

On the Lookout for the Dark Arts and Finding Our Better Selves in
Another white Man's Burden

Review: Tommy J. Curry

Another white Man's Burden: Josiah Royce's Quest for a Philosophy of white Racial Empire
(Albany: SUNY Press, 2018), 278 pages.¹

"I can conceive of no greater calamity than the assimilation of the Negro into our social and political life as our equal." — President of the United States of America
Abraham Lincoln

Genie in a Bottle

Every philosopher sends out his or her most precious insights in hopes that someone will discover this "message in a bottle," and receive "a testimony to the *transience of frustration* and the *duration of hope*, to the *indestructibility of possibilities* and the *frailty of adversities* that bar them from implementation."² In *Another white Man's Burden: Josiah Royce's Quest for a Philosophy of white Racial Empire* (AwMB), Dr. Tommy J. Curry unearths a startling agenda that sets the stage for Royce's philosophy of loyalty. Polish readers will find parallels in the circumstances that led to Curry's critique of Royce with the events surrounding Zygmunt Bauman's recently recovered and published *Sketches in the Theory of Culture*. Thought to be entirely destroyed by the Polish

1) Hereafter this book will be cited in the main text as AwMB followed by page number.

2) Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 142–143.

government in 1968, thanks to the due diligence of a persistent colleague, the book's time has arrived despite its fifty-year hiatus. Curry, too, like Bauman's editor Dariusz Brzezinski, discovered a pivotal piece of the puzzle of Royce's scholarship. After being reassured that no such address existed, in 2008 Curry did a Google search for Royce's "Some Characteristic Tendencies of American Civilization" (1905) on the indebtedness of America to Britain in shaping the philosophy of loyalty. It is as if a crucial manuscript of Royce's has appeared in a manner similar to rediscovering Bauman's book fifty-years after it was believed to be destroyed. In Curry's case, he unearthed what Royce scholars did not pick up on and exposed an unpleasant, if not offensive side to Royce's philosophy. Here was the great "multiculturalist" — a cultural philosopher supposedly ahead of his times — praising those strategies employed by British imperialist powers through administrative oversight in the colony of Jamaica to keep Black, Brown, and Indigenous people down. Royce was advocating the implementation of harsh, anti-Black measures throughout the post-Civil War American South. In this, "almost unknown work published in 1900," Curry states that, "Royce comes clean, so to speak" in his advocacy of white racial empire. Royce wrote: "nations as near to each other, not only in blood, but in their whole spiritual kinship as are America and Great Britain, can never view each other's fortunes and issues considerately and justly without learning from each other" (AwMB, 68).³

Undoubtedly, Royce's wise provincialism is committed to civil imperialism through his praise for British bureaucracy. There is a big difference between the logics of colonization and that of cultural brokers. Bauman describes such cultural brokering under pluralistic conditions, directly concerned with protecting those at the "margins" of society.

But, aside from the differences that divide and justify efforts to classify them, people of the margins are united by an overarching shared trait: *they have a multiplicity of cultural meanings, and in an irreducible way.* This ambivalence in their cultural meaning, which cannot be eliminated, ceaselessly pushes their surroundings to try to repress or annihilate them, and pushes the people themselves to a constant but futile conformity directed to a more alluring cultural possibility, or to leading protest movements as a less alluring category, or to accepting their position of chronic multiplicity of meaning and isolating themselves from the rest of the world in the fortress of a cultural system that is externally consistent, and constructed from its marginal position.⁴

Bauman's warning does not smack of the "us vs. them" psychology you may assume because his philosophy of culture assumes that the status quo, mainstream authorities, or petit bourgeoisie will aim to rely upon, one way or another, these "marginal" forces of power as a means for its own growth and development. To use a common turn of phrase: how it comes to its own "rude awakening". It is only in this rich repository of resources that "cultural brokers" are able to locate threads of mutual interests among hostile parties. America leads the world in this regard — American open selves symbolically hold the most relevant treasure chest of cultural reserves known to date! As Bauman observes, it is important to distinguish between "cultural determination and differentiation."⁵ The former entails an emphasis on appropriation or assimilation, in the sense of triumphalist dogmatic exceptionalisms of false superiorities, while "differentiation" embraces an openness that cultivates

3) Josiah Royce, "Some Characteristic Tendencies of American Civilization," *Transactions of the Aberdeen Philosophy Society* 3 (1900): 195.

4) Zygmunt Bauman, *Sketches in the Theory of Culture*, trans. Katarzyna Bartoszynska, ed. Dariusz Brzezinski (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2018), 115 (emphasis added).

5) *Ibid.*, 209–214.

the sharing and using of cultural rituals without the provocation of ownership. Differentiation is open-ended with regards to withholding normative judgments, while determinations are often violent abstractions about what a culture is and how much its contributions to other cultures will be. One of the essential hallmarks of *homo sapiens* (and this includes other species) lies in our inclination toward plasticity, or holding steadfast to conditions that permit a high-degree of malleability with regards to our personal self-determinations. Royce's philosophy not only adopts a triumphalist infatuation with British exceptionalism, but he falls for the overly-deterministic conception of cultural meanings. Disinherited and underprivileged groups really represent the progress of culture, meaning the power of transference that can be achieved by moving to uplift the so-called weakest links. Royce ultimately advocated a liberty he presupposed to be Westernized and exportable, serving as a regimen to develop backwards or so-called "primitive" populations. This is evident in his praise of Japanese imperialism, which he interprets as evidence that nations will achieve desirable expansive results by imitating the British empire. Curry writes:

Whereas Black thinkers... saw the defeat of Russia as the end of Anglo-Saxon domination, Royce's reaction was much more tempered. For Royce, "the recent war has shown us what Japan meant by imitating our Western ways, and also what ancestral ideas have led her sons to death in battle, and still hold the nation so closely knit to their Emperor." Thus, what Royce learned to admire in the Japanese was not novel at all, since he (along with many white intellectuals) saw in Japan the ideal of progress and civilization that up to that point was exclusive to the (white) West. (AwMB, 92)⁶

Philosophy's Penchant for "Intellectual Monoculture"

"Journalists, academics, and other slaves without skin in the game in a given subject converge to a 'bien pensant' mode that can be manipulated and often resists empirical backing.... This is similar to the way ecological diversity decreases when an island gets larger."⁷ Such is the dangerous pattern too often insulating the thought of a "great" thinker. Too many are eager to police or regulate philosophical discussions rather than engage them. What is most provocative, I contend, about AwMB's claims is not its general indictment of Royce's racism and desire to promote and protect a white racial empire, but the inadequate treatment with which philosophy has confronted and inquired about the experiences of Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples. Should it be surprising to find how little attention has been paid to Royce's racist posturings or the hesitancy that ensued to recognize it from a discipline that has all but bankrupted itself on issues of race, gender, and social justice? This is a common complaint across all disciplines in American institutions of higher learning, but philosophy has suffered dearly for its closedness and preference for intolerance and lack of diversity. Curry writes:

Far too often, the idea of race is approached in its most ideal and abstracted formulation in academic philosophy. Canonical white figures are often thought to be blind to their biases concerning race, not racist or particularly averse toward Black Americans or immigrants. This line of thinking has no actual basis in fact, of course, but is the popular consensus of the majority of the discipline regarding the problem of race in the life, works, and writings of white American philosophers from the nineteenth century forward. This is of course not any earth-shattering revelation regarding the discipline

6) See Josiah Royce, "Race Questions and Prejudices," *International Journal of Ethics* 16, no. 3 (1906): 270, <https://doi.org/10.1086/intejethi.16.3.2375935>.

7) Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Skin in the Game: Hidden Asymmetries in Daily Life* (New York: Random House, 2018), 242.

of philosophy more generally or the field of American philosophy specifically, but it is rare that there is in fact a conversation beyond critique in the annals of the American philosophical canon. 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. (AwMB, xi, emphasis original)

AwMB presents more than a polemical and rhetorical case against Royce's philosophical project. It would be unfair and too easy to dismiss its crucial claims as merely fomented by the resentments of identity politics. Curry presents the needed background detailing the anthropological studies and ethnological research and debates that framed and filtered many of the socio-political ideas of Royce's era. But, I believe, it may be more accurate to characterize this period – one sieged by the anxiousness of an expanding world along with a need for international institutions – as dominated more by visceral affective orientations toward race that were practiced and institutionalized for generations. By the dawn of the twentieth century, one did not need scientific studies to validate the prejudices that were already widely held about white superiority and anti-Black racism. During what I call “inquisition” times, extreme efforts are made to twist and turn certain belief structures into the hearts and minds of the youth. Royce seems to be following along with similar scholarly interests, which explains why he spends so much time on issues of race relations and the plight of Negroes in Jamaica and the American South. Curry highlights how Royce experts have downplayed and “decontextualized,” the “actual meanings and events he believed constituted the crisis of white supremacy and the racialist sciences of his day” (AwMB, 4). Royce lived in a time saturated by pseudoscientific theories about race, with ethnological studies being an alchemical precursor to today's genetic and biomedical advancements.

At times, Royce talks up the loyal self of wise provincialism in ways we would identify as consistent with upholding the values of racial equality and fighting against anti-Black racism: For example, he writes:

Hence we all think too often of loyalty as a warlike and intolerant virtue, and not as the spirit of universal peace. Enlightened loyalty, as we have now learned, means harm to no man's loyalty. It is at war only with disloyalty, and its warfare, unless necessity constrains, is only a spiritual warfare. It does not foster class hatreds; it knows of nothing reasonable about race prejudices, and it regards all races of men as one in their need of loyalty. It ignores mutual misunderstandings. It loves its own wherever upon earth its own, namely, loyalty itself, is to be found. Enlightened loyalty takes no delight in great armies or in great navies for their own sake. If it consents to them, it views them merely as transiently necessary calamities. It has no joy in national prowess, except in so far as that prowess means a furtherance of universal loyalty.⁸

In a manner similar to temperament and experiences of his good friend and predecessor, Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James, the pieces of Royce's philosophy are complicated and do not admit of straightforward characterizations. Both Royce and James shared this double-sided complicated way of thinking and traveling the world. Neither was afraid to take to the sea as not only a chance to travel, but to escape domestic disappointments of the mainland. Foreign seas represented a kind of rejuvenating get-away that served Royce well throughout his life. He and James were informed by these ventures and sought to understand themselves by immersing themselves in foreign or extraordinary experiences, that adjust and add to our original purposes. Surprisingly enough, Royce was not opposed to the possibilities that novel experiences can have on the value

8) Josiah Royce, “Loyalty,” in *The Basic Writings of Josiah Royce: Logic, Loyalty and Community*, vol. 2, ed. John J. McDermott (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 939.

and intensity of one's will to live; after all, he was a consistent pluralist. It just so happens, however, that he presupposed a blatant superiority when it came to the historical achievements of English civilization. But we can never forget the unique combinations that diverse tributaries of influence contributed to what is generically known as the Anglo-Saxon empire. The undercurrents of implicit exclusion based on racial homogeneity can be read as the reason for justifying the implementation of British administrative policies. The ethnic focus of Royce's philosophy of loyalty leads to, ironically, a narrow-headed insistence on the conventional. He assumed an ethnopolitics, rooted in ethnotechnical consensus.

Rethinking Western Frameworks of Sovereignty and Nationhood

Royce's wise provincialism works on behalf of the new gatekeepers of cultural inspections because of its inability to overcome any logic that seeks to avoid the seductions of domination generated through the imposition of cultural contacts. These have a negative and stigmatizing impact on our own cultural meanings. They have the tendency to enclose and render us inflexible in our ability to understand and hold more hospitable (for example, open, tolerant) attitudes toward remote, unfamiliar ways of life. It is only through encountering such foreign, yet *interesting* cultural tropes that we become moved ourselves; it is how the incitements of self-stimulation become actualized. From a cultural standpoint, such encounters are essential to the lifeblood of past traditions, customs, and practices. Because crystallizations and inertia set in, cultural entropy is inevitable but — similar to the instances of recycling we witness in “nature” (using the traditional genres) — it can be used as an impediment or stimulus for cultural understanding, maintenance, and growth.

Because we live in an age that seems, for the first time in human history, to acknowledge cultural multiplicity as an innate and fixed nature of the world — one which gives rise to new forms of identity that are at ease with plurality, like a fish in water — and even boasts of the fact that it not only discovered, but even accepted as a truly human state and mode of being both noble and dignified, this indeterminacy of the human condition as humanity's calling. Our era both multiples the marginal regions of meaning and is no longer ashamed. Quite the opposite, in the mouths of its greatest thinkers, it acknowledges them as its constitutive feature.⁹

In other words, “anyone living today, after Magellan and after Armstrong, is forced to project even their hometown as a point perceived from without.”¹⁰ Any notion of national identity can longer be rooted in an ideal of homeland, nor are there any customs or rituals that can be strictly championed for being American. This is what makes being an American unique — if there is any connection with Royce's enlightened or universal loyalty, it has to do with not falling into kinds of parochial (that is, sectionalism) interests. Wise provincialism relies on assimilative strategies that emphasizes national unity at the expense of the stranger or foreigner's experience (AwMB, 135–136).¹¹

9) Bauman, *Sketches in the Theory of Culture*, 117.

10) Peter Sloterdijk, *Globes: Macrospherology*. Spheres Volume II, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2014), 789.

11) Royce notes in his history of California how his experiences there of cultural assimilation had a profound impact on him as a young man: “The foreigners determined no important part of our life. We, in turn, were moulding to our own ways of life.” Josiah Royce, *California: From the Conquest in 1846 to the Second Vigilance Committee in San Francisco: A Study of American Character* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1886), 374. Hence, Curry writes: “California is a concrete example of how provincialism is the local expression of a national ideal — an ideal Royce believes centers around the national unity of America as an emergent imperial power” (AwMB, 135).

The national ideal, held as the basis of Royce's philosophy of loyalty, is not open to multicultural or cosmopolitan commitments. Royce clearly offers unapologetic praise for the imperial successes of the early twentieth-century, especially in the British and Japanese cases. Royce takes for granted a conception of national identity of which *all* can be proud and take refuge, but such appeals are not convincing for Black, Brown, Asian, or Indigenous peoples. Is the colonizer's history something that we should take pride in? Curry's prosecution of Royce's racism, including the inability of Royce scholars to truly confront it, implies that the cohesion of communities cannot be formed simply on efficacious administrative procedures. It is my contention, that thicker forms of solidarity are needed beyond mere legal and political arrangements, in order for cultural loyalty to take root. Curry challenges whether Royce's loyal self takes seriously the more subtle and pervasive types of social and cultural transmissions, such as, imitation, teaching, cuisine, entertainment, and other so-called "peripheral" rituals. Wise provincialism is conservative in the static and closed sense because it assumes a necessary relation between self and place. Even with the sublime geography of America memorialized in the great writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, still an ethos of *rootedness* and local prejudices pervades Royce's case for the American nation. It is no surprise, how frequently he goes out of his way to assure readers that his notion of wise provincialism cannot be conflated with sectionalism. Curry challenges the popular claim that Royce is a progressive multicultural thinker, whose philosophy can be read as a form of liberation for Black and Brown people. Instead, what Curry uncovers is a persistent pattern of insensitivity toward the suffering of oppressed groups, along with a strong attachment to a triumphalist vision of Anglo-Saxon ethnopolitics. Royce's national romance with America is rooted in a narrative of ethnopolitical particularism, despite its pretensions to universalism. He subscribed to the Anglo-American myth of national origins. Outside of this glorified national ideal is chaos and disorder. Royce was a national loyalist, rooted in the false conviction of white superiority. The philosophy of loyalty, at the end of the day, did not appreciate the enhancement of cultural worthiness through promoting the diversity of rituals and values, but clearly saw that the immense landscape contributed many strengths to the American character.

Curry is essentially articulating the perspective of those who will be the victims of Royce's imperialist logic and assimilationist ethic; those whose interests and concerns don't make it on the "national agenda". For peoples on the margins of culture, how are their rituals and ways of life going to be adopted by the status quo? Can we assume a community that is loyal and devoted to the marginalized and least advantaged, aside from the Beloved Community (AwMB, 190–197)? We would have to move in the direction of Rawlsian hypotheticals in order to imagine instances in which such goals would be believable and desirable. Curry concludes with an alternative reading of King's Beloved Community compared with Royce's, asserting the two cannot be reconciled as certain Royce scholars are wont to do. Curry's more Du Boisian, "King took an anti-colonial perspective, which made imperialism a foundational component of modern-day racism. This perspective by King, initially conceptualized as the internationalist extension of Du Bois's analysis of the color line, became the basis of the American civil rights movement" (AwMB, 193).¹² Therefore, the Beloved Community speaks to an explicit rejection of imperial projects rooted in the dark arts of colonial rule; it is not to be confused with an unbridled globalism that avoids confronting the ills engineered by the divisions between "high" and "low" cultures. Another significant limitation of Royce's philosophy applied to cultural and political disputes lies in his reliance on, what I take to be a thin understanding of political affairs. In a similar manner with classical liberalism, Royce reads political interests through the traditional prisms of church and state, spirit and blood.

12) "Racism is no mere American phenomenon. Its vicious grasp knows no geographical boundaries. In fact, racism and its perennial ally – economic exploitation – provide the key to understanding most of the international complications of this generation." Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here? Chaos or Community* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 173.

Where there once stood kingdoms and empires all the great powers we now see are uncovered in the archaeological dig sites of ruin. What would have been unthinkable in Royce's day has now become reality – all we have are the countries and nations sitting atop the rubble of great empires. The success and wide appeal to populist and nationalist movements today is evidence of both the loss and continued search for former European power phantoms. Thus, “for 450 years we have only discussed the theme of reachability from the perspective of the outbound journey and thus acted as though globalization were a European privilege.”¹³ With the refugee and ecological crises it's evident that the widespread weariness about globalization speaks to a deeper wound: “A period of self-critical reflection has dawned upon Europeans, ever since they had to recognize the injustice of their imperialist and colonialist one-sidedness. They have to put up with two-way traffic now more than ever, something that they unleashed and incited.”¹⁴ A little over one-hundred-and-fifty-years after the Civil War and Americans have still not come to this honest realization, which is why: “In Trump's America, poor and middle class whites find unity despite their class differences. This unity is not found in race, but an ideal — the ethnonationalist destiny of whites in the United States for generations to come” (AwMB, vii). Curry goes on to ask near the end of the book whether it is,

a pragmatic strategy under the presidency of Trump that was ushered in by the rise of hate crimes, white ethnonationalists on university campuses, and a shared fear among Blacks, Muslims, and immigrant populations? Since Trump's election, the efforts to deport Mexican immigrants and surveil Latino citizens have increased. Black men are still disproportionately killed by the police, and their murders are rationalized by the state and multiple state-level courts as justified... Our contemporary political moment repeats the crisis of the country at the turn of the century. (AwMB, 152)

Not only will this book prove to be informative for anyone concerned with American philosophy, philosophy of race or colonialist studies but, as witnessed throughout the long career of Bauman, it questions and provides a critical alternative to the status quo, while seeking to transcend and transform existing realities. Although we cannot characterize Royce's philosophy of loyalty as antisocial and egotistical, it may not be a stretch to find non-empathetic and non-cooperative strains in it. Such are the ways of political idealists. As a pluralist, Royce underestimated the growing pluralism of the world and how much of it depended on addressing racial injustices and practiced forms of dehumanization. Curry traces the underlying ethnological principles informing Royce's, “most clearly articulated work on race, ‘Race Questions and Prejudices’, with a recommendation for how to deal with and manage the Negro” (AwMB, 166). Royce was following Adolf Bastian and Joseph Le Conte's theories, which asserted that “the Negro and the Japanese were considered plastic races, so greater race contact would civilize these groups. Royce did not simply assert this argument, he inherited it” (AwMB, 166). Hence, Royce's cultural and political logic fell into the trap of believing that the foreign has to be assimilated into the familiar in order for the community to embrace its true identity. But it is more typical that culture and history advances on the margins, by reaching out and aspiring to expand into the improbable. To achieve this kind of freedom requires that we work to flex the normal into the abnormal – that we take a non-assimilative posture willing to unleash the ordinary to become extraordinary. In the manner of what Curry calls the “Dark Arts” Royce believes it to be impossible and undesirable that race should not be given utmost consideration in matters of social engineering. Royce's race theory is read as an “extension of Le Conte's Evolutionary Aesthetic” (AwMB,

13) Peter Sloterdijk, *What Happened in the 20th Century?*, trans. Christopher Turner (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 50.

14) *Ibid.*, 51.

168–171). What Royce did not foresee involves the development of advanced technologies and informational computation contributing to the accelerated urbanization of life beyond anyone's wildest expectations. Our social interactions are of such low-context that it would be more appropriate to situate cultural relatedness on the level of *adoption* rather than traditional measures of *assimilation*. The latter involves all that Royce knows and presupposes this structure in his overall advocacy for British imperial administrative measures being implemented throughout the American South, as a constructive means to deal with racial problems. But it is always a two-way street, but assimilationists assume that it is ultimately only one way.

AwMB provokes us to rethink sovereignty and the rights of states to exclude the entry or movement of others on whatever grounds. It appears that open borders — which does not mean necessarily porous ones — is the only morally defensible solution available that does not grant unchecked governing authority to nation-states. The presumption should be on the state to show how they can legitimately exclude people on a wide range of discretion, given the cruel monster leviathans they can materialize into. We have reached the horizon in which governments should act more as cultural brokers rather than enforcers of civil and social power. Our understanding of sovereignty in a world of “disputed territories” has undergone great shifts since Royce's day and needs to be redefined to meet the demands of a world already connected digitally or virtually. Imperialist powers are ill-equipped to meet the challenges of our epoch. We live in an age which has been blessed and cursed with the power to hit the reset button — to set things afresh without the existential crisis of complete annihilation. Today, every person, genre, and industry must reconsider the many ways it can be rebooted and reformatted. Imperialist logic, hellbent on domination and assimilation, will not get you very far today! The intensity of the socio-cultural transformations that have been brought about were unforeseen by Royce, as was the number and role of cultural brokers as they widened their scope to be potentially inclusive of rituals and strange ways of life experienced by the “have-nots”.¹⁵ Every culture and ethnicity has a role to play in bringing about the Beloved Community, but none can claim to be the leading or sole catalyst of providence. Like persons, each culture generally registers a peculiar edition of what the theatre of selfhood should look like. Today, unlike in Royce's times, we are better fitted to pull back from such false senses of superiority given what happened in the twentieth century. As cultural animals, if we fall into the snares of demagogic powers, it must be admitted that we are less knowledgeable and more out of shape than we thought. It's imperative that we remain supple and flexible, willing to take up new trainings in liquid times. This requires that we reencounter even our intellectual giants and reconsider them in light of these fresh circumstances. AwMB displays the nuances and complexities involved in endeavors with which we will have to grapple if we wish to practice versatility with respect to our identities, values, and the socio-cultural ecologies that support them.

15) I only employ this term in order to remind the reader about stereotypes in which we have all been ingrained. What a misleading, depressive designation to bestow on any “other”? It is similar to being labeled “illegal” as a matter of immigration policy and I think it is unhelpful, in the least, and highly detrimental or counterproductive to the health of any psychosocial discourse.