

## A Critical Response to Pauline Kleingeld's "Critical Notice" on *Kant, Race, and Racism*

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**Abstract** In this critical response, I clarify my critique of the commonly held assumption that racism contradicts Kant's pure moral philosophy. I explain why Kant's belated criticisms of some practices of slavery should not be interpreted as a rejection of colonial slavery as an institution. I end with a reflection on the relation between Kant's philosophy and anti-racism.

**Keywords** racism, slavery, Kantianism, positionality, Charles Mills

### 1. Preliminary remarks

A year after my *Kant, Race, and Racism: Views from Somewhere* (2023), Pauline Kleingeld published a "Critical Notice" on the book in the journal *Mind*. One of its most telling passages appears at the end:

I also disagree with Lu-Adler's suggestion that the question whether Kant changed his mind on race-related issues should be *suppressed* for the sake of anti-racism. It seems to me that ... the fight against racism is not best served by focusing *only* on his likely contribution to racist ideology. (Kleingeld 2024: 16–17, emphases added)

The italicized words exemplify how Kleingeld misunderstands the key interventions I made in my book throughout her "Critical Notice." One of my interventions was to challenge the hegemonic hold that Kleingeld's "second thoughts" thesis—the thesis that Kant belatedly reverted his long-held racist views and became "more egalitarian with regard to race" (Kleingeld 2007: 592)—had on the prevailing discourse on Kant's relation to racism. It is no exaggeration to say that the thesis has become a default assumption about Kant's relation to racism among Kantians (if they acknowledge that he held racist views in the first place). As I put it in my book and will say more in Section 2, the thesis or its underlying conceptual and methodological assumptions had "a steadfast hold on the ongoing discourse about Kant and racism." I sought to "free scholarship from this hold," with the hope "to take the discourse in a more fruitful direction" (Lu-Adler 2023: 36).

In other words, I was trying to *decenter* a dominant narrative so that we could better understand Kant's relation to racism and better serve the anti-racist cause. Decentering a narrative is not the same as excluding it altogether or suggesting that my proposed approach is the "only" way forward. I made this point explicit in the book. For example, in the Forward-Looking Conclusion, I summarized my approach vis-à-vis the one represented by Kleingeld (among other leading Kant scholars) as follows.

The debates about Kant and racism are often about whether or for how long he was racist and what, if anything, we as morally aspiring individuals today can learn from the fact that even a great thinker like Kant could not escape the grip of racial prejudices. I sought to *go beyond* these inquiries (*without devaluing them*). ... Applying [Sally Haslanger’s notion of racism as a racist ideological formation] to Kant, I *highlighted an overlooked factor* in the debates about Kant and racism: his social location and the power that came with it. (Lu-Adler 2023: 329, emphasis added)

So, I was trying to *expand* ways of studying Kant’s relation to racism by foregrounding a previously overlooked fact: he developed a theory of race and propagated racist views as an eminent philosopher and a lifelong educator who was powerfully situated in an extensive nexus of social actors and meaning makers. Needing to foreground this fact was one reason why I deemed it necessary to “*go beyond, if not disregard*, the question of whether Kant later retracted his own racist views”: even if Kant belatedly reverted those views, “he could never single-handedly undo the racialist and racist worldview that his geography and anthropology teachings and writings might have helped to form in the minds of his broadest audiences” (Lu-Adler 2023: 75, emphasis added). What questions guide our inquiry matters because questions orient our *attention* and determine where we invest our intellectual energy. Questions like “Was Kant racist?” or “Did Kant change his racist views?” had for all too long *dominated* the debate about Kant and racism. It was against this backdrop that I said that dwelling on those questions—in the sense of lingering over them for an unnecessarily long time—“can blind us to the dynamic and intricate ways in which racism might have taken shape in the *nexus of power relations* in which Kant was embedded” (2023: 88). I wanted to introduce *another way of seeing* how Kant related to racism.

Thus, I was trying precisely to be “pluralistic, allowing for multiple, complementary, and mutually enriching approaches to the issue of Kant, race, and racism”, as Kleingeld suggests we should be (Kleingeld 2024: 15). As it should be clear from the Introduction of the book, I had to work hard to carve out a new way of studying Kant’s raciology—and justify its philosophical significance—by questioning the assumptions behind the dominant way of presenting, downplaying, or simply ignoring it in Kant scholarship (more on this in Section 2). Kleingeld ignores my assessment of the role of her “second thought” thesis in entrenching those assumptions and sustaining the dominant approach. She might have spent more time trying to figure out how my new approach to Kant’s raciology, as much as reasonable people might disagree with its details, could *enrich* the ongoing discourse on Kant’s relation to racism, *complement* past contributions like hers, and “open up new avenues in as yet unexpected directions” (2024: 15).

Another crucial intervention of my book is indicated by its subtitle, “Views from Somewhere.” Among other things, this subtitle conveys my wish to study Kant’s raciology as someone who lives in a body historically depicted as an inferior racial Other and whose life is still affected by that history. As I am primarily concerned with lived social realities, I resist being pulled into the same old debate about whether *Kant* was a racist or whether *he* changed his racist mind. I

study Kant's raciology not to settle scores with *him*, but to use it as a window into the *history* of race thinking that shapes the present—all with a view to social change.

To clarify this orientation of my work, let me borrow a few concepts from the British philosopher Liam Kofi Bright's "White Psychodrama." Bright portrays two characters, the Repenter and the Represser, who stand for two opposite reactions to a mismatch between "an ideological narrative that speaks of equality" and "a material structure that witnesses [racial] inequality" (Bright 2023: 202). Repenters celebrate and promote racial diversity in their workplace and invest in "lessons on sophisticated etiquette around interracial interactions," for example, to minimize their contribution to the existing inequality and alleviate their sense of guilt. Repressers "would like to change the focus away from the potentially guilt-inducing elements"; they seek to "implement colour-blind policies and norms that avoid drawing attention to race," and "hold out hope for a society that is ... considerably more relaxed about race, and less prone to fixate on the historic crimes of white people." As Bright sees it, the opposition between these two characters is more a culture war between predominantly white stakeholders over "how to psychologically manage the results of living in a materially ... unequal society" than it is a substantive disagreement about "how or whether to reduce that material inequality" (2023: 204–6).

Bright's third character, the Non-Aligned, focuses instead on working toward "a genuinely racially egalitarian socio-political order" (2023: 211). This person "can see themselves as genuinely pursuing a reasoned approach to creating a better society, dispassionate enough and at enough ironic distance not to get torn away from their tasks by the raging of the Repenters and the Repressors." In this way, they "can focus on achieving their goals, rather than be distracted by the pervasive and highly affectively charged white psychodramas that constitute the mainstay of Repenters and Repressors battling it out in the culture war." It is indeed an "imperative," Bright submits (mainly addressing people of color), that "we cease investing our psychic energy in the white bourgeoisie's culture war" (2023: 216–17).

Bright's analysis should make Kant scholars (in Western academia) pause and think candidly about how they deal with racism. As academics who study Kant for a living *and* as social beings implicated in structures shaped by historical legacies of racism, these scholars—including me—are confronted with two forms of ideology-reality mismatch. First, there is the mismatch between an egalitarian ideology and the material reality of racial inequality that Bright described. Second, there is a mismatch between the belief that Kant's philosophy is liberal, egalitarian, and universalist and the fact that Kant published and taught things that are racist (as well as sexist and Western supremacist). A Kantian who acts like a Repenter when faced with the first mismatch may nevertheless be a Represser in approaching the second mismatch. As we shall see in Section 2, the latter attitude manifests itself in how issues of race are nearly invisible in mainstream portraits of Kant. After clarifying what I take to be a non-contradictory relation between Kant's pure moral philosophy and racism (Section 3) and the relevance of his participatory construction of the "Negro" to colonial slavery as an entrenched institution (Section 4), I will end by embracing the stance of the Non-Aligned (Section 5).

## 2. Race, racism, and Kant scholarship

In a lengthy intellectual biography of Kant, Paul Guyer writes: “For the rest of the 1770s, Kant published virtually nothing” (Guyer 2006: 32). This echoes the commonly held assumption that the 1770s was Kant’s “silent decade.” In truth, Kant published two editions of his first dedicated essay on race in 1775 and 1777. As I explained in Chapter 3 of my book, Kant made self-consciously original philosophical claims about organic formation, biological diversity, and heredity in that essay, which he would revise and refine in his next two race essays (1785 and 1788) until they were crystalized in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790). Apparently, none of the race essays or anything else Kant said or implied about race has much philosophical value in Guyer’s eyes. The index of *Kant* lists two references under “race” (there is no mention of racism). Guyer rushes through the references with a palpable sense of unease and impatience. Speaking of Kant’s 1764 essay “Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime,” Guyer dismissively calls it “an essay in what we might call the anthropology of gender, culture, and race: Kant was primarily concerned with supposed differences among the aesthetic and more importantly the moral sensibilities ... between men and women, different nations, and, *alas*, different races” (2006: 24, emphasis added). Setting aside the fact that Kant did not yet have a proper concept of race in 1764, the word ‘alas’ signals a wish that he had never said anything about the so-called races. So, it is unsurprising that, regarding Kant’s 1788 essay on race, Guyer merely states without further comments that “this was primarily a contribution to the debate about race that he had already engaged with in 1775” (2006: 37).

Such remarks by a prominent expert on Kant leave the impression that “There is no there there” (to use an oft-quoted expression by Gertrude Stein) when it comes to Kant’s writings and teachings on race.<sup>1</sup> This exemplifies a common way of repressing Kant’s raciology: it is dramatically minimized or completely absent in supposedly authoritative and comprehensive presentations of Kant’s philosophy. For other examples, consider *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, which has a 20-plus-page-long entry on Kant (Walsh 2006), the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Rohlf 2024), and the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Jankowiak 2014). Only the last of these encyclopedic entries mentions in passing that Kant had “opinions” about “race issues” among many other “aspects of the human experience.” None of the entries mentions the fact that Kant not only expressed racist views on multiple occasions but also developed a groundbreaking *theory* of race in three dedicated essays.

A subtler way to repress Kant’s raciology is to downplay its philosophical relevance and suggest that those wanting to dig deeper are not philosophically serious. One strategy employed to this effect is treating Kant’s racist remarks as mere personal prejudices that were an unfortunate product of his time and insisting on a neat separation between those prejudices and Kant’s philosophical theories; if it is no longer feasible to ignore those prejudices, the reader is advised not to “overvalue them or try to inflate them into something they are not” (Louden 2000: 105). Thus, any scholar who seeks a closer look at Kant’s writings and teachings about race bears the burden of justifying their project to counter the suspicion of an unreasonable overreaction. This burden feels heavier when such a project also risks being portrayed as a politically motivated attack

on Kant, as frivolous “sensational exposés” with no interest in gaining “philosophical insights.” There is a pressure to follow “the leading writers on Kantian ethics who have addressed this issue” of Kant’s racism, who “take philosophical principles seriously,” and who therefore acknowledge that “Kant regarded nonwhite races as inferior to whites” only to insist that what “matters” in the end is the understanding that Kant “also held on basic philosophical grounds an egalitarian position about all human beings.” (Wood 2008: 8–9). Such claims send the message that it is *unphilosophical* to take Kant’s racism more seriously than simply treating them as regrettable blunders of a man who succumbed to the prejudices of his time or to follow through a nagging suspicion that Kant’s ethical theory, for example, *may* not be as egalitarian as the leading Kantian ethicists assume it to be.<sup>2</sup>

Those who acknowledge Kant’s racism only to set it aside as philosophically negligible may nevertheless consider themselves anti-racist. Their anti-racism is uncomplicated and involves no substantive color-conscious attention to the complex *material realities* of racial inequality. As Kantians, they can express their anti-racist intent simply by pointing to what Kleingeld singles out as “key elements of the *Groundwork*: Kant’s defence of human dignity and the prohibition, in the Formula of Humanity, against using other human beings ‘merely as means.’” Recognizing that Kant also propounded racist views while writing the *Groundwork*, their strategy, as Kleingeld promotes it, is to “[abstract] from his racism and [work] with Kant’s moral principles *as stated*, that is, as principles that apply to all human beings.” This affirmation of Kant’s moral principles as initially already generalizable to all human beings supposedly constitutes some of Kant’s readers’ and, by extension, Kant’s own “contribution to anti-racism” (Kleingeld 2024: 15–16). Besides its question-begging assumption about how to interpret “Kant’s moral principles *as stated*” (more on this below), this insistent appeal to rarified Kantian-normative ideals feels more like a convenient *evasion* of the real world we live in, which is shaped by historically inherited racist ideologies and practices, than a sincere wish to bring about the supposed Kantian ideals.

Kleingeld differentiates herself from many others by highlighting the fact that the same Kant who wrote the Formula of Humanity also publicized racist views. She balances Kant’s “dual impact” (Kleingeld 2024: 15)—on racism and anti-racism alike—by insisting that there is a straightforward contradiction between Kant’s pure moral philosophy (represented by the *Groundwork*) and his racism. This allows her to argue that, by the final analysis, Kant’s pure moral philosophy stands strong despite his racism (which he would eventually renounce anyway). She recognizes that Kant being the author of the *Groundwork* “gives us no reason at all to downplay or disregard his racism”; at the same time, she reassures us that, so long as we take some “precautions” in light of Kant’s racism,<sup>3</sup> “we can make full use of whatever recourses we find in Kant’s moral philosophy,” some of which “may serve as valuable resources in the fight *against* racism.” She adds that the few “core Kantian notions” she has named—“such as human dignity, the moral requirement of respect, Kant’s republican conception of freedom ... and the prohibition against using others merely as means”—have in fact “served [as anti-racist tools] in the past” (Kleingeld 2024: 7). She gives no evidence for this factual claim and no clue as to what kind of *work* is entailed by using those Kantian notions to “fight” racism. Curious readers may comb

through the vast literature on the notions in question and see whether any Kantian has done serious work to show how to use them for anti-racist purposes. In doing so, one should not be contented with platitudes like “all human beings, regardless of their race, have dignity.” A keen observer like Bright, who is part Black, would immediately recognize such platitudes as the kind of strategy that a Repenter or even a Represser would use to avoid doing the hard work of figuring out how to change (or at least thoughtfully theorize about) the *material conditions* that sustain racism.

The Conclusion of my book called Kantians to do this kind of work both as scholars and as educators (provided these roles define our primary spheres of influence). Contrary to Kleingeld’s claim that I saw Kant’s moral philosophy as “irrelevant to embodied human beings” (Kleingeld 2024: 4–5), I devoted nearly nine pages (Lu-Adler 2023: 337–46) to discussing the need for a *substantially* (as opposed to nominally) anti-racist reorientation of Kantianism to bridge abstract Kantian moral ideals and the *nonideal social realities* confronting us. In other words, my primary concern was not whether Kantian morality is still relevant but, assuming its relevance (as most Kantians would), *how* to realize it under racially inflected social conditions *in concreto*. Building on Charles Mills’s criticism of the colorblind modeling of social reality operative in mainstream liberalism (including Kantian liberalism) for relying on “idealization to the exclusion, or at least marginalization, of the actual” (Mills 2017: 75), I indicated that Kantians should invest more energy in figuring out how to “adequately describe nonideal social realities” (Lu-Adler 2023: 339). After all, to materialize racial equality in a multi-racial society, for instance, it is not enough to assert the abstract normative ideal *that* all races must be treated equally. Rather, the hard question is *what it would take to bring about* substantial racial equality as specifically manifested in, for example, “equitable distributions of education and employment opportunities, real estate loans, political power, clean and safe environment, and so on, along the racial lines” (2023: 337).

In making this claim, I was inspired by the literature in Critical Philosophy of Race, which informed the overall approach of my book. As Linda Martín Alcoff describes it in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2023), Critical Philosophy of Race approaches the concept of race “with a historical consciousness about its function in legitimating domination and colonialism”; it has “departed from broadly liberal approaches that have narrowed racism to individual and intentional forms”; it is primarily concerned with such problems as “the social and historical construction of races, ... the relevance of race to formations of selfhood, ... and the question of how to assess the existing canon of modern philosophy.” I addressed these problems in Chapter 4 (on Kant’s role, as a putative *Naturforscher*, in the Western-Eurocentric production of racial knowledge against the backdrop of colonialism and slavery), Chapter 5 (on how race concepts, once taken root in a society, can profoundly affect people’s self-perceptions and social relations), and Chapter 6 (on Kant’s and his followers’ contributions to a racially exclusionary conception of philosophy’s history).

What I did in those chapters and the Conclusion made sense only because of the work done in the book’s first two chapters. In Chapter 1, I challenged the long-held assumption of a direct contradiction between Kant’s Formula of Humanity *as stated* and his racist views (“contradiction thesis” for short). On my account, racism and pure moral principles like the Formula of Humanity

belong to such distinct levels of discourse that they cannot be directly contrasted with each other. One important upshot of my analysis was to preserve the integrity of Kant's system of pure morals while highlighting the need to consider the concrete *conditions* under which it may be realized or approximated to the highest degree possible. Thus, much of what I said in the Conclusion presupposed the conceptual work done in Chapter 1.

In Chapter 2, I reconceptualized racism to think beyond the individualistic or atomistic approach—exemplified by Kleingeld's "second thought" thesis—that "prioritizes allegedly racist individuals as the sole or primary subjects" of blame, redemption, psychological analysis, and so on. Adopting a holistic approach inspired by Sally Haslanger's notion of racism as racist ideology formation, I sought to study Kant's raciology "as a product of his explicitly stated philosophical *methods* and *principles*" and "as an integral part of the broader racial *knowledge production* and racist *ideology formation* that took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries against the backdrop of colonialism and race-based chattel slavery," and to show "how the racist and racist worldview that Kant helped to shape ... could have a lasting impact." My ultimate goal in clarifying this aspect of Kant's legacy was to explain what kind of work today's Kantians need to do to *bridge* abstract Kantian ideals and a non-ideal world shaped by historical legacies of racism (Lu-Adler 2023: 77).

In Section 3, I will explain a key distinction made in Chapter 1, namely between logical and real abstraction, and show how this distinction problematizes the contradiction thesis. Kleingeld, as we shall see, has completely failed or abnegated a critic's responsibility to grasp such a crucial distinction in her "Critical Notice." Then, in Section 4, I will use the case of colonial slavery to illustrate the implications of conceptualizing racism in terms of racist ideological formation. Once we recognize how Kant's remarks about "Negroes"—explicitly made until the early 1790s—contributed to the formation of an insidious *ideology* underwriting colonial slavery and anti-abolitionism, we should be far more reluctant than Kleingeld is to celebrate his belated criticism of the *practice* of slavery in some places as exceedingly brutal. It is important to uncover what was not said behind this limited criticism. Kant was not taking a stance, for instance, on whether colonial slavery *as an institution* was unjust for violating the enslaved people's inalienable *right* to freedom. He was silent on this question even while theorizing about rights systematically—as a man socially well-positioned to articulate and promote a *counter-ideology* against colonial slavery and thereby throw his weight behind the burgeoning abolitionist movement.

### 3. Kantian abstraction and the problem with the contradiction thesis

Kleingeld claims that, in Chapter 1 of my book, I criticized "race theorists, Kant scholars, and Kantians alike for focusing on the question whether there is a *contradiction* between Kant's core moral theory and his racism" (Kleingeld 2024: 1) and that I wanted them to "disregard" or "move away" from this question (2024: 15). She then takes credit for recognizing the "need to examine the relation between Kant's moral principles and his racist views, including whether they contradict each other" and even for noticing that the very "logic" of my argument "implies that we

should also focus on” it (2024: 15–16). This is an astonishingly unfair move, ignoring or twisting what I said only to caricature me as an illogical author who “argues—despite her own recommendation that we put the matter aside—that there is no contradiction between Kant’s moral theory and his views on race” (2024: 5).

In the Introduction of my book—in a section entitled “Is There Really a ‘Contradiction?’”—I observed that the debate over Kant and racism had so far entirely revolved around “a presumed logical contradiction.” This *presumption* was pivotal to how Kleingeld analyzed the debate and inserted her “second thought” thesis, claiming that Kant eventually resolved the supposed contradiction by reverting his racism (Lu-Adler 2023: 10). I set out to problematize this commonly but uncritically accepted assumption of a contradiction in Chapter 1, showing that Kant’s philosophical system accommodates both a lofty pure moral philosophy and a racist worldview. I made a pivotal conceptual move to this end: I distinguished “real abstraction,” which underpinned the strict universality that Kant attached to pure moral principles, from “logical abstraction.” Kleingeld avoids engaging with this crucial distinction, says that my argument is “hard to follow,” and then rushes to dismiss it—as if she follows it after all (she does not)—by assuming what my distinction called into question in the first place (Kleingeld 2024: 5).

To explain the distinction, let me begin with the familiar Aristotelian-style abstraction featured in Kant’s logic lectures. He calls it “logical abstraction.” It is an *abstraction from differences* to form more general concepts (until nothing further can be abstracted); it results in a hierarchy of concepts that are “lower” or “higher” relative to each other; the principle governing the logical relation between such concepts is “What belongs to or contradicts higher concepts also belongs to or contradicts all lower concepts that are contained under those higher ones” (Log, 9: 98). By contrast, real abstraction is an *abstraction from certain conditions of application*. It corresponds to a frequently used expression in Kant’s transcendental philosophy, “in abstracto” (versus “in concreto”). Kant’s “pure logic” exemplifies how we can obtain something by real abstraction: in such logic, “we *abstract from all empirical conditions* under which our understanding is exercised.” By contrast, “applied logic” studies human understanding “*in concreto*, namely *under the contingent conditions* of the subject, which can hinder or promote its use.” Pure logic is a science *a priori*, whereas applied logic requires knowledge of subjective conditions that “can all be given only empirically.” The two logics are therefore “entirely separated,” although they complement each other under the heading “general logic” (A53–4/B77–9, emphasis added).

The notion of real abstraction sheds new light on the relation between Kant’s pure moral philosophy and his racist views: they belonged to different levels of discourse separated by real abstraction; as such, they cannot directly contradict each other. In proposing this view, I followed a textual clue in Kant’s account of pure logic vis-à-vis applied logic. Pure logic relates to applied logic, he says, as “pure morality” relates to “the doctrine of virtue proper”: while pure morality “contains merely the necessary moral laws of a free will in general [*überhaupt*],” the doctrine of virtue “assesses these laws under the hindrances of the feelings, inclinations, and passions to which human beings are more or less subject,” namely under contingent subjective conditions that can



only be given empirically (A54–5/B79; see GMS, 4: 410n). In other words, it is one thing to set forth a system of pure morals *a priori*, which contains necessary moral laws for free will *in abstracto*; it is another to show whether or how they apply to human beings *in concreto*, under the contingent conditions of the human subject.

Kant methodically separates these two tasks. It is up to the *Groundwork* to set forth a system of strictly necessary moral concepts and laws *in abstracto* (GMS, 4: 409). To accomplish this, Kant traces their “origin completely a priori in reason” and derives them “from the universal concept of a rational being as such [*überhaupt*],” independently of “any empirical and therefore merely contingent cognitions” (4: 411–12). So, while Kant makes a *de re* reference to human beings in the *Groundwork*, he conceives them under the description of what Henry Allison calls “finite rational agency,” for which Kant sometimes uses “humanity” as a place-holder (Allison 2011: 207). That is, the *de dicto* reference of Kant’s system of pure morals is to the human being *merely as a finite rational being* in abstraction from “the nature of the human being” and from “the circumstances of the world in which he is placed” (GMS, 4: 389).<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, the use of real abstraction in the *Groundwork* explains why the system of morals it sets forth “needs anthropology for its application to human beings” (GMS, 4: 412). As Kant puts it in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, which contains the “doctrine of virtue” that he compared to applied logic earlier,<sup>5</sup> the application presupposes knowledge of “the particular *nature* of human beings, which is cognized only by experience.” More specifically, it calls for an anthropology that uncovers relevant *empirical conditions* for instantiating the moral laws set forth *a priori* in pure moral philosophy. These include, among other things, “the subjective conditions in human nature that hinder people or help them in fulfilling” those laws and “the development, spreading, and strengthening of moral principles (in education in schools and in popular instruction)” (MS, 6: 217; see GMS, 4: 388–89).

Kant has thus established his pure moral philosophy, represented by the *Groundwork*, and his anthropology as separate (albeit ultimately related) sciences by employing real abstraction: the former abstracts from the special “nature” of humanity as an *earthbound* “race” of finite rational beings vis-à-vis the ones “on other planets” (Anth, 7: 331). By contrast, anthropology studies the human being precisely “according to his species as an earthly being endowed with reason” (Anth, 7: 119)—to show how “the human being, as an animal with the *capacity of reason* (*animal rationabile*), can make out of himself a *rational animal* (*animal rationale*),” according to “the idea of possible rational beings on earth in general [*überhaupt*]” (Anth, 7: 321–22). In other words, having built an abstract system of pure morals, Kant needs anthropology to establish the *hope* that it can be realized—or approximated to “the greatest degree”—by the earthbound “human race” over an indefinitely many generations (V- Anth/Fried, 25: 696–97).

Importantly, “the human being” as the subject of Kant’s anthropology refers to the human species as a systematically unified whole, not a mere aggregate of individuals (Anth, 7: 320). So, Kant sometimes clarifies that his anthropology is “not a description of human beings, but of *human nature*” (V-Anth/Fried, 25: 471, emphasis added). Again, he uses real abstraction to pinpoint this subject matter. In particular, he abstracts from the various material conditions under which human

beings inhabiting different geographic regions acquire different physiological features. Studying such material conditions is the task of *physical geography*, which considers and compares “human beings ... in respect of their differences in natural shape and colour in various regions of the Earth” to explain, among other things, “those tendencies of human beings that are derived from the zone in which they live” (EACG, 2: 9; see PG, 9: 183–375; V-PG/Holstein, 26: 3–5). The geographically indexed differences that will become most significant for Kant include not only different skin colors (the topic of his race essays) but also supposedly natural differences in temperaments, dispositions, and talents (the basis for his racist account of who is capable of what, if any, kind of culture). I will return to this point in Section 4.

A distinction of three levels of discourse (pure moral philosophy, anthropology, and physical geography) emerges from the two iterations of real abstraction I just identified. At the most abstract level, we have a *pure moral philosophy* that studies the human being qua (finite) rational being as such, in abstraction from the nature of humanity as an earthbound species; this earthbound nature is the subject matter of *anthropology*, which in turn abstracts from different conditions affecting the varied developments of humans inhabiting different geographical regions; the latter then becomes the subject matter of *physical geography*. As I explained in my book, Kant’s racist worldview takes shape as he seeks to determine whether humanity—as an earthbound species that continues through indefinitely many generations—can realize or maximally approximate the hopeful vision of progress toward moralization and, if the answer is yes, *who* of all the different human races are best equipped to propel such progress as agents.<sup>6</sup> The resulting racism, I argued, cannot contradict any of the moral principles established *in abstracto* in Kant’s pure moral philosophy: they are simply not at the same level of discourse for logical comparison (Lu-Adler 2023: 61–73).

Now that I have reiterated my argument, one can see how Kleingeld misses the mark when she claims:

If they are *levels* of (‘real’) abstraction, then the most abstract conception of the ‘human being’ must be contained in the most concrete, bottom-level (racialized) conception. And if the three conceptions of ‘human being’ thus have a common core, they do not refer to entirely different things.<sup>7</sup> This would undercut Lu-Adler’s strategy for arguing that there is no contradiction. (Kleingeld 2024: 5)

The way Kleingeld talks about the “levels”—about how the higher and more abstract concept must be “contained” in the lower and more concrete concept—suggests that she misunderstands my distinction between two kinds of abstraction. She has logical abstraction in mind, as indicated by her reference to the containment relation. This notion of abstraction underlies her assumption—shared by many others in the discourse on Kant and racism—that the *strict universality* of a pure Kantian moral principle like the Formula of Humanity means its *generalizability* to the domain of all individual humans inhabiting the Earth (see my analysis of this mistake in Lu-Adler 2023: 12–14). I distinguished Kant’s method of real abstraction, which underwrites his conception of strict

universality (Lu-Adler 2023: 48), from logical abstraction to call that assumption into question. So, Kleingeld’s dismissing my distinction of three levels of discourse by implicitly relying on the assumption of logical abstraction is question-begging.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4. It goes beyond Kant: colonial slavery and racist ideology formation

Kleingeld devotes the lion’s share of her “Critical Notice” to defending some of the central claims of her “second thought” thesis (Kleingeld 2024: 7–15). I was no less interested in what Kant belatedly said—or did not say—about what Kleingeld now vaguely calls “race-related issues” (2024: 2), particularly colonialism and slavery. It is just that I had a different way of studying Kant’s pronouncements and, just as important, silences about such issues: I studied them holistically, taking into account both the relevant *historical context* and *Kant’s positionality* in a nexus of meaning-makers and social actors. I will use the case of colonial slavery or transatlantic slavery—referring to the combination of Atlantic slavery and the transatlantic slave trade that fueled it—to illustrate what I mean.

I brought up “Kant’s criticisms of how racial slavery and the associated slave trade were practiced in the 1790s” toward the end of Chapter 4 (Lu-Adler 2023: 230). It is important to note the overall theme of Chapter 4, entitled “From Baconian Natural History to Kant’s Racialization of Human Differences—A Study of Philosophizing from Locations of Power.” It is a study of the Western-Eurocentric racial knowledge production that took place against the backdrop of colonialism and transatlantic slavery during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and Kant’s place in this collective epistemic enterprise. At the end of the chapter, I summarized the lessons I learned from my study as follows:

the racial classifications and theories developed by Kant and others are like the seeds sown. Once sown, they will grow—and occasionally mutate—in ways that are beyond the sowers’ control. Meanwhile, the existing power structure, as historically contingent as it may be, determines who gets to construct racial concepts and who gets to use them as tools to rule over the racial other. Try as a Buffon or a Kant might to be objective and to base his division of human varieties or races only on strictly factual reports, he still could not afford not to reflect on the fact that he was dividing up humanity at a time when their own supposed race was engaged in what they knew were often brutal exploitations of other so-called races. (Lu-Adler 2023: 238–39)

I was thereby pointing to the practical stakes of racializing human differences—as Kant did as a philosophical *Naturforscher*—in the context of *de facto* racial domination. Even if Kant had made no blatantly racist claim and even if we excise all such claims from his essays on race, he would still be complicit in the formation of modern racist ideology by developing the first scientific concept of race underlying such an ideology (Bernasconi 2001). Now, Kant indeed taught and publicized racist and white supremacist views throughout the heyday of his professional life as an eminent scholar and educator. He did so while knowing that his words could have a wide reach

and that members of his valorized white race had for some time commodified, trafficked, enslaved, and oppressed the “Negro” race in particular. It is this historical and social *situatedness* that I tried to highlight when I adopted Haslanger’s notion of racism as racist ideology formation and contended that, even if Kant ended up changing his own racist mind, he would still be saddled with the burden of having helped to propagate, cultivate, and entrench a racialist and racist worldview from a position of intellectual authority—a worldview that he could not singlehandedly undo. It would take an unambiguously expressed and rigorously promoted *counter-ideology* for the late Kant to begin reckoning with this part of his legacy. No sincere Kantian should accept anything less than this standard.

To my knowledge, Kant never explicitly endorsed colonial slavery as morally justified.<sup>9</sup> He did something subtler: as a scholar and educator whose words had a meaning-giving and world-making power, he participated in the construction of an insidious *ideology* underwriting that institution, which depicts the “Negro” race as singularly suited for slave labor. This picture crystallizes in the *Menschenkunde* based on Kant’s lectures on anthropology from the 1780s.<sup>10</sup> Having affirmed that there are “Four Races on Earth” descending from the same original human phylum,<sup>11</sup> Kant characterizes each race in terms of what (if any) driving forces (*Triebfedern*) and talents it possesses, which determine what (if any) culture (*Bildung*) it can obtain. He says the following about the “Negro race”:

they are full of affect and passion, very lively, talkative and vain. They acquire culture, but only a culture of slaves; that is, they allow themselves to be trained [*lassen sich abrichten*]. They have many incentives [*Triebfedern*], are also sensitive, afraid of beatings, and also do many things out of honor. (V-Anth/Mensch, 25: 1187)

Kant’s choice of *abrichten* is particularly telling: it points to the animality in the object of training. He thereby channels what David Baumeister, in a systematic study of Kant’s theory of animality and its relation to his raciology, calls an ideology of “black animality” (Baumeister 2022: 108–12). This “racialized ... animalization” of Blacks reflects Kant’s developmental view of the human species: while all humans—on account of descending from a shared phylum—originally possess the same species-specific germs and predispositions, these may be differentially and *unequally developed* among the individuals (2022: 95–6). Kant racializes these purported developmental differences and turns animality, one of the original human predispositions, into a “race-relevant predisposition” (2022: 103–8). The animalized Blacks are still humans (strictly speaking, Kant does not dehumanize them), only lopsidedly developed ones: the predisposition to animality is most prominently developed in them, whereas predispositions requisite for the civilization and moralization of humanity are somewhat stunted. In this way, an “ideological core” of colonial slavery “passes through Kant” (2022: 97): in a “horribly revealing” manner, he *gave voice* to the “animalized colonial violence” against other races committed by members of his white race (2022: 116).

Equally revealing is Kant's portrait of Blacks as incapable of working as free labor: they can only be *forced* by others to carry out productive labor (such as tilling the fields). This is already implicit in his depiction of them as sensitive and "afraid of beatings," which presumably explains their trainability for servitude. This view receives a scientific veneer in Kant's third and theoretically most sophisticated essay on race (1788), where its relevance to abolitionism also becomes salient. In this essay, Kant conceptualizes the "Negro" as not only physiologically suited to toil as slaves—in contrast to the supposedly weak Amerindian—but also as unfit for free labor. In making this point, Kant invokes the well-known controversy between the abolitionist Reverend James Ramsay and the self-interested anti-abolitionist planter, slave owner, and sugar merchant James Tobin.<sup>12</sup> Calling Tobin a "knowledgeable man," Kant summarizes Tobin's argument "against Ramsay's wish to use all Negro slaves as *free* laborers" as follows:

among the many thousand freed Negroes which one encounters in America and England he [Tobin] knew no example of someone engaged in a business which one could properly call labor; rather that, when they are set free, they soon abandon an easy craft which previously as slaves they had been forced to carry out, and instead become hawkers, wretched innkeepers, lackeys, and people who go fishing and hunting, in a word, tramps [*Umtreiber*]. (ÜGTP, 8:174n).

*Umtreiber* connotes unruliness and aimlessness. It suggests that Blacks, lacking an inner drive to labor, can only be *driven* by external forces and passively receive orders from others (their masters). This is purportedly because, as their race was established in its native climate of sub-Saharan Africa, a certain "inner predisposition"—a disinclination to labor—was formed along with their externally visible skin color and became just as hereditary as the latter. In other words, "the far lesser needs in those countries and the little effort it takes to procure only them demand no greater predispositions to activity"; as a result, this race never developed "an immediate drive [*Trieb*] to activity (especially to the sustained activity that one calls industry), which is independent of all enticement" (ÜGTP, 8: 174n).

Kant reiterates the anti-abolitionist ideology that Blacks could not make good of freedom in his Dohna lectures on physical geography (1792). Revisiting Hume's notorious claim about Blacks, Kant claims that "among the many thousands of Negroes who are gradually being set free, there is no example of anyone who has distinguished himself with particular craft." He thereby implies that the formerly enslaved are constitutionally incapable—due to "something essential in the character of the Negro"—of using their newfound freedom well, even to cultivate something as basic as a craft. This allegedly explains "why no freed Negro works the fields" and why "he prefers to ... become a servant" (Dohna manuscript 2019: 105).<sup>13</sup> This resonates with Kant's claim in the 1788 essay that "the Creole Negroes" driven to the Northern (European) regions are not fit to be "farmers or manual laborers" (ÜGTP, 8: 174). Again, citing Tobin's testimony, Kant asserts that these "freed Negroes," due to a hereditary lack of immediate drive and hence a naturalized disinclination to proper labor, "would rather endure waiting behind the coaches of their masters or,

during the worst winter nights, in the cold entrances of the theaters (in England) than to be threshing, digging, carrying loads, etc.” (8:174n).

Kant saw in Tobin’s testimony what he believed all along: lazy “Negroes” were incapable of freedom—a belief underwriting the kind of anti-abolitionist campaign that Tobin was engaged in. This belief blinded Kant to an alternative explanation of what Tobin observed. There were circumstantial reasons why the Blacks Tobin saw on London streets were reduced to degrading positions of (seemingly voluntary) servitude. Slavery was the root of their condition. The majority of the “Black Poor,” as they were collectively called, were former slaves. Their number increased significantly in the mid-1780s due to the American Revolutionary War (1775–83): many Black Loyalists, enslaved men who sided with the Loyalists during the war because they were promised freedom, were brought to London as freedmen after the war. They were only nominally free, however. Materially impoverished (literally penniless) and receiving no financial assistance from the government (sometimes denied such assistance because of their race), many were forced into menial urban jobs that Kant described.<sup>14</sup>

So, through the early 1790s, Kant not only exhibited moral indifference to the enslavement of an entire race but also added ideological fuel to anti-abolitionism. Although he claims in the Dohna lectures that the slave trade is “morally reprehensible,” he immediately adds that “it would have taken place even without the Europeans” (V-PG/Dohna, 26.3: 1142). His rationale is that slavery—“the fate of the Negroes” on the Slave Coast (*Sklavenküste*)—is “bearable” in comparison with death, which would be their fate under the despotic kings of their motherland (Dohna manuscript 2019: 234). Meanwhile, Kant shows an awareness of the economic connection between slave labor and certain goods consumed in Europe: behind the European consumption of all sorts of sugar products, in particular, are “Negroes” processing sugarcane into raw sugar (2019: 192), who are “made” to endure the toil on the Sugar Islands in the West Indies (2019: 241).

These remarks about Black slaves being an integral and uniquely fitting part of an intricate economic system are significant. They point to the historical backdrop against which we should assess Kant’s passing remarks about colonial slavery in his later writings. Granted, he describes the Sugar Islands as “that place of the cruelest and most calculated slavery” in his 1795 essay “Toward Perpetual Peace” (ZeF, 8: 359). But one should not rush to celebrate the fact that Kant at last criticizes *certain practices* of slavery as *exceedingly* cruel. By the 1790s, most European thinkers would likely be willing to grant that much. The question is whether they would also agree that Atlantic slavery as an entrenched *institution* should be immediately abolished.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, since we are looking at Kant’s pronouncements—and silences—about that institution at a time when he was theorizing systematically and meticulously about *right*, we should ask whether he would support abolitionism on account of the enslaved having certain inviolable rights.<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately, Kant said nothing as to whether transatlantic slavery as an institution should be abolished or whether the enslaved had an inalienable right to freedom—or, as the Haitian Revolution unfolded on one of those Sugar Islands, whether the enslaved were capable of self-emancipation as political agents (as opposed to waiting for white saviors).

Even while being silent about such issues, which *should* feature prominently in any political theory developed during the Enlightenment,<sup>17</sup> Kant nonchalantly alludes to the slave trade in a section of the Doctrine of Right entitled “What Is Money?” He mentions the *Negersklaven* on the Coast of Guinea—the Slave Coast mentioned in his Dohna lectures a few years earlier—as an example of “goods” that eventually become *money* or “a lawful means of exchange of the industry of subjects with one another.” He describes those slaves as the kind of goods that, if one individual shows a demand for them, will move another individual to “industry in procuring” them (MS, 6: 288). This captures the logic of the slave trade well. Kant does not add that one should never treat human beings as goods under any circumstance. Instead, he casually describes the economic system that reduces certain humans to mere currency for trade. At the same time, as I noted while talking about his Dohna lectures above, Kant well understands the connection between the sugar consumed by Europeans like him and the use of Black slaves on the Sugar Islands, the high demand for whom in turn *incentivizes* others to procure a steady stock of slaves in places like the Slave Coast. At a time when the abolitionists in both Britain and France were urging sugar abstinence because of its connection to transatlantic slavery and thereby building up economic pressure for political change (Van Dyk 2021), Kant chose to keep his substantive shares in the Königsberg Sugar Refinery (established in 1782), which constituted a quarter of his investments and the equivalent of 1/25th of the refinery’s start-up capital.<sup>18</sup>

I mention Kant’s pronouncements, silences, and deeds related to colonial slavery not just to point a moralizing finger at him. Confronted with Kant’s anti-abolitionist remarks about Blacks being suited for none other than forced labor and his continued silence about whether the enslaved must also enjoy the *right* to freedom even while meticulously theorizing about “right,” some of his modern readers may feel baffled and frustrated. “What could have driven the great philosopher to such madness?” they might ask (Boxill 2017: 47). But others, such as Charles Mills, would contend that the putative madness “has its own rationality, not to be understood through such medical and psychologistic prisms, but as part of a global system of European domination rationalized by a racially bifurcated ethic” (Mills 2021: 494).<sup>19</sup> This is also why I talk about colonial slavery as an entrenched *institution*: it is embedded in an intricate global *system* dominated by European nations and serving the latter’s political and economic interests. So, the question is what to *do* about it, not just whether it is morally wrong. It is a *political* question whose answer may well go beyond what abstract moral principles can tell us. A conservative institutionalist like Edmund Burke, Kant’s well-known contemporary, could call colonial slavery “evil” but simultaneously find it “incurable” as “a system made up of a great variety of parts”—so that the best (the least destabilizing) response was to reform it, to make it “as small an evil as possible” (Burke 1999: 255–56).

Similarly, even if Kant argued—although he never did in his published writings—that colonial slavery is morally wrong in itself (as an institution, not just in terms of how it is practiced in various colonies), he could still decline to support its immediate abolition out of political considerations (such as the destabilizing effects that Burke feared and would be made tangible by the Haitian Revolution). This is the most plausible hypothesis one can venture about the late Kant, given the historical context plus all his revealing claims and silences about colonial slavery. There

is no good reason to claim the opposite unless one begs the question by assuming that Kant's late political writings were egalitarian in a racially conscious manner or that he suddenly came to realize that all humans—affirmatively including all races—must enjoy equal moral and political standing so that they have the *right* to (re)claim what they deserve, their freedom above all.

When one is all too eager to find hints of racial-egalitarian epiphany in Kant's cursory remarks about the extreme brutality of certain practices of colonial slavery, one also misses the opportunity to ask hard questions about his late political philosophy and its uncertain relation to his moral philosophy. As I have explained elsewhere (Lu-Adler 2025), insofar as chattel slaves were treated as fungible and tradeable (money-like) *goods*, they lacked civil personality—a status encoded by colonial laws and sanctioned by colonial states. Meanwhile, Kant's concept of right signifies a reciprocal relation between human beings who are *presumed as free* in the first place (MS, 6: 230); one can *enjoy* it only as a citizen of a civil state according to public laws.<sup>20</sup> This presumption of civil personality underwrites Kant's claims and silences about various forms of slavery. On the one hand, it grounds his arguments for penal slavery, when a citizen who has enjoyed “lawful *freedom*” (MS, 6: 314) forfeits it by committing a crime (6: 329–30), and against voluntary self-enslavement, which amounts to the impossible act of self-cancellation by a free citizen (6: 283, 330). On the other hand, the same presumption makes it theoretically difficult for Kant to figure out *what to do* about the institution of colonial slavery (he does not address this question at all): enslaved people are somebody else's property, not free members of a state; as such, they *have no place* in Kant's system of right, which is designed to limit the freedom that a civil person enjoys so that it does not impinge on the presumptive freedom of another civil person.

Mills, noting that Locke's liberal political theory is *inapplicable* to the case of colonial slavery, surmises that “it may never even have occurred to [Locke] that anyone could think his *Second Treatise* norms and prohibitions applied to [African slaves]” and that anti-Black racism is “the most empirically (psychologically, sociologically, historically) likely explanation” (Mills 2021: 495–97). Might we say the same, *mutatis mutandis*, about the apparent inapplicability of Kant's theory of *right* to the slaves in the Atlantic world (not only those in the most abject situation on the Sugar Islands but also the ones in the newly independent and “free” country called America)? Might his lingering racism be the reason behind his continued silence about what to think of colonial slavery as an institution? Once again, I raise such questions not because I want to settle the old question, couched in exclusively individualistic terms, whether the late Kant changed his racist mind. Rather, I want to highlight the fact that Kant, as he made a concerted second Copernican turn with his political theory,<sup>21</sup> was *socially well positioned* to throw his weight behind what should be a pressing moral and political issue (as it was to the abolitionists), namely that an entire race was denied the right to freedom by well-institutionalized slavery. If Kant's persistent normative silence about this issue raises the specter of residual racism on his part, the *burden of proof* is on him—or his apologists—to remove the specter. As I suggested earlier, given Kant's iterative contributions to the pro-slavery and anti-abolitionist ideology, nothing short of a clearly and vigorously presented *counter-ideology* can begin the reckoning. Anyone willing to lower the bar should ask themselves, “Why?” As Mills reminds us, colonial slavery is unlike any other



philosophical issue facing Enlightenment thinkers: it carries an exceptionally consequential “moral weight,” and a public-facing thinker’s statements or silences about it can convey messages about whether Black lives really “matter” (Mills 2021: 494).

##### 5. A concluding reflection: to reorient or to untether?

I opened my book by referring to the public debate over *Kants Rassismus* in Germany amid a worldwide anti-racist protest after the murder of George Floyd. The debate partly revolved around the question of what to do about the (metaphorical) monument to Kant; most commentators who addressed this question insisted that the monument should be left exactly where it had always been—on a pedestal (Lu-Adler 2023: 1–2). I returned to this issue in the Conclusion. I argued that a sensible middle ground would be to bring Kant’s statue down from the pedestal so that we could have critical dialogues with him at eye level. One should neither “worship” nor “point a finger at” him, I wrote, but “understand him with the curiosity—not presumption—about whether he still has something worthwhile to offer.” Warning against simply “assum[ing] that Kant’s philosophy will have something particularly useful to offer,” I nevertheless urged my fellow Kant/Kantian scholars to “look everywhere for it, with methodological care and a critical attention to lived realities as well as intellectual curiosity and honesty”; the reason is that, insofar as Kant’s contribution to the formation of modern racist ideology constitutes an integral part of his legacy, we “owe it to the ongoing antiracist struggles to explore potentially useful Kantian tools to address it” (2023: 335–36).

Patricia Kitcher and Jennifer Mensch, both prominent Kant scholars, aptly captured this conciliatory spirit of the Conclusion in their blurbs for the book: “speaking to those of us still engaged by the figures and themes of the Enlightenment” with “a sense of optimism” (Mensch), I explained “how, with a better understanding of what Kant did, current scholars can use some aspects of his moral theory to try to undo vestiges of his unfortunate legacy on the question of race” (Kitcher).

I wrote the Conclusion that way partly to honor Charles Mills’s legacy: while we disagreed about how to interpret the relation between Kant’s pure moral philosophy and racism (as one can tell from Chapter 1), I had so much admiration for Mills as a person and as a philosopher that I decided to center his version of Kantianism in the Conclusion when he died in September 2021 (I was finishing Chapter 6 at that time). Mills’s is a color-conscious version of Kantianism. It keeps the basic Kantian moral principles and ideals intact only to *reorient* them toward corrective racial justice and substantial racial equality in a way highly sensitive to the social reality of “race” (Lu-Adler 2023: 337–41). As Mills puts it in “Black Radical Kantianism,” the plan is to “rethink [Kantian] principles and ideals *in the light of* a modernity structured by racial domination”; it is a “racially informed engagement” with Kantianism guided by the hope that “it might provide [resources] for an anti-racist retrieval” (Mills 2018: 2–3).

Now, I would like to take a step back and reflect on the *pragmatic* considerations behind Mills’s turn (from Marxism) to black radical (Kantian) liberalism, a turn that some of his friends

and followers find regrettable and problematic (Slack 2022). Mills opens his “Black Radical Kantianism” with a frank description of a difficult choice confronting scholars like him.

Subordinated social groups trying to develop an emancipatory politics routinely face the problem of how to relate to the frameworks, principles, and ideals officially promulgated by those who dominate the social order. Should they seek to adapt these frameworks, principles, and ideals to their own ends, or should they attempt to devise alternatives? (Mills 2018: 1)

As Mills characterizes these two options, the upside of one mirrors the downside of the other. Adopting the first approach, one can position oneself “within the mainstream” and appropriate its “already familiar and socially hegemonic” resources for anti-hegemonic purposes. By contrast, “jettisoning altogether the oppressor’s creation, the master’s tools, for one’s own original liberatory vision” is unlikely to attract “that section of the privileged whom one is trying to win over (assuming this goal to be on the agenda)” (Mills 2018: 1). Here we see an example of what Alison Bailey (2014) calls an *uneven knowing field*. The structure of this uneven epistemic terrain reflects a historically inherited unequal distribution of social power. Subordinated social groups who hope to be heard and make a difference in the broader field of knowledge production bear the burden of making their emancipatory projects intelligible—and even appealing—to those occupying dominant positions. Mills accepts the burden by attempting to present black radical thoughts in a familiar Kantian-liberal framework.

“Why Kant, though?” Mills asks himself. Predictably, his first answer is a “strategic argument from Kant’s rise to centrality in contemporary Western normative theory over the last half-century.” That is, given Kant’s reception as one of the most important ethico-political philosophers, “a racially informed engagement with this body of discourse would have the virtues of being in dialogue with what is now the central strand in Western ethico-political theory.” In addition, Mills believes that “the key principles and ideals of Kant’s ethico-political thought are, once deracialized, very attractive”; it is just that they need to be rethought in the light of non-ideal, racially inflected social-structural conditions (Mills 2018: 3, 18). This is a version of what Gregory Slack calls Mills’s “Viability Argument” for the idea that radicals should appropriate liberalism for emancipatory purposes (Slack 2022: 282). Slack thinks that Mills “mostly succeeded” with one of his intended audiences, “mainstream philosophers in general and social and political philosophers in particular”: judging from the prestigious professional opportunities he received, he had certainly “gotten the attention of the mainstream” (2022: 279–80).

I am less sanguine about the reception of Mills’s black radical intervention in mainstream Kant scholarship.<sup>22</sup> As I noted in Section 2, mainstream discourse on Kant shows little interest in issues related to race, let alone in having the kind of generative “dialogue” or “conversation” that Mills was trying to promote between Afro-modern political thought and Kantian ethico-political thought, for instance (Mills 2018: 3). By all appearances, it looked like a one-way extension of good will from Mills’s side. As two young scholars put it to me two years after Mills’s passing, he was “deprived” of a genuine *dialogue* by mainstream Kant scholars. They may mention his work

occasionally. In such cases, however, I cannot help but suspect what Mills himself feared was “*conceptual* tokenization, where a black perspective is included but ... makes no difference to the overall discursive logic of the discipline ... in question: the framing assumptions, dominant narratives, prototypical scenarios” (Mills 2017: 188–89).<sup>23</sup>

Maybe, then, it is time to revisit the question that Mills raised himself. Why Kant? This is also a question raised in Inder Marwah’s penetrating review of my book. The review ends with an important challenge: “If one’s priority is to advance antiracism, why adopt Kantian liberalism as the framework to do it?” If I managed to show in the Mills-inspired Conclusion of my book that “a suitably modified Kantian liberalism can be made *compatible* with antiracist politics,” the question is whether it *adds* anything to antiracism or why one “should appeal to” Kantian resources for this purpose. Why not, *instead*, turn to more radical sources like W. E. B. Du Bois and Dadabhai Naoroji? If the “racial myopia” of Kant scholarship is “sustained by its self-referentiality,” Marwah continues, “why not disregard disciplinary borders and consider less familiar vantage points” (Marwah 2024a: 4)?

Marwah poses a similar challenge in a commentary on Inés Valdez’s *Transnational Cosmopolitanism: Kant, Du Bois, and Justice as a Political Craft*. Valdez embraces “exegetically disloyal readings that can reorient normative principles for contemporary use” (Valdez 2019: 11). Specifically, she gives a “creative and disloyal reading” of Kantian principles “against the grain of [Kant’s] Eurocentrism” so that those principles, “in combination with subaltern thought and action, allow us to genuinely embrace equal concern” (2019: 59–60). But Marwah pushes for a “still greater disloyalty” that “throws into question why we should bend our inquiries toward familiar political-theoretical categories [like Kantianism] ... rather than abandoning them when it suits our purposes.” Why read Kant at all, loyally or disloyally? “Why not cut the tether,” Marwah presses on, “and engage the political thought that interests us, without putting it into ‘dialogue’ with familiar sources or in relation to established typologies and debates?” Why not turn to “unconventional sources, simply because they address politics in enriching, provocative, or generative ways”—without “tying [them] to common points of reference”? To be clear, Marwah’s point is not that there is anything wrong with reading Kant but that “we shouldn’t be limited” to him. His even broader point is that we should question the “disciplinary inclinations and habits” that tether us to a particular theoretical framework (such as Kantian cosmopolitanism) or a particular way of conducting our inquiries (Marwah 2024b: 185–87).

I choose to end with this sobering challenge from Marwah partly because I am weary of what Lewis Gordon calls “disciplinary decadence.” This happens when a discipline makes itself “insular” through certain practices of knowledge production: its practitioners “speak only to themselves, which makes the impact of what they produce relevant only to their adherents”; the discipline itself becomes “godlike,” to the extent that “its precepts and methodological assumptions become all its practitioners supposedly need to know” (Gordon 2019: 26). Any perceived contradictions within the framework would be “relegated to the outhouse” as mere “infelicities.” The response, then, is “dismissal of the challenges” instead of curiosity about “what may be wrong with the model.” The antidote to such decadence, Gordon submits, is “teleological

suspension,” a willingness to go beyond itself. That is, a discipline “must not presume its own legitimacy”; it must “let go of such attachments” (2019: 33–4).

To me, this means it is time to play the role of the Non-Aligned. I take nothing for granted. I wish to free my scholarship from unproductive disciplinary habits and assumptions into which I was socialized. A lot of work lies ahead. Stay focused, as Bright advised.<sup>24</sup>

#### Sources and Abbreviations of Kant’s Works

References to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* take the standard A/B form, corresponding to its first (1781) and second (1787) editions. Unless noted otherwise, references to his other works are to the volume and pagination of *Immanuel Kant: Gesammelte Schriften* (AA), Berlin, 1902-. I use available translations in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. Both the abbreviations of the German titles and the English translations used are listed below. Other translations are my own.

- A/B Kritik der reinen Vernunft (AA 3–4)  
*Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Anth Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht (AA7)  
“Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View.” In *Anthropology, History and Education*, edited by Günter Zöller and Robert Loudon, 231–429. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- EACG Entwurf und Ankündigung eines Collegii der physischen Geographie (AA 2)  
“Plan and Announcement of a Series of Lectures on Physical Geography.” Translated by Olaf Reinhardt. In *Natural Science*, edited by Eric Watkins, 386–95. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- GMS Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten (AA4)  
*Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. In *Practical Philosophy*, edited by Mary Gregor, 37–108. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- IaG Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht (AA 8)  
“Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim.” Translated by Allen Wood. In *Anthropology*, 107–20.
- Log Logik (AA 9)  
“The Jäsche Logic.” In *Lectures on Logic*, translated and edited by Michael Young, 527–640. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- MS Die Metaphysik der Sitten (AA6)  
*The Metaphysics of Morals*. In *Practical Philosophy*, 353–603.
- PG Physische Geographie (AA 9)  
“Physical Geography.” Translated by Olaf Reinhardt. In *Natural Science*, 434–679.
- SF Der Streit der Fakultäten (AA7)

- “The Conflict of Faculties.” In *Religion and Rational Theology*, edited by Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni, 233–327. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- ÜGTP Über den Gebrauch teleologischer Principien in der Philosophie (AA8)  
 “On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy.” In *Anthropology*, 195–218.
- V-Anth/Fried Vorlesungen Wintersemester 1775/1776, Friedländer (AA25)  
 “Anthropology Friedländer.” In *Lectures on Anthropology*, edited by Allen Wood and Robert Loudon, 37–255. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- V-Anth/Mensch Vorlesungen Wintersemester 1781/1782 Menschenkunde (AA 25)  
 “Menschenkunde.” In *Lectures on Anthropology*, 281-333.
- V-Anth/Mron Vorlesungen Wintersemester 1784/1785, Mron (AA25)  
 “Anthropology Mron.” In *Lectures on Anthropology*, 335–509.
- V-PG/Dohna Vorlesungen über Physische Geographie 1792, Dohna (AA26.3)
- V-PG/Dönhoff Vorlesungen über Physische Geographie 1782, Dönhoff (AA 26.2)
- V-PG/Holstein Vorlesungen über Physische Geographie 1757–1759, Holstein (AA 26.1)
- ZeF Zum ewigen Frieden (AA8)  
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<sup>1</sup> It is worth pointing out that, by 2006 (when Guyer published *Kant*), some of the best-known English-language writings on Kant's raciology had already been in circulation. See Eze 1997; Robert Bernasconi 2001 and 2003; Hill and Boxill 2001; Mills 2005.

<sup>2</sup> The message that a project on Kant's racism is philosophically insignificant also manifests itself in how academic prestige is granted. You are considered a *bona fide* Kant scholar only if you have demonstrated expertise in a "core" area of Kant's philosophy, such as his pure moral philosophy, epistemology, and metaphysics—not if you tell people that you specialize in Kant's philosophy of race. I know two young philosophers, one Black and one Brown. Both are brilliant and successful in their respective fields of scholarship. They told me on separate occasions that, as graduate students, they wanted to write a dissertation on Kant and racism but were dissuaded from doing so by their well-meaning professors, who were concerned that a dissertation on Kant and racism would diminish their prospect on the job market.

<sup>3</sup> One of the "precautions" Kleingeld thinks we must take is as follows: "When making philosophical use of elements of Kant's moral philosophy from the 1780s, therefore, we should make the necessary adjustments (for an example, see the 'race-sensitive re-articulation' in [Charles Mills's "Black Radical Kantianism"])" (Kleingeld 2024: 7). The reference to Mills was absent in the penultimate version of Kleingeld's "Critical Notice" (an editor at the *Mind* shared it with me for feedback, following the journal's standard practice). In my feedback, I objected to Kleingeld's assertion that I made Kant's moral philosophy "irrelevant" by explaining how, in the Conclusion of my book (Lu-Adler 2023: 337–46), I talked about "the need for a substantially (as opposed to merely nominally) anti-racist *reorientation* of Kantianism, so as to bridge Kantian-moral theory

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and the nonideal social realities confronting us today.” I added: “To the extent that this part of my book was explicitly built on Charles Mills’ work and especially his idea of black radical *Kantianism*, it should also be clear that I’m *definitely not* dismissing Kant’s (ideal) moral theory as irrelevant. I’m simply calling for the liberal minded Kantians who want to use this theory to supplement it with what Mills called a proper and adequate description of non-ideal social realities.” The reader would be well advised to learn about “race-sensitive re-articulation” in the original context of Mills’s “Black Radical Kantianism” (2018: 6–7), which pointed to the distinction between *nominal* and *substantial* forms of racial inclusion that I foregrounded and expanded on in the Conclusion of my book (Lu-Adler 2023: 337–38).

<sup>4</sup> Kleingeld objects that I spent “only one paragraph arguing for this rather non-standard reading” and misinterprets my talk of “mere rational beings” as if I was referring to an infinite being for whom, as she rightly notes and I agree, moral laws are not imperatival (Kleingeld 2024: 6). I was building on Allison’s interpretation of the *Groundwork*. I also pointed out that Kant’s pure moral theory does *not* abstract from the *finite* nature of human rationality. It is just that such finality is not unique to human rationality, but a feature of all rational beings qua created beings: they are finite in terms of being limited by their *sensibility* qua embodied rational creatures. What Kant is abstracting from in his pure moral philosophy is the *earthbound* embodiment—with its special mode of sensibility—that differentiates humans (Lu-Adler 2023: 51–2, n.21).

<sup>5</sup> Kleingeld quibbles that I “referred only to the *Groundwork* when describing ‘Kant’s moral philosophy’ as not concerned with embodied human beings.” She claims: “The *Metaphysics of Morals* seems to pose a particular problem for her thesis. This book is also part of ‘Kant’s moral philosophy’, and it explicitly applies moral principles to *human* beings as such” (Kleingeld 2024: 5). To respond, let me reiterate what I said in my feedback on the earlier version of Kleingeld’s “Critical Notice”: although I occasionally speak of Kant’s “moral philosophy” without qualification, it should be clear from the context that I was not commenting on Kant’s moral philosophy as a whole, but on its *pure* core represented by the *Groundwork* (especially by the Categorical Imperative). This is also the part of Kant’s moral philosophy that Kleingeld assumes as logically contradicting racism.

<sup>6</sup> While acknowledging that “in moralization we have done almost nothing,” Kant claims to “have reason to hope for it” (V-Anth/Mensch, 25: 1197–98). This hope is rooted in his teleological conception of a universal world history, which represents “the human species . . . in the remote distance as finally working itself upward toward the condition in which all germs [*Keime*] nature has placed in it can be fully developed and its vocation here on earth can be fulfilled” (IaG, 8: 30). Kant grants the same *Keime* to all races on account of their shared human phylum (V-Anth/Fried, 25: 694). What differentiates the races in his view, though, is that such germs can be fully *developed* only in the white race because it alone possesses all the subjective conditions needed for such development (V-Anth/Mensch, 25: 1187). For discussion, see Marwah 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Kleingeld seems to conflate *de re* and *de dicto* references. In a trivial *de re* sense, one may say that Kant’s pure moral philosophy, anthropology, and physical geography all refer to the same thing: each says something *of the human being*. They have distinct and non-exchangeable *de dicto*



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references, however. As I characterized them in my book, the distinct references are to “human being *qua* rational being as such,” “human being *qua* free-acting, yet-to-be-perfected rational animal,” and “human beings *qua* spatio-temporally particularized inhabitants on earth” (Lu-Adler 2023: 71).

<sup>8</sup> I suggested this much to Kleingeld in my feedback on her draft. I also summarized my distinction between the two kinds of abstraction for her and emphasized that it was *the pivotal* conceptual move I made in Chapter 1. Her revised version adds the parenthetical “real” to qualify “abstraction” while completely neglecting to consider how radically different it is from logical abstraction on my account.

<sup>9</sup> Kleingeld uses what Kant says about African slaves in his 1782 Dönhoff lectures on physical geography (V-PG/Dönhoff, 26: 1080) as an example of how he “endorses race-based slavery” (Kleingeld 2024: 7). Physical geography is merely *descriptive* for Kant, however, and what he does in the relevant passage is to present supposed facts gleaned from travelogues: he relates that a particular tribe of West-African “Negroes” are sought out as slaves because they can endure unbearable heat, that 20,000 of them are bought every year to replace the ones in America, and that they are often captured by their own people and sold to the Europeans. To be sure, descriptions like these are not innocent. Still, they are no evidence that Kant endorsed race-based slavery in the sense of regarding it as *morally permissible*.

<sup>10</sup> Like all other transcripts of Kant’s popular lectures on anthropology, the *Menschenkunde* must also be in broad circulation beyond his classroom. It would be published as a standalone book in 1831, which purportedly represented Kant’s “philosophical anthropology” and which reproduced the outline of racial profiles that he presented in the 1780s (Starke 1831: 353).

<sup>11</sup> This is Kant’s scientific monogenism, a central topic in Chapter 4 of my book. My critical analysis of his views on racial slavery in this chapter suggested that, in Kant’s case, monogenism was no compassionate alternative to polygenism (Lu-Adler 2023: 234–35).

<sup>12</sup> The Ramsay-Tobin controversy represented a turning point in the abolitionist movement (Swaminathan 2016).

<sup>13</sup> This refers to the 2019 version of the complete transcript of *Physische Geographie: Dohna* ([https://telota-webpublic.bbaw.de/kant/base.htm/geo\\_doh.htm](https://telota-webpublic.bbaw.de/kant/base.htm/geo_doh.htm)). The Akademie edition leaves out some of the more troubling claims Kant made about the enslaved “Negroes.”

<sup>14</sup> The British government was more interested in getting rid of those Blacks than improving their material conditions in London—hence the disastrous Sierra Leone expedition of 1786–87 (Braidwood 1994; Fryer 2018: 194–205). I thank Alex Raycroft for drawing my attention to the situation of Black Poor and its connection to the Sierra Leone expedition.

<sup>15</sup> I call Atlantic slavery an “institution” to suggest that, unlike mere practices, it has the following features that partly explain why it was not simply a moral issue, but a *political* and *economic* one. It is *organized*, involving collective and coordinated actions of the relevant stakeholders; it has an established *structure*, in which each of those stakeholders plays a determinate role that serves to sustain the structure—for example, as a “slave holder,” “slave trader,” or “investor” in the trade; it is embedded within a larger *system*, linking up with such other institutions as banks; and it is

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*legally regulated* (for example, by the well-known Code Noir regulating French colonies), which legitimizes it and ensures its sustainability by, for example, preventing self-undermining ways of using slaves. This last point is important, as it suggests that Kant's recognition of the practice of slavery as *exceedingly* cruel on the Sugar Islands entails a need for *reform*, not a call for abolishing the institution altogether.

<sup>16</sup> For a model of how to articulate abolitionist demands using the language of right in the eighteenth century, one can look at the entries on slavery and the slave trade, published in the *Encyclopédie* edited by Denis Diderot and Jean d'Alembert in 1755 and 1765 respectively. The author of those entries, Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt, unambiguously condemned slavery and the slave trade as *unjust institutions* and affirmed the enslaved human beings' *inalienable right* to freedom. See Lu-Adler 2024 for my analysis of those entries, which give us a clear sense of what is missing from Kant's belated and meager remarks about Atlantic slavery.

<sup>17</sup> On the Enlightenment's silence about the Haitian Revolution, see Trouillot 2015: 70–107.

<sup>18</sup> I thank Jennifer Mensch, Martin Sticker, and Garrath Williams for drawing my attention to Kant's investment in the sugar refinery. I am relying on the sources curated by Steve Naragon: <https://users.manchester.edu/facstaff/ssnaragon/kant/Professors/profsSalaries.htm#investments>, accessed November 17, 2024.

<sup>19</sup> To appreciate this point, one need to understand Kant's non-ideal political theory (Huseyinzadegan 2019).

<sup>20</sup> This has to do with Kant's view that civil condition is what "secures what is mine or yours by public laws" (MS, 6: 242). It is the only "rightful condition" (6: 255), which "contains the conditions under which alone everyone is able to *enjoy* his rights" (6: 305–06).

<sup>21</sup> Kant described the turn in the "Conflict of Faculties" (1798). Addressing the question "Is the human race constantly progressing?" Kant recommends a change in "the point of view" after the fashion of the Copernican turn in astronomy: from this viewpoint, one considers the human race "not as [a sum of] individuals ...but rather as divided into *nations* and *states*" (SF, 7: 83–4). For my brief discussion of this turn, see Lu-Adler 2023: 342–43. Now I suspect that the focus on nations and states may also help to explain why race did not figure prominently in Kant's late political philosophy.

<sup>22</sup> See Huseyinzadegan 2022 for an account of what Mills's Black Radical Kantianism demands of Kant studies and contemporary Kantian political philosophy.

<sup>23</sup> See my comments on Kleingeld's reference to Mills in note 3 above.

<sup>24</sup> I am indebted to Dilek Huseyinzadegan, Inder Marwar, Maria Mejia, and two members of the Editorial Board for the *Critical Philosophy of Race* for their feedback on an earlier version of this paper.