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Penning Dissent: The Methodological and Historiographic Motivations behind the Writing of *Another white Man's Burden*

By: Tommy J Curry*

Over the last decade, my interest in Josiah Royce has been motivated by the question: What is the relationship between historical and verifiable facts and philosophical interpretation/theory? This question is of tremendous consequence in philosophy since the discipline requires no empirical or archival evidence to substantiate the arguments that are made for or against a “specific philosopher” or thinker beyond the impression the philosopher and other philosophers have made about the “specific philosopher under scrutiny.” When it comes to the study of Black historical figures and the study of American racism this question that motivated my interest in Josiah Royce and American philosophy more generally became a methodological concern. I observed that among American philosophers there was no real need to understand the historical or scientific practices of 19th century America. There remains a very real resistance to such periodization. What I observed was how Black thinkers (both past and present) were excoriated for theories of racism and arguments concerning the construction of the American empire that ran counter to the liberal ideology of the late 20th and early 21st century that held American racism is no longer at the core of America itself.

Since 2005, my argument that Josiah Royce was a xenophobe and insidious anti-Black racist was denied by many American philosophers who believed that white figures offered resources and overlap with the intellectual projects of Black scholars in the 1800s. Despite this claim, there has been little evidence presented as the result of any rigorous and thorough investigation of 19th-century Black texts to ever establish that Royce did agree with Black scholars during his time or that social program of assimilation would be compatible with the visions of liberation and freedom Black figures held within his lifetime. The assertion that Black Americans would be sympathetic and supportive of any white political program that was not enslavement or Jim Crow segregation needs to be seriously reconsidered. Such an assumption sets the most meager criteria by which to evaluate the historical and ongoing debates concerning Black oppression in the United States and abroad. Perhaps this methodological assertion is not obvious to many philosophers, but it nonetheless provides evidence for why philosophy is thought to be an extension of colonial logic. American philosophy functions as a colonialist apparatus through which white philosophers, acting as the benevolent civilized cultures, give Black philosophers, those exceptional but still members of primitive groups, the values and methods to better understand and clarify their historical existence. Because Black historical figures are thought to have no sociality, no worldview or values—a positive philosophical program and are merely waging polemics (i.e. a negative philosophical program)—any white philosophical program that is more inclusive than American slavery and segregation is deemed acceptable and better for Black people than the status quo.

As noted in *Another white Man's Burden: Josiah Royce's Quest for a Philosophy of white Racial Empire* (2018), Black philosophers have long contested how America normalized the inferiority, enslavement, and extermination of peoples throughout the darker world. Their insights have fueled centuries of protest, revolution, and radical thinking across the world. Despite these facts, decades of decolonial analysis, post-colonial critique, and anti-colonial struggles have not seriously affected the inclinations or disciplinary disposition of many, if not most, of the philosophers who claim to be fundamentally concerned with the issues of race, racism, or sexual violence within American philosophy. Often in sharp contradiction to the discoveries had in history, economics, sociology, and more evidence-

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based fields, philosophy persists in its assertions that merely having an intuitive revelation from reading the text substantiates facts about the life, motivations, and thinking of the philosopher(s) under investigation. American philosophy remains unchanged by the work of non-white scholars because the racism of white figures like John Dewey, Josiah Royce, Jane Addams, and others remain relegated to the periphery of how young scholars are taught to theorize about racism and racial difference within the confines of the American philosophical endeavor (Curry 2009a; 2010; 2012; 2014; 2016; 2018). After a decade of exposing Josiah Royce's racism in my initial article entitled "Royce, Racism, and the Colonial Ideal: White Supremacy and the Illusion of Civilization in Josiah Royce's Account of the White Man's Burden" (2009a), and almost a decade constructing a verifiable intellectual genealogy that shows how 19th century and 20th-century Black figures thought about issues of history, assimilation, and American democracy (Curry 2009a; 2009b; 2009c; 2012; 2014; 2015; 2016), white American philosophers remain unaffected and deliberately insistent on ignoring the research of Black philosophers and scholars who do not replicate and confirm their philosophical worldviews.

To be clear, my argument concerning the American philosophical endeavor is not simply that American philosophers have failed to confront their history of genocide, imperialism, and enslavement. This is true, but not the most significant aspect of the argument waged throughout my work. My argument has been that American philosophy deliberately chooses to institutionalize a vision of America where any actual understanding of the terms, theories, and debates of historical figures adopted within American philosophy is confined to the periphery of thought, despite being true. For example, Josiah Royce becomes a figure of interest and is asserted to not only be "not a racist," but an anti-racist. I am interested in what allows such representations to become the authoritative dogma within American philosophical circles. Why must the actual history and text of white thinkers that often stand against the dominant interpretations of Black, Indigenous, and Brown thought taken as the foundation by which all thought and theory should be adjudicated? What project and assumptions are active in making the neutrality of white male and female thinkers anti-racist or progressive in the mind of whites and many Black and Brown scholars who seek to avoid the strength of the evidence before them. In short, who gets to decide which sentences in an author text are evidence of their humanist ideals rather than their racial jingoism.

Waging the Historiographic Critique: Slavery, Ethnology, and Black Philosophy

The starting assumptions of American philosophy place a disproportionate burden on the Black, Brown, Indigenous philosopher that requires no similar effort by American philosophers who decide to replicate the mainstream findings of previous scholars. For the scholars interested in disproving the consensus of American philosophy by showing that a historical white figure was racist or anti-Black, no amount of argumentation will convince. The philosopher who embarks on this endeavor to disprove the merely asserted progressiveness of a white philosophical figure must become a historian and archivist to do so. The presumed innocence of the white philosopher imposed upon how a particular thinker must be read to be American philosophy is not only of historiographic concern but presents as a genuine philosophical problem. What is at stake is not only how present-day philosophers frame and consequently formulate, or reconstruct, the intellectual projects of historic white philosophical figures, but how that project is projected forward and asserted to thereby contribute to problems of current concern.

Far too often philosophers attach themselves to an erroneous narrative of history wherein Black people could not (were not able to) think about and critique the institutions of slavery and the white people who asserted themselves to be the masters of the darker races. This narrative is the foundation of the historical fiction asserted within American philosophy. American philosophy begins with the reflections of white American thinkers concerning the problems and possibilities of American democracy. The pessimism of Black people, as the origin of Black theory about the American project, is unfathomable to many American philosophers. Slavery renders Black people absent in philosophy. They have no voice beyond the political pamphlets of David Walker, Maria Stewart, or perhaps Frederick Douglass, and even then, those voices are muted, heard solely as whispers when they affirm the possibility for racial progress in America. Consequently, the critique of American philosophy as a field of

study, or the peculiar enterprise of that moralizes the American democratic project as both the subject of and method through which one *is* an American philosopher by a Black philosopher is by thought to be anachronistic; demonstrating the capacity beyond the slave and most freedmen/women in the 19th century. since the act of critique itself was not capable of emanating from the Black-slave. I find my reflections upon Josiah Royce to be similarly driven by this forgetting of *Black thinking* for *white thought*.

American philosophy is a philosophy of empire. Through the various ideas and values proposed by white 19th century America, we see tides and trends that reveal to use not the exceptionality of white men and women, but their mundane-ness. American philosophy then projects itself as novel, not for its contribution but for the geography that circumscribes the democratic project. Despite the genocide, enslavement, and imperial histories of pragmatism, feminism, and progressivism, this history is thought to be ultimately inconsequential for how we think about the values and processes we suggest define and distinguish the American philosophical from other practices or styles such as analytic or Continental philosophy. As I explain in *Another white Man's Burden*:

By revising the history of suffrage, feminism, and ethnology, American philosophy not only creates but invests in disciplinary practices that sanitize white supremacist movements. These sanitized movements, such as feminism in this case, then serve as a barometer of Black, Brown, or Indigenous thinkers' writings and theories. Specifically, Black philosophers are either interpreted or problematized within American philosophy based solely on these revisions to the political movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whereby their participation or withdrawal from these idealized movements not only determines their political progressivism and their place but also the alleged blind spots of their thought (xiii).

American philosophy, as a disciplinary practice, then insists that Black philosophers and the subsequent conversations concerning race, sexual violence, and death, confirm and conform to the analytic assertions situating democracy as good, feminism as desirable, and America as exceptional. Black thought is thereby demanded to believe in the teleological orientation of America—the expansion of rights and freedoms rather than its constriction or demolition of the groups of people seeking freedom.

Another white Man's Burden begins without the disciplinary constraints of *white thought* limiting *Black thinking*. These are not merely differing histories, but a situating of what American philosophy has taken to be the commonsensical as the extension of white supremacist ideology making the actual history and effect of the values and movements white liberals orient themselves towards. My research presumes a basic knowledge of American and British ethnology, German ethnographic traditions, and the communication of these ideas throughout the West (Vermeulen 2015). This European exchange of racial theories serves as the background for Black critiques of reason, science, and theology in the United States. The presumption that such knowledge is not required to effectively understand the work of Josiah Royce reflects that anti-colonial critique and post-colonial reconstructions of European theorists need no actual knowledge or historical substance to be conducted. This presumption is so overwhelming that even when a Black philosopher demonstrates to a whole field their reading of Royce is a gross misreading of his work given the milieu of his own time, such discoveries are rejected because Black theories concerning race are refused elevation to *method or paradigm*.

What then does it mean to write against American philosophy—as an enterprise, a discipline, a worldview? The act of writing against a field requires not only expertise, but is an endeavor understood to be ideological and often in vain. In penning a disruption to the well-established narratives surrounding the ideals of American democracy, one pens heresy, but also describes a set of historical relationships and conditions that are unable to be understood as philosophical, much less knowledge. By defining itself as a distinct philosophical enterprise, American philosophy invents its history and is *justified* by its separateness from Continental and analytic traditions. Consequently, American Philosophy is unable to be refuted; or carries *within* it a historical position and cultural exceptionalism an inability to refute. The belief structures and disciplinary ideology is incapable of conceding the points made by *Another white Man's Burden*. The racist and pseudo-scientific orientation of late 19th century thinking made American

democracy a racial creed. The American philosopher is born into this philosophical orientation. The realms of professionalization teach the newly emergent scholar to believe that American philosophy is – that it can be justified and engages in different philosophical terrain because it is democratic and engages the possible or the pragmatic. These words however are merely guises for the primary rule of its paradigm, which is: while Black people might have died, been enslaved, and remain subjugated by American democracy, their suffering distracts from the ultimate end of democracy which is its unrealizable potential.

Black Philosophy as an Interpretive Metric

There is a profound arrogance and pedestrian ignorance in the present engagement with Black intellectual history in American philosophy. It is assumed to be irrelevant to philosophical method and the historiographic reconstruction of various time periods because it has not positive content. This assumption of the field presumes the vacuity of Black thought such that Black writings can be compatible with any configuration of a white philosophical system because Black writings about race and racism are merely *critiques* of the ever-present discrimination directed towards the Black race, not systems of thought or political programs that need to be considered on specific terms and within separate traditions. White philosophers have asserted that Royce was a racial progressive because, without a knowledge of the deep intellectual and political genealogy of Black American's challenges to white ethnology and concurrent debates surrounding Black inferiority, Royce appears to not support slavery, biological determinism, or the lynching of Black men. Upon more careful examination, however, it is clear that this unfamiliarity with the texts, theories, and authors in question rise to the level of methodology and disciplinary praxis. The careers of Leonard Harris, Lucius Outlaw, John McClendon, and Bill Lawson have served as invitations to engage this history, albeit in a different register, for several decades. This is not about the inability to know, but rather the refusal to seriously engage the works of Black authors that do not leave the assumptions of historical white figures and contemporary white philosophers undisturbed.

Can Black philosophy begin with the premise that white philosophy, or more specifically, the thoughts white philosophers have historically had about the world, are in fact delusions of power, racism, and empire? Can Black philosophers, consequently, assert that white philosophy's concepts about the world are illusory, and consequently, not real; ignorant? Perhaps, one could ask the question this way: What kind of atrocity would need to be discovered that is so dehumanizing and violent—so racist—towards Black people that it would convince philosophers that their engagement with white thinkers who supported or accepted this atrocity would be unjustifiable and shameful because of the world these thinkers have imagined for Black people? SHOULD the historiography that American philosophy depends upon—its insistence that more democracy and larger communities do remedy racism and Black deaths—not be understood as myth, a collective ignorance?

Another white Man's Burden is not only an intervention into Royce studies but more so a commentary on the limits and practices of scholastic endeavor among American philosophers. Despite decades of scholarship from Black philosophers who have shown evidence suggesting that the discipline of philosophy remains an echo chamber celebrating what a select group of white scholars in the 20th and 21st century find to be *exceptional* in the writings of mostly white philosophers of centuries prior. Across four generations of Black philosophers' active participation in the Society for the Advancement of American philosophy, American philosophy remains unaffected by the criticisms and insights of Black research. Instead of reformulating and revising the histories of white exceptionalism, American philosophers have aimed to assimilate Black thought within their canons. When theories such as Leonard Harris' insurrectionist ethics or Charles Mills' analysis of the white polity are incompatible with mainstream white philosophical traditions those works are systematically ignored and more congenial theories of cosmopolitanism or liberalism are embraced. What I call the apartheid like structures of American philosophy revolve around this epistemological barring of Black thought that does not replicate white thoughts about the world. I have previously explored how historical Black philosophers' ideas are

deemed philosophical by white philosophers by the extent to which the ideas of Black thinkers can be disassembled and then reconstructed as imitating the philosophical systems of white figures (e.g. pragmatism, idealism, naturalism, etc.), but my current work is trying to demonstrate how this process of writing Black theory out of philosophy occurs in real-time.

Contrary to the perception of my research into race and racism as idiosyncratic, the themes I am developing have been explored in within the American philosophical tradition in great detail, albeit in a different register, by Leonard Harris (2020; 1983), Lucius Outlaw (1996), Bill Lawson and Howard McGary (1992), Charles Mills (1997;1998), Dwayne Tunstall (2009a; 2009b; 2013), Jacoby Carter (2013) and most recently Amir Jaima (2018). The difference is that works by Black male scholars who do not simply reiterate mainstream political liberal thinking and coalitional-inclusive politics are disciplined by confining them to the periphery of contemporary thought. These groups are punished for daring to violate the consensus of white disciplines and depicted as ideological in their consideration and presentation of facts.

Another white Man's Burden introduces archival and historical evidence to substantiate the role that 19th century ethnology played in determining the meaning of race for Josiah Royce and many American thinkers in the late 1800s. The nature of the evidence is of some importance here. American philosophy often relies on intuitive accounts of American history and the commonsensical accounts of progress from slavery to our modern times. In this narrative of history, progress is assumed to be inextricably bound with the very foundation of democracy. Regardless of the murder, death, or suffering American democracy caused Black people and many other non-white races, the idea of democracy itself remains pure and unstained by the mundane instantiations of democracy when practiced. Black philosophy wages an almost insurmountable critique of these assumptions. Black authors who wage to harsh a critique on American democracy and whiteness are cast to the margins or deliberately misread so that their criticisms of the white race and the United States are not canonically situated. This displacement of Black authors and theorists commits Black, Brown, and Indigenous philosophers to repeating the same arguments, unearthing the same criticisms, and revising the same historical narratives generation after generation.

W.E.B. DuBois said that American democracy was “to a large extent unworkable” (1968, 418). The neoliberal inclination of American civilization which valued profit above people was connected in his mind to the historical abjection and commodification of the Black slave body in the United States and colonies across the world (1915). Rather than dealing with a set of prejudices towards Black people due to the color of their skin, DuBois argued that capitalist exploitation and slavery created for the first time in history the superior race idea. The superior race idea was the “the theory that a minority of the people of Europe are by birth and natural gift the rulers of mankind; rulers of their own suppressed labor classes and without doubt, heaven-sent rulers of yellow, brown, and Black people” (2007, 11-12). This idea did not only sustain the erroneous ideology of whiteness, but created an epistemology rooted in the identification of non-whites as consumable resources which could be utilized for the enrichment of whites. Democracy was merely one idea that concretized this theory throughout Western nations. Blackness, or more accurately the animation of anti-Blackness, created “new cruelties, new hatreds of human beings, and new degradations of human labor. The temptation to degrade human labor was made vaster and deeper by the incredible accumulation of wealth based on slave labor; [and] by the boundless growth of greed” (DuBois 2007, 13).

In *The World and Africa*, DuBois (2007) explains that we are coming to realize that “we are face to face with the greatest tragedy that has ever overtaken the world” (1). DuBois believed that there has been a collapse in the European ideal. He writes: “We have long believed without argument or reflection that the cultural status of the people of Europe and North America represented not only the best civilization which the world had ever known, but also the goal of human effort destined to go on from triumph until the perfect accomplishment was reached” (1). The faith in the progress of American democracy is not a belief in the idea itself, but a pre-rational belief about the nature of the West, its whiteness and the form of government created by whites that is believed to advance towards perfection alongside its creators. Democracy sustain the illusion of progress not because it—the idea itself—

progresses, but because the white race who manages Western democratic societies will continue to evolve and thrive against the varying tides of immigrants and Blacks. A belief in democracy is not a belief in the people, but the whites who have come to manage and determine the expression of freedom, no matter how incomplete, for other racial groups in the United States and Europe. Faith in democracy is ultimately the faith in white rule. DuBois drew attention to the fact that it is Blacks who are accused of racism—or “unduly emphasizing racial differences and of advocating racial separation”—when they illuminate this perennial failure of American democracy (1996, 667). Despite DuBois’ reflection on democracy as problem rather than potential, these reflections have not determined any paradigmatic approaches towards our understanding of democracy in American philosophy. If American philosophers began with the considerations DuBois urge us to consider, then we would find not only less resistance to the arguments presented in *Another white Man’s Burden*, but a need to trace the categories and ideologies that continue to reify and reimagine the superior race idea throughout the works of various American thinkers.

Conclusion:

Josiah Royce was one of these thinkers chosen to be an exemplar of American philosophy. In 2005 as a student at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Josiah Royce was offered to graduate students as a racial progressive, a white thinker who believed in the humanity of the Negro and maintained a deep sympathy for Black humanity because he thought the lynching of Black men was unnecessarily barbaric. Led by a professor who had no knowledge of the state of race debates or ethnological theory in the 19th century, the class was led to believe that Josiah Royce (and other white philosophers more generally) should be read as anti-racist solely based in their disagreements with other white scholars concerning the fate of Blacks and Indigenous people in the United States. By making the measure of a white scholar’s anti-racism a comparison between white scholars who may have a less racist, xenophobic, or imperialist idea than another racist white scholar of their day, American philosophy creates a pseudo-logical engagement with the topic of race and racism. This practice has created an artificial market and area of specialization whereby white philosophers who know very little about the historical context or contemporary debates concerning racial oppression can become experts in “race theory” by arguing that the racism of their heroes or heroines should be interpreted as progressive ideas, and precocious products of 19th century pragmatist, idealist, or feminist philosophy.

The colonial program of Royce—his deliberate introduction of British style colonialism on U.S. soil—did not cause any pause or suspicions of Royce’s racist motivations. Despite his praise of Joseph LeConte, Adolf Bastian, and James Fraser, as well as his engagement with Houston Stewart Chamberlain, American philosophers who claim expertise in 19th-century figures and debates, white philosophers decided that they needed to be convinced. Like many other interventions in philosophy, Black philosophers are responsible for educating white philosophers about what they do not know and then be evaluated by those same white philosophers who admit ignorance about these kinds of literature as to what is relevant, central, or rigorous philosophical analysis regarding topics they know very little about. In this way, the analyses of racism, anti-Blackness, and colonialism always start with concerns peripheral to the philosophical endeavor. It is as if criticisms concerning the place that Black, Brown, Asian, and Indigenous peoples have in philosophical systems are merely extraneous concerns for America’s democratic project. This tendency is so dominant in American philosophy that there seems to be a disciplinary decree—enacted almost by fiat—that the charges of racism made against Royce specifically, but also other white philosophers (e.g. Dewey, Addams, etc.) must be proven beyond all doubt and are by default personal and in some sense ad hominem rather than the product of contextually engaging the historical period under investigation. These trepidations are not purely intellectual. At the heart of this defensive posture is the unsettling fact that if such claims are accepted as correct, white philosophy has to admit that a Black person—a Black man nonetheless—has fundamentally altered the direction and course of American philosophy.

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