

The Racial Power of Judgment. Reading Kant's Third Critique with and against Charles W. Mills

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Abstract

This essay sets out to show that i) the seemingly contradictory claims in the first part of *Kant's Critique of Judgment* on aesthetics as well as the relation between Kant's aesthetic and the Third Critique's second part on the teleology of nature turn out to be completely coherent if we look at them through the lens of Charles W. Mills's *The Racial Contract*. The essay argues that Kant's Third Critique is not only implicitly based on a differentiation between truly human beings as opposed to subhuman human beings; much rather, said differentiation is explicitly elaborated on in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. The essay then ii) shows that the racial differentiations around which Kant's Third Critique revolves cannot be restricted to Kantian aesthetics. Much rather, Kant's conceptualization of the disinterested subject of aesthetic experience as a distinctively civilized being structures Western aesthetic theories to this very day. This is why the essay then iii) proceeds to show why it is not enough to acknowledge the exclusions of Kant's aesthetic and to grant everybody access to the kind of aesthetic civilization towards autonomy that Kant restricted to a few white gentlemen of taste. Much rather, the autonomous, detached, and disinterested subject that is at the center of Kant's aesthetic needs to be thoroughly questioned in favor of a heteronomous, relational subject. In conclusion iv), I argue that the transformation of the autonomous subject into a vulnerable and dependent being also raises doubts as to the plausibility of Mills's Black Radical Liberalism that revolves around a subject whose Kantian autonomy Mills hardly ever questions.

Keywords: aesthetics, (critique of) autonomy, (the ideology of) civilization, racialization, human sub-humans.

El poder racial del juicio. Lectura de la Tercera crítica de Kant con y contra Charles W. Mills

Resumen

El presente artículo defiende la tesis que i) las afirmaciones aparentemente contradictorias de la primera parte de la *Crítica del juicio* de Kant sobre la estética, así como la relación entre la estética de Kant y la segunda parte de la Tercera

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crítica sobre la teleología de la naturaleza, resultan ser completamente coherentes si las miramos a través del prisma de *El contrato racial*, de Charles W. Mills. El ensayo sostiene que la Tercera crítica de Kant no solo se basa implícitamente en una diferenciación entre los seres verdaderamente humanos en oposición a los seres humanos subhumanos; más bien, dicha diferenciación se elabora explícitamente en la *Crítica del juicio* de Kant. A continuación, el ensayo ii) demuestra que las diferenciaciones raciales en torno a las cuales gira la Tercera crítica de Kant no pueden restringirse a la estética kantiana. Más aún, la conceptualización de Kant del sujeto desinteresado de la experiencia estética como un ser distintivamente civilizado estructura las teorías estéticas occidentales hasta el día de hoy. Por eso, el ensayo iii) pone de manifiesto qué no basta con reconocer las exclusiones de la estética de Kant y conceder a todo el mundo acceso al tipo de civilización estética hacia la autonomía que Kant restringió a unos pocos caballeros blancos de buen gusto. Por consiguiente, se propone que el sujeto autónomo, distante y desinteresado que ocupa el centro de la estética de Kant debe ser cuestionado a fondo en favor de un sujeto heterónomo relacional. En conclusión, iv), sostengo que la transformación del sujeto autónomo en un ser vulnerable y dependiente también plantea dudas sobre la plausibilidad del liberalismo radical negro de Mills, que gira en torno a un sujeto cuya autonomía kantiana Mills casi nunca cuestiona.

Palabras clave: estética, (crítica de) la autonomía, (la ideología de) la civilización, racialización, subhumanos.

1. From where I start

It took an incredibly long time for racism to be seen in Kant's writings. Without the sharpened gaze of those who look at Western philosophy from a certain outside, like, e.g., Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (1995) or Tsenay Serequeberhan (1996), it would probably have taken even longer.

In recent years, however, we have seen fervent debates about the status of Kant's racism. On the one hand, there are discussions about how long Kant explicitly held racist views, and more than a few try to prove that, at least in Kant's writings of the 1790s, racist remarks can no longer be found.² Others argue that while Kant did make racist arguments in his

² This claim has prominently been brought forward by Pauline Kleingeld in her essay "Kant's Second Thoughts on Race" (2007). Earlier versions of Kleingeld's defense of Kant can be found e.g. in Shell

lectures on anthropology until the end of his life, his three critiques, which are then said to be philosophically more relevant, are not affected by this. Finally, among those who assume that Kant's entire oeuvre is tinged with racism, there is an ongoing debate about the extent to which Kant's writings nevertheless remain relevant for all those who strive towards more inclusive philosophies. Kant's moral universalism and his understanding of enlightenment as exit from self-imposed immaturity play central roles in these debates.

