about their dialectical effectiveness against a stronger revisionist argument.¹² Contextual hermeneutics by itself is always circular in this way: the interpreter provides the relevant context to explain their understanding of the text, but can only argue that this is the relevant context by giving their reading of the text. How do we adjudicate competing contextual readings? Without better arguments—specifically a contextualist account of meaning that would give reasonable guidelines about how circumstances of utterance should place limits on temporally removed interpretations—all we can do is complain that others do not know what we know. So I sympathize with Curry when he complains, rightly, that we do not know as much as he does about nineteenth-century ethnology. And I am happy learn this material from him, though I fear that the argument does not generalize in the manner he sometimes suggests.

Thus far, I have argued that Curry and even Mills have neglected the full semantic arguments that their position requires, but that is just a small part of the methodological case that Curry raises. Like Mills, he makes stronger pragmatic arguments. Mills had argued that reading Kant as a racist would open “a conceptual space for locating the distinctive character of the political struggles of colored people” (Mills, “Kant’s *Untermenschen*” 171). In plain terms, we would not well understand the historical struggles of non-whites under colonial regimes if we insisted that the real theories of modern philosophy were genuinely egalitarian. Mills famously gives an alternative “symbiotic” narrative, one in which the main contract of modern political theory was a racial one. That is an appealing narrative, and I happily communicate it to hordes of students. But the symbiotic narrative itself does not rule out the so-called “anomalous” reading of modernity, namely, the more classic view that Enlightenment egalitarianism was in principle inclusive but that the lived realities failed to measure up to the ideals. This is one place where Curry advances a step beyond Mills. He argues, in particular, that anomalous readings of past racisms have an assimilationist effect (Pragmatic Argument #1):

[T]here is at a very basic and intuitive level a belief and practice among philosophers and theorists more broadly that asserts that assimilating Blacks into the categories and traditions of whites is in fact humanizing, since it suggests at the most intuitive level that they (Blacks) share in the humanity of the white race. In short, let's just include Black or Brown or Indigenous peoples into the (white) definition of humanity. (*Another white Man's Burden* 35)

Curry's argument is that to claim that Kant's (or any other) notion of equality properly includes non-whites is to continue to allow European philosophers to define equality for all humans. He could, unlike Mills, allow that the anomaly theory holds some value as an interpretation of white racism relative to white ideology, but that it is still an inadequate characterization of the history of racial ideology when not exclusively white. We should rather look, Curry reasonably claims, at alternative notions of equality including those proposed by Black thinkers. It is then a gratuitous effect that white philosophers like Kant and Royce look much less appealing once we place them in this larger context. We can conclude this review of Curry's first pragmatic argument by asserting a principle: we should assess white philosophers' views on race primarily in relation to Black writers of their time, rather than vice versa. And this is exactly what Curry has done in the case of Royce, with the effect that Royce comes out as a remarkably racist writer. Note that the issue here is precisely not whether the criticisms by Black authors can be accommodated by the theory proposed by the white author—which would just repeat assimilationism at the level of theory.

A second pragmatic argument (Pragmatic Argument #2) that Curry offers against sanitization concerns a very complex phenomenon about accusations of anachronism (*Another white Man's Burden* 34). Philosophers often object, namely, that researching race in the history of philosophy involves anachronism. Just recently, a colleague told me, about one of my projects on Locke, that “of course Locke is racist by our standards,” implying (I suppose) that my research was uninteresting. This makes it sound as if the contextualist history (that of Curry, Mills, or myself) is anachronistic. But Curry is explicit about the fact that contextualist research is not a matter of judging the past *by our standards*. Our intuitions about what is racist need, rather, modification informed by historical research (and Curry achieves just this by showing how racist theories have not always been biological or segregationist). Anachronism occurs when scholars take the long-deceased philosopher to have asserted a theory (theory T) that can be abstracted from the racist beliefs under discussion—then they can truly assert that T is not

racist by our standards. And if we allow this sanitized theory T, contextualist histories will appear to impose current sensibilities about racism onto these philosophers—the reason for this is that the historian of racism appears to be assessing the philosophers’ “private predilections” instead of the sanitized theory T.¹³

The unstable dialectic works as follows: to those without an appropriately historical understanding of race, those of us who study the history of race will appear anachronistic;¹⁴ but to us contextualists, the contemporary philosopher’s understanding of the relevant texts is a sanitized one, and their reliance on their intuitive sensibilities is therefore shallow. Needless to say, it is very difficult to mediate these debates; but such is the predicament in which we find ourselves. Nonetheless, here, we may assert a practical conclusion from the argument: when studying the history of thought about race, we ought to historicize our own sense of what is racist and what is not; it should not be a matter of whether a theory coheres with our sensibilities, but rather of how then-current notions of race informed the theory.

Finally, Curry offers a third argument (Pragmatic Argument #3) pertaining to a further effect of portraying a sanitized theory T as anti-racist. If sanitized theories become a model of anti-racist thought, it puts the contemporary scholar of color in an unfortunate position. They are under pressure, namely, to affirm the sanitized theory as such so that their sensibilities may be adjusted to current norms. This puts them in the unenviable position of having to treat historically problematic theories as “*theoretical beacons* that should guide and could improve our existing philosophical sensibilities” (*Another white Man’s Burden* xvii). Curry’s chief example is feminism, which naturally draws the ire of some colleagues. But why should Black women, for example, ignore the fact that feminism was historically a white supremacist movement? Granted, ignoring the history here would make solidarity with today’s white women an easier achievement, but this is a very immodest demand to make: it puts the labor of integration (if that is our goal) entirely on the side of scholars of color. As above, we assert here a third practical conclusion: do not place the burden of historical critique entirely on scholars of color, and defensive revisionism is likely to have just this effect.

Critics will be quick to object that Curry goes too far in claiming that the theories are falsified by their context, but there is much truth in the pragmatics here. Curry is not arguing that a theory of race is false if it was formulated first by a racist, what is called by some a “genetic fallacy.” Although there are some passages that border on this mistake,¹⁵ the better tendency of his thought is to highlight the effects of ignoring the history of racism when discussing

political or social theories. Rather than being defensive, the white scholar might choose to engage in some good old-fashioned perspective switching: consider the standpoint of the scholar of color, whose historical allegiance is understandably to those excluded by liberalism, feminism, and democracy. Why would the claim that these movements could have been less exclusive *in the abstract* convince you that you should now pledge allegiance to them in this abstract sense? At the very least, again, there is an expectation of assimilation in the way that classically racist theories are presented in purified form. Moreover, this way of telling the past clearly privileges assimilation over truth.¹⁶

IV. Canonization

Curry's more general arguments about interpretation thus meet with some success since he helpfully illuminates the rhetorical situation of the scholar of color (or indeed any scholar of race). These points deserve our fuller attention, and to better appreciate the situation, we should look also at canonicity. What effects, namely, do established canons have on the researcher of race? More specifically, what effects do they have on the Black researcher of anti-black racism? In brief, Curry argues that canons frame a kind of hierarchy of relevance that determines which authors and which texts receive discussion in disciplinary media. Since existing canons are white, predominately racist, and heavily sanitized, this puts the student of Black authors from the nineteenth century (and earlier) in a difficult position: to publish their material, they need to cast it in relation to theories of canonical white authors. But the canonical authors are typically presented, as Kant and Royce are, in a sanitized form. The sharper points of criticism that Black authors (for example) have to offer are thus softened by the sanitization effects. In this section, I wish only to contextualize Curry's point relative to some more general themes in the historiography of philosophy.

The first point to consider about literary canons is that they are not the result of obvious inferences from source materials. Eighteenth-century readers of philosophy, for instance, did not see Locke, Berkeley, and Hume as making a cumulative, sequential argument that empiricist principles lead to skepticism about personal identity. What we know as British Empiricism was rather a construction by nineteenth-century authors who wished to defend philosophy against empirical psychology by showing that the latter could not account for agency (see Klein). Whether it was a good construction for studying eighteenth-century British philosophy is another question. What

cannot easily be debated, however, is that the canonical status of this idea—the idea that the figures in question formed a school or movement with the core idea “empiricism”—impacts how we view other authors of the time. I mention this example only to draw sympathy to Curry’s general point: canons motivate certain disciplinary dynamics that demand that unfamiliar figures be cast in relation to more familiar figures. So Curry’s specific point is that the reader of nineteenth-century American race theories has to place the theories in relation to the dominant canon of American Philosophy.

Traditionally, “American Philosophy” as a sub-discipline orients around the three great pragmatists: Peirce, James, and Dewey. Others are sometimes promoted to the list, so that there is debate about the importance of Addams, Royce, and Du Bois. But the relevance of these thinkers is decided according to whether their thought reflects pragmatism in one of its purer forms *or* to whatever extent they interacted with the canonical philosophers. Hence, Curry complains of Du Bois that

he is relevant to American philosophy because he represents the accumulative apex of white thinking and mentorship in a Black figure as a pragmatist, not because of his own novel contributions to how we think about and diagnose the recurring ills and crises of the American empire. (*Another white Man’s Burden* xix)

Royce scholars are familiar with this problem since, for many decades now, there has been a concerted effort—one might call it the founding ideology of the Josiah Royce Society—to present Royce as the fourth great pragmatist.¹⁷ This requires some terminological revision since the language and argument style of at least the early Royce is patently Germanic. Even if we concede, however, that in spirit and achievement, Royce is a pragmatist rather than a Neo-Hegelian or Kantian, this would have certain consequences for the study of other figures in his milieu. Those seeking to publish on Royce’s students, critics, or other interlocutors would likewise have to assimilate their thought to the pragmatist canon. To write on either Royce or his students, then, there is some implicit pressure to (1) cast his philosophy in relation to pragmatism, and (2) accept the ideology underlying the canon.

None of this will deter the committed pragmatist, nor the defender of Royce. But as is the case with defenders of British Empiricism and other historiographic relics, the pragmatist should at least concede that the whole idea of an American Pragmatism is likewise partly a retrospective construction. Curry notes at several points that the pragmatist canon was devised in the mid-1960s, though he does not provide further analysis in *AwMB*.¹⁸ As

is the case with British Empiricism, these facts of historiographic record do not entail that isolating a pragmatist canon is not a good way to catalog and categorize the documents of the past. But they do open room for debate, and the inconvenient exclusion of Black ethnology (re: Curry's research area) is an important data point for anyone looking to reassess what it means to call Peircean and Deweyan pragmatism the centerpiece of American Philosophy. At the very least, it should be a scholarly project for Americanists to identify the ideology and re-evaluate relevant figures with regard to it; there might be unintended exclusionary effects.

These points should establish the *plausibility* of Curry's claim that the canon of American Pragmatism has unintended exclusionary effects. Here, I support his point only by describing two additional obscuring effects of canons. The first is an availability effect. Experts acquire a PhD and publish their early career works by mastering the material in their immediate canon, which for Americanists is a few pragmatists in addition to the big three. Correcting this is not simply a matter of writing up a summary of the material and publishing it: Curry can introduce the work of his ethnological heroes only by demonstrating historical relationships to canonical (white) figures.¹⁹ That would be fair enough, were it not combined with both sanitization and a defensive reaction from those white scholars who seek to defend the honor of the canonical figures. It is an unenviable circumstance for the scholar of racism or non-white authors, to say the least. And consider further that in order to communicate these points, Curry has had to write a book explaining that Royce's philosophy contains racist premises (what should have been an entirely superfluous undertaking).

A second obscuring effect pertains to white scholars of mainstream history of philosophy, which I can best illustrate with a personal anecdote (it is thus my addendum to Curry's arguments, and not his argument as such). Like Royce, I received my PhD in Philosophy by writing a dissertation largely focused on Kant. At the time, I knew nothing of the dependence of his moral philosophy on his race theory, and it was not until reading the essays by Mills and Eze that I returned to my *Akademische Ausgabe* to assess Kant's historical essays next to his anthropology. Only then did Kant's philosophy as a whole—his notions of autonomy, peace, and cosmopolitanism—begin to make sense. The glue that ties it all together for Kant is his theory of humanity, and this theory is one of racial hierarchy. But why did I need to read Mills and Eze before I understood Kant's philosophy, when I (not they) had this for my professional area of specialty? So we white historians do not merely place the scholar of color in an unenviable rhetorical circumstance;

we also obscure our fields of study to our own discernment by constructing and amending hagiographic canons.

These anecdotes should, I hope, lend some credence to the claim that the dominance of American Philosophy by pragmatism has noteworthy and deleterious effects on scholars of color. It is worth at least considering what a sub-discipline called “American Philosophy” might otherwise look like, and, here, Curry offers another suggestion: American Philosophy, namely, should be understood as “a particular set of social and philosophical problems that originated geographically and historically upon American soil” (*Another white Man’s Burden* 13). We Americans ought simply to look at what is peculiar to our history: a diversity of populations who have struggled with immigration and integration ostensibly under the reign of liberal, democratic, and egalitarian ideals. America is and has been a very interesting place, with a complicated history that differs from that of every other culture or nation in human history. There is thus a wealth of material that would fall under the rubric of “American Philosophy,” so much so that the curious historian might begin to consider the pragmatisms of Dewey and Peirce to be relatively small pieces of the whole.

To summarize, there is a plain set of disciplinary dynamics that place the scholar of racism in a peculiar rhetorical position. How does an author or topic become canonical? The easy answer to this question is Royce’s magic word: assimilation. The scholar must demonstrate that the author in question is sufficiently pragmatist, or empiricist, or feminist, by the retrospectively projected standards. What is the best way to introduce an author? Affiliation: try to find some letters written by the author to a canonical figure, as feminists do with seventeenth-century philosophy (see Mercer). But these strategies place some structural obstacles in the way of the scholar of race, given that the canonical figures have been largely sanitized on this topic. How might we introduce a genuinely critical thinker on the topic of race—such as Anténor Firmin or Curry’s other heroes²⁰—into a canon, the racial sensibilities of which are a constantly shifting target? Those who wish to criticize Curry’s work will owe him a sympathetic assessment of this problem.

V. Imagination

The arguments that I have recounted and assessed appear, for the most part, in the opening sections of *AwMB*. In later sections, Curry emphasizes a different set of hermeneutic phenomena in regard to Royce scholarship. Readers of a text, namely, imagine themselves to have an intuitive grasp of the

character of the author. A scholar of Royce *knows* Royce himself. Royce called this phenomenon “appreciation,” and it formed the basis of his philosophy of history.²¹ To Curry, however, it seems a further obstacle to genuine contextual research. If our intuition of the author’s character guides our reading of the text, that could make us resistant to disconfirming facts or contexts. A white liberal scholar devoted to Royce, for example, is likely to intuit Royce as having white liberal sensibilities. And this could lead them to deny (when presented with the evidence) the fact of Royce’s racism. This phenomenon is indeed an obstacle to deeper historical understanding, but in this concluding section, I wish to indicate something of a scientific basis for it. So I accept the argument that Curry seems to make, and I hope to place it in a richer context.

Curry complains of the extant literature on Royce and race:

The previous writings on Royce’s race thinking are more geared toward the *exegetical expressions of dearly held personal assumptions* about Royce’s ethical character, and the need to describe him as socially conscious and aware of the racism in his time, rather than his actual perceptions and sensibilities of racial and ethnic difference at the turn of the century. (*Another white Man’s Burden* 156; emphasis added)

Later, he adds that this is a tendency endemic to the theorizing reader:

As theorists, we dedicate ourselves to theory—the *sole productions of the individual and our intimate intuitions of their text*. To methodologically protect this approach, we are taught to cast criticisms of our interpretations into various aspects of irrelevance. (*Another white Man’s Burden* 183; emphasis added)²²

I wish to object only to Curry’s claim that it is especially philosophers who assume intuitive access to meaning; the phenomenon in question stems rather from peculiarities of *Homo sapiens* (even if sometimes also from peculiarities of white people). Our understanding of the practices of interpreting philosophers needs to be consistent with what we uncover about language and symbolic communication generally. We can only understand these disciplinary minutiae—why certain scholars read certain canonical texts in certain ways—to whatever extent we also understand all the elements involved in symbolic communication, specifically symbolic communication of complex (canonical or semi-canonical) texts across vast swaths of time. In this concluding section, I wish to indicate briefly just five components of the process: mind reading, historical understanding, oracularity, identification, and racial prejudice. A better elaboration of this material would, as I suggested at the outset, teach us something about *white imagination in search of a canon*.

The core element of taking a string of marks or noises to be meaningful—to be a text instead of a mere mark or noise—is that we understand them as expressions of minded creatures. This is an ineliminable aspect of symbolic communication, the product of the evolution of *Homo sapiens* as well as perhaps other cousins of ours in the animal kingdom. So it seems too much to complain that readers rely on intuitions about the author's character. It is unlikely that they can do much else at first. It is interesting enough that certain philosophers once proclaimed the "death of the author," but we today are wiser (on this point), and we will need to structure our theories of interpretation by taking into account the basic phenomena of mind reading, simulation, and so on.²³

But this opens the question rather than closes it, and Curry is right to object that "intuition of character" should play a limited role in historical understanding. We must intuit a minded creature, but why a *character*, and why a good one at that? To this extent, Curry's methodological arguments open a promising direction. Philosophers of history, from Royce to Collingwood and even some more recent thinkers,²⁴ have stressed empathy and understanding as the basic methodology in historical knowledge. Curry gives us an alternative thesis: *we do intuit an author by empathy (or simulation) of a character, but this intuition is more an obstacle to accurate historical knowledge than it is a means to it.* This point is worth pursuing much further, and it promises a richer, cognitive theory of historical knowledge than has recently been on offer. Royce and Collingwood believed that we readers, if careful, could know the thoughts of Aristotle or Plato. We need to move past this idealist theory of mind, but without becoming skeptics (as Curry worries [*Another white Man's Burden* 188]). The thought we have of an author's mind should be treated as a fundamentally unreliable one.

Nonetheless, there is more to interpreting a philosopher than simply imagining a mind behind the marks (words). There is lending coherence to a large body of text, and comparing our readings with those of other students. We understand what Kant meant because we participate in dialogue with many people over large swaths of place and time about "Kant." In this process, Kant becomes less the particular *Homo sapiens* who authored the texts than a product of the cultural imagination: the great philosopher becomes an oracle of sorts, whose texts are treated as mysteriously wise proclamations, the meanings of which slowly reveal themselves to us.²⁵ Curry rightly objects to certain aspects of interpretation; he sees the Royceans reading into the proclamations of their oracle whatever they need to think, or whatever their own situations demand. The whole process is a matter of imagining our own thoughts to be told to us by our great dead ancestors.

It is too easy, for some of us, to dismiss interpretations of old philosophies as irrelevant to the identity of the interpreter. This was the naïve view I took as a student, when I imagined my Heideggerian teachers to be needlessly invested in rescuing that philosopher's work from his anti-Semitism. My censure pertained to my (false) belief that Heidegger's Nazism had nothing to do with them, because, for me, Heidegger's books are just books. The more sympathetic point is to realize that their activities had very little to do with the historical Heidegger (or Royce, Kant, Frege, etc.) in the first place. Heidegger just happens to be the name of the oracle of this particular crowd of professors, as Royce is for another crowd. In other words, for all these scholars, the texts in question are not just books. They are living expressions of a mode of life—not exactly a theory—and the interpreters cannot abstract the texts from their own identities. They do not want to leave their crowd, but they do worry, reasonably, that the sensibilities of their club might be less than pure. Once a reader has invested a certain amount of trust in an author (or set of interlocutors)—trust that the big answers in life will be revealed by the canonical texts in question—it seems inevitable that the reader will identify with the (imagined) author and the circle of interpreters.

Finally, what does any of this have to do with racism? Well, Curry is pointing out the specifically racial effects of white scholars reading a deceased white (oracular) author's writings about race. So the specifics of psychological and social dynamics of white guilt, white ignorance, and so on, are here compounding the already complicated situation. Why do supposedly progressive white scholars need an oracle? Why do they choose white authors for their oracles? (Once they choose their oracle, it goes without saying that the oracle will not be allowed to be racist.) I do not know how to answer these questions, but it seems clear to me that we cannot fully address the questions raised by Curry above—about sanitization and canonization—without understanding better why the white imagination works just in this way. Tommy Curry has told the Royce scholars that the oracle they imagine is not the real Professor at Harvard; Curry has pulled back the curtain on this particular wizard. It remains to discover, however, how such dreams as theirs arise in the first place.

NOTES

1. Curry throughout seeks to address “the historical gulf—the methodological failures—of American philosophy's engagement with race itself” (*Another white Man's Burden* xxi). In his conclusion (*Another white Man's Burden* 187), he hesitantly expresses the main idea undertaken in this review: “[T]here is something striking in the seemingly unified position taken up by scholars of Royce” who seek to re-interpret his writings on race as expressive of a liberal ideal.

2. “[T]he racial critique raised against Josiah Royce in this book is more accurately understood as a corrective to the historiographic lens deployed by American philosophers who intuitively assert that nonbiological accounts of race are anti-racist and less pernicious than other nineteenth-century theories of race that linked blood to destiny” (*Another white Man’s Burden* 2).

3. This summary of chapters 4 and 5 of *California* is mine, but I take it as consistent with Curry’s intentions (see *Another white Man’s Burden* 47–58, 135).

4. A scholar seeking to quibble on this point might compare Royce’s remarks about history in “Some Characteristic Tendencies of American Civilization” to the methodological remarks in chapter 4 of *California*.

5. Royce’s use of terms such as “native” and “foreigner,” as noted above, have caused this reader much confusion. But the problem is not unique to Royce. See, for instance, Mills’s note in *Racial Contract* (41) about Australian descriptions of aborigines as foreigners.

6. There are occasional more inclusive passages in Royce’s corpus, such as his admission in *California* that “the story as told by the foreign population is not known to us. We can see only indirectly, through the furious and confused reports of the Americans themselves, how much of organized and coarse brutality these Mexicans suffered from the miners’ meetings” (*California* 286). But generally Curry is right to claim (*Another white Man’s Burden* 147) that Royce proceeds “without making any effort to situate how the victims of this assimilation, those people that ‘must in due measure conform,’ will react to this cultural imposition.”

7. There is a vast literature on this topic. For a starting point, see my references to Mills’s “Kant’s *Untermenschen*,” discussed below.

8. Mills, “Kant’s *Untermenschen*” (180): “While it is, of course, always possible to reconstruct a theory in which personhood has no gender or racial restrictions, the question at issue is what Kant thought.” The difficulty, as I explain in the following, lies in determining conditions for sets of sentences formulated by the interpreter to be called “what Kant thought.”

9. Keith Donnellan introduced the problem, and Kripke later built his theory in response. See Brandom’s *Making It Explicit*, chap. 9, for an application of these points to historiography.

10. In her excellent intervention into the earlier debates about Royce and race, Marilyn Fischer summarized this implication nicely: “The problem with their [Kegey, Pratt, and Sullivan] interpretations is that they assume that the meanings of the words Royce used are self-evident to readers of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century readers” (127).

11. One exemplary passage: “Because of the ahistorical nature of the discipline of philosophy generally, American philosophers and their writings dealing with racism, gender, and empire are being praised as anti-racist by scholars having no actual knowledge of the debates of nineteenth- and twentieth-century figures deploying various ethnological assumptions, theories, and terms throughout their writings” (*Another white Man’s Burden* 35).

12. In one late passage (*Another white Man’s Burden* 188), Curry comes close to dealing with these issues, but his worry seems to be that raising them encourages a facile skepticism. It should be clear from my remarks that this is not the case.

13. This is Foust’s contention, which Curry, of course, disputes (*Another white Man’s Burden* 144–45) on the grounds that the distinction between a writer’s theory and his private beliefs is a distinction specific to more recent views of racism.

14. “Black scholars point out the racist idea, and *white philosophers* fix it, explain it away, or render said criticism irrelevant to the core contributions of said thinker” (*Another white Man’s Burden* xi).

15. For example: “Such arguments assert a nonsensical proposition—while white supremacy that holds theories of white racial superiority in intelligence, civilization, evolution, and culture are false, the very same ideas emerging from white supremacy are true if they are not thought to be the exclusive capacity of whites but in fact are the natural capacities of all humans” (*Another white Man’s Burden* 36).

16. “In our efforts to *include* Blacks, do we ignore the barbarism of the white race? Do we insist on giving Blacks reason for the purposes of the philosophical project and ignore that we are also talking about cultural idealizations of the white man’s burden? Arguments suggesting that we can appeal to the metaphysics, or less pretentiously, the universal claims proposed by philosophers, often revise the categories that serve as the basis of the exclusion” (*Another white Man’s Burden* 39).

17. Oppenheim’s *Reverence for the Relations of Life* follows this strategy transparently: he tries to put Royce into relation to each of the three great pragmatists, with the implication being that Royce is the fourth.

18. Moore’s *American Pragmatism* is a key text, though there are many others.

19. “In American philosophy circles, there is often the practice of asking whether certain Black figures were sufficiently feminist or pragmatist, or can be claimed as feminist, pragmatist, or liberal in their orientation” (*Another white Man’s Burden* xiii).

20. In “From Rousseau’s Theory of Natural Equality,” Curry usefully introduces Firmin in relation to Rousseau. This move, however, only illustrates the problem.

21. See especially Royce, *Spirit of Modern Philosophy*; Harrelson, “Ethics of History.”

22. These points are not merely late additions to the text, since in his Introduction, he had already written: “Because philosophy assumes a literal access to meaning whereby *the reading of works is assumed to be intuitive* and mediated hermeneutically (only distorted through personal bias or inclination), there has been somewhat of a methodological aversion to historicizing American philosophers” (*Another white Man’s Burden* 7).

23. Needless to say, the scientific literature on these topics is vast. But someone really wanting to understand what underlies interpretation, especially bad interpretation, will want to know it. See Neuman for one recent attempt to apply the mind reading/simulation experiments to the act of reading.

24. For just the basics here, see D’Oro, “Reasons and Causes”; Kögler and Steuber, *Empathy and Agency*.

25. The oracle-thesis has been proposed to me by Kaley Rittichier, a logician who finds these historical practices to be frivolous.

REFERENCES

- Brandom, Robert B. *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*. Harvard UP, 1994.
- Curry, Tommy J. *Another white Man’s Burden: Josiah Royce’s Quest for a Philosophy of white Racial Empire*. State U of New York P, 2018.
- . “From Rousseau’s Theory of Natural Equality to Firmin’s Resistance to the Historical Inequality of Races.” *The CLR James Journal*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2009, pp. 135–63.
- Donnellan, Keith S. “Reference and Definite Descriptions.” *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 75, no. 3, 1966, pp. 281–304.

- D'Oro, Giuseppina. "Reasons and Causes: The Philosophical Battle and the Meta-philosophical War." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 90, no. 2, 2012, pp. 207–21.
- Eze, Emmanuel. *Achieving Our Humanity*. Routledge, 2001.
- Firmin, Anténor. *The Equality of the Human Races*. Translated by Asselin Charles, U of Illinois P, 2002.
- Fischer, Marilyn. "Locating Royce's Reasoning on Race." *The Pluralist*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2012, pp. 104–32.
- Foust, Matthew. *Loyalty to Loyalty: Josiah Royce and the Genuinely Moral Life*. Fordham UP, 2012.
- Harrelson, Kevin J. "The Ethics of History in Royce's *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*." *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2013, pp. 134–52.
- . "Inferentialist Philosophy of Language and the Historiography of Philosophy." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2014, pp. 582–603.
- Kegley, Jacquelyn Ann K. "Josiah Royce on Race: Issues in Context." *The Pluralist*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2009, pp. 1–9.
- Klein, Alexander Mugar. *The Rise of Empiricism: William James, Thomas Hill Green, and the Struggle over Psychology*. 2007. Indiana University, PhD dissertation.
- Kögler, Hans Herbert, and Karsten Steuber, editors. *Empathy and Agency: The Problem of Understanding in the Human Sciences*. Westview Press, 2000.
- Kripke, Saul A. "Naming and Necessity." *Semantics of Natural Language*, edited by Donald Davidson and Gilbert Harman, Springer, 1972, pp. 253–355.
- Mercer, Christia. "Descartes' Debt to Teresa of Ávila, or Why We Should Work on Women in the History of Philosophy." *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 174, no. 10, 2017, pp. 2539–55.
- Mills, Charles. "Kant and Race, Redux." *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, vol. 35, nos. 1–2, 2014, pp. 125–57.
- . "Kant's *Untermenschen*," *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*, edited by Andrew Valls, Cornell UP, 2005, pp. 169–93.
- . *The Racial Contract*. Cornell UP, 1997.
- Moore, Edward C. *American Pragmatism: Peirce, James, and Dewey*. Columbia UP, 1962.
- Neuman, Yair. "Empathy: From Mind Reading to the Reading of a Distant Text." *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2010, pp. 235–44.
- Oppenheim, Frank. *Reverence for the Relations of Life*. Notre Dame UP, 2005.
- Pratt, Scott L. Introduction. *Race Questions, Provincialism, and Other American Problems*, by Josiah Royce, edited by Scott L. Pratt and Shannon Sullivan, Fordham UP, 2009, pp. 1–19.
- Royce, Josiah. *California*. 1885. Peregrine Press, 1970.
- . *The Philosophy of Loyalty*. 1908. Vanderbilt UP, 1995.
- . *Race Questions, Provincialism, and Other American Problems*. Macmillan, 1908.
- . "Some Characteristic Tendencies of American Civilization." *Transactions of the Aberdeen Philosophical Society*, vol. 3, 1900, pp. 194–217.
- . *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*. 1892. George Braziller, 1955.
- Skinner, Quentin. "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas." *History and Theory*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1969, pp. 3–53.