The fierceness with which the struggle to save as much as possible of Kant is remarkable, as is the philological effort made for this purpose. Both reveal much about the naturalisation of a supposedly universal philosophical canon that should be addressed as West-centred. However, the irrepressible will to save Kantian claims cannot be restricted to philosophy departments.

Much rather Kant's writings contributed to the formation and normalization of an orbit of thoughts, perceptions, and desires that has become hegemonic. It is, as I will try to indicate at least, the orbit of racial capitalism that has become global and from which not only its profiteers will hardly want to escape, but also those who suffer the most brutal disadvantages.³

This claim might come as a surprise, as one will search in vain for the concept of capitalism in Kant and even more so for the concept of racial capitalism, which was only coined much later. From today's perspective, however, one can very well claim that Kant co-designed the subjects, without which racial capitalism would not have started to thrive by the end of the 18th century.⁴ To be more precise, Kant not only designs a concept of subjectivity that fits the racial capitalism of his time, but also educational

(1995) or Muthu (2003). For critical engagements with Kleingeld's view see Bernasconi (2011), Lu-Adler (2023), Huseyinzadegan and Pascoe (2023).

³ For a concise introduction to (theories of) racial capitalism see Kelley (2017).

⁴ While traces of Locke's possessive individualism can certainly be found in Kant's normative account of subjectivity, Kant's main emphasis is, on the one hand, on labor or, rather, on the different kinds of labor that within bourgeois society allow for different kinds of subjectivity whereby those who perform reproductive labor or slave labor are barred from subjectivity in the full (see Pascoe, 2022). On the other hand, Kant claims that subjects in the full need to be 'civilized,' which Kant equals with the acquaintance with the arts and sciences. The link between these two dynamics of subjectivation are obvious: According to Kant only those who dispose over the labor of others have enough time and other resources to cultivate their artistic and scientific skills. In this essay I will focus on the 'civilizational' norm of Kantian subjectivation.

procedures for the formation of such subjects. On the one hand, this testifies to Kant's awareness of performativity in relation to subjectivity which, and this should never be forgotten, implies the possibility of subverting dominant forms of subjectification. On the other hand, Kant's manifold reflections on the education of the subject of racial capitalism testify to the fact that Kant did not want to stop at the conceptualization of modern racial, bourgeois subjectivity but to actively participate in its formation. And precisely because Kant (both as a university teacher and a public intellectual) had such a lasting impact on the hegemonic procedures of subjectivation which became globally effective with racial capitalism, it is still very difficult to escape from them.⁵ Even when the violence of these procedures of subjectivation is obvious.

This might explain why some of the most clear-sighted critics of Kant's racism insist on continuing to work with Kant after—or so they say—Kant has been subjected to critique. It is not least this supposedly critical desire to continue working with Kant that I will try to understand in the following. An understanding of this desire seems indispensable to become sensitive to and curious about alternatives to the mode of subjectivation that Kant co-designed and propagated; indispensable above all for those who—like myself—are simply by birth on the side of the profiteers of racial capitalism. Possible alternatives to the procedures of subjectivation that became hegemonic in the wake of Kant are already there, but for certain people, especially for the profiteers of the hegemonic Kantian structures of desire, they are hardly perceptible. Others, however, have long since grasped such alternatives or allowed themselves to be grasped by them, or they have never given up on them despite the most adverse circumstances of oppression and erasure.

For a better understanding of the significance of racism in Kant and the subjectivation procedures that are at its centre, I propose a re-reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Kant's Third Critique seems to me particularly suitable for this endeavour for several reasons. First, Kant's Third Critique is a good starting point for examining the thesis often put forward in recent Kant scholarship, according to which Kant increasingly moved away from racist statements towards the end of his life. Moreover,

⁵ Huaping Lu-Adler (particularly 2023, pp. 285–328) has brilliantly engaged with the reasons for Kant's long-lasting influence as a university teacher.

Kant's Third Critique thwarts the separation between supposedly critical, transcendental philosophy and more empirical, if not seemingly occasional, observations; a separation that plays a crucial role in outsourcing Kant's racist and sexist statements to the beyond of transcendental philosophy. Additionally, the *Critique of Judgement* enables and provokes discussion of the extent to which Kant's aesthetic theory—and the pedagogy enshrined in it in particular—articulate such a subtle and insidious racism of civilising subjectivation that this racism can hardly be distinguished from the potentially emancipatory elements of Kantian universalism. It is particularly the *sensus communis*, that is at the centre of Kant's aesthetics, that provokes the debate on how close the connection between racism and universalism is and what this connection means for the self-determined subject that Kant's aesthetic education promises; a subject, moreover, that is propagated by liberals to this day.

Although Kant and particularly his Third Critique is at the centre of this essay, I conceive of it not exclusively as a contribution to Kant Studies but also as an attempt to intervene into the formation of modern, liberal personhood that was massively shaped by (the beginnings of) Western aesthetics.⁶

⁶ By 'Western aesthetics' I do not mean to only refer to aesthetics' origin as a philosophical discipline in 18th-century Western Europe, particularly in England, France and Germany. Rather, I intend to use this term to question the supposed universality of philosophical aesthetics and call it what it is: a very successful but ultimately very provincial endeavor. The emergence of Western aesthetics in the 18th century and thus also of the concomitant new philosophical subfield was accompanied by numerous changes that also marked drastic breaks within Western discussions (see Kristeller, 1951; Shiner, 2001). The most important elements of the new understanding of aesthetics can all be found systematized in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*: i) Aesthetics in the sense of a rather broad theory of perception, which still plays an important role in Kant's First *Critique*, is narrowed down to a theory of the perception of beautiful nature and/or art. ii) Among many other things, this implies a categorical separation between art and craft, but also the devaluation of all understandings and practices of aesthetics that disregard this separation and are therefore ever more often referred to as 'primitive.' iii) The then new narrow understandings of aesthetics and the no less new conception of art in the collective singular—until the 18th century one spoke of a plurality of arts—also lay the foundation for the development of an autonomous (societal) sphere of art. iv) Equally decisive is the departure from aesthetic theories of production and the associated idea that aesthetic activities can be taught and learned in favor of the idea of unfathomable geniuses that resist theorization. Aesthetics of production are replaced by theories of reception that put the emphasis on a process of lifelong learning by way of aesthetic experiences that can be refined ever further and thus requires time and money. v) Above all, however, the aesthetic experiences in question are linked to a sovereign subject who is able to abstract from all interests and (sensual) inclinations and thus always remains at a distance—from others no less than the surrounding world—especially in moments of (sensual) overwhelm. vi) The turn from a plurality of arts to the concept of art in the collective singular is accompanied by the claim that there is only one valuable and, at the same time, universal form of aesthetics, even though it is a rather provincial variant of aesthetics, namely Western aesthetics.

2. How the power of judgement gets racialized

The *Critique of Judgement*'s opening and seemingly modest claim is to reconstruct the transcendental preconditions of aesthetic judgments, which cannot be non-fulfilled when an aesthetic judgment is made. Immediately thereafter, however, it becomes increasingly clear that proper aesthetic experiences and judgments imply norms, which may well be missed. Later, it turns out that the capacity for such experience and judgment depends on empirically contingent educational processes on both the individual and the cultural-collective level; plus, as the Third Critique's second part reveals, on the evolutionary level as well. Finally, Kant claims that the seemingly equal humans of the opening passage are suited for such education to varying degrees. In other words, Kant's opening and truly universal assumption, that all humans who are equipped with reason and understanding are capable of making aesthetic experiences and judgements, is swiftly transformed into the claim that only some humans are truly suited for aesthetic experiences.

This inconsistency has been frequently registered, and sometimes it was even praised as an intentional opening, indeed as Kant's explicit concession that he could not bring his transcendental system to a triumphant conclusion with the Third Critique. On second glance, however, sharpened by Charles W. Mills's engagement with Kant, the seeming contradictoriness is grounded in a continuous and all but inconsistent logic. Bringing this logic, which is fundamental in a non-Kantian sense—it is not transcendental, but structurally classist, sexist, and above all racist—to the surface, is even more important because the philosophical discussion of (Kant's) aesthetics to this day almost entirely denies said logic of multiple exclusions or deems it systematically irrelevant. Much rather, Kantian aesthetics is seen as a realm of free play open to all, if not the epitome of freedom that is equally hard to find in the world of capitalist commerce as in moral behavior. It is against this claim that I will argue, in a Millsian vein,⁷ that aesthetics is consistently installed and propagated in the *Critique of Judgement* as an instrument of civilization, but also as a measuring

Although all these aspects deserve detailed consideration, my focus in this essay is on the (Kantian variant of) autonomous subjectivity that strongly influences the discourse of philosophical aesthetics to this day.

⁷ I am well-aware of the fact, that the *Critique of Judgement* did not play a role in Charles M. Mills's (see 2014, 2017c, 2020, 2022) demonstration that Kant's exclusion of many people from being true humans makes perfect sense once one factors in the racist baseline of Kant's system. However, I will show that Mills's reading strategy can and should also be applied to Kant's Third Critique.

instrument of the civilization already achieved; as an instrument moreover, that assigns different groups of humans to different levels of so-called civilization and excludes some entirely from the process of aesthetic education and thus from ever becoming fully human.

The baseline of exclusions begins in §2 of the *Critique of Judgment* with the devaluation of the Iroquois Sachem (a representative of the indigenous population of North America), whom Kant sets up as paradigmatic of the incapacity for aesthetic disinterestedness. And the baseline runs through to what is often seen as the emancipatory climax of Kantian aesthetics, to Kant's introduction of the *sensus communis*. Moreover, the racial base line also structures the book's second part on teleological judgments. Here is the opening of Kant's exclusionary baseline in §2:

If someone asks me whether I find the palace I see before me beautiful, I may well say that I don't like that sort of thing, which is made merely to be gaped at, or like the Iroquois sachem, that nothing in Paris pleased him better than the cook-shops [...] All of this might be conceded to me and approved; but that is not what is at issue here. One only wants to know whether the mere representation of the object is accompanied with satisfaction in me, however indifferent I might be with regard to the existence of the object of this representation [...]. Everyone must admit that a judgement about beauty in which there is mixed the least interest is very partial and not a pure judgement of taste (KU AA 05: 204f.).

To be sure, Kant claims only to reconstruct (in a transcendental way) what those who make aesthetic judgments always already do. However, so little is recognized as aesthetic judgment or aesthetic experience in his reconstruction that Kant's aesthetic amounts to a new norm that excludes many (from aesthetic experiences and judgements) and most of what has hitherto passed for art. It is obvious, for example, that the disinterestedness of aesthetic behavior, which Kant puts center stage, presupposes economic security, satisfaction of basic needs, and leisure.

On the other hand, the beautiful is burdened with multiple tasks, which Kant does not identify as interests: recreation from capitalist competition and distraction from the barbarism that goes on in other areas of society than that of the emerging field of art. But one purpose of the

aesthetic that is clearly spelled out in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* even though Kant would never have declared it as a purpose, is that of excluding many humans, to varying degrees, from the realm of the beautiful and thus, at the same time, from the educational process of becoming fully human. In this respect, Kant's Third Critique does not depart from the path that Kant took in his openly sexist and racist "Observations on the Beautiful and Sublime" (1764),⁸ and this continuity gives the lie to those who think that there are unbridgeable gaps between the pre-critical and the critical Kant in matters of exclusions.

The exclusionary logic of the Third Critique becomes most evident in the context of Kant's search for a principle that would guarantee the universality of aesthetic judgements. This search comes as a surprise. For Kant has made clear right at the beginning that the fact that the aesthetic is a subjective judgement means that nothing other than the subject's two powers of cognition, imagination and understanding, play with each other when they have been stimulated by a beautiful object or a beautiful idea. In other words, if nothing but the two faculties play with each other, the ensuing judgment is necessarily universal as it presupposes nothing but the two faculties that all humans share. However, Kant is obviously troubled by the following question: how can the aesthetically judging subject ensure that no interests have been mixed into its pleasure? How to make sure, in other words, that only imagination and reason that all thinking beings share have played a role? For only under this condition is the judgement a truly general one and can be 'imputed' (*ansinnen*, see KU, AA 05: 293) to all thinking beings. According to Kant, this generality can only be guaranteed by the *sensus communis*, i.e., by the ability to test one's own judgement with reference to possibly hidden interests in such a way that I put myself in the place of all other rational beings and perceive or judge a potentially beautiful object or idea from their perspective. Kant conceives this thought experiment as a kind of inner dialogue and equates it with taste, sociability,

⁸ Kant's "Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and sublime" exclude Black people from all achievements in the fields of art and science. As proof of this Kant refers to Hume who, on his part, was also prominently referenced by Edward Long, a self-proclaimed scholar and colonial profiteer who owned property in Jamaica and became famous for his three volume *History of Jamaica* (1774; see BGSE, AA 02: 253). Hume's infamous footnote, to which Kant refers, says: "I am apt to suspect the N*s to be naturally inferior to the Whites [...]. In Jamaica, indeed, they talk of one Negro as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly" (Hume, 2006, p. 213). For the social-historical context of Long's writings, profits, and privileges, see Hall (2024).

and civility. However, the much-lauded *sensus communis*, which Hannah Arendt dubbed ‘enlarged mentality’ and which not only Arendt treats as the epitome of cosmopolitanism,⁹ is anything but broadening, but rather crassly restrictive. Moreover, the purpose of the Kantian thought experiment is the exact opposite of all efforts to understand (the taste of) others. Rather, other rational beings only enter the scene as a tool for the abstraction from one’s own interests.

In his discussion of *sensus communis* Kant first remarks:

Whether there is in fact such a common sense [...] thus whether taste is an original and natural faculty, or only the idea of one that is yet to be acquired and is artificial [...] this we would not and cannot yet investigate here (KU, AA 05: 240).

And it is only in §41 that he presents his answer. Now Kant clearly states that the *sensus communis* needs to be trained (through as many comparative aesthetic experiences as possible). Moreover, he equates such aesthetic education with civilization or the ascent from “merely a human being” to a “a refined human being (the beginning of civilization)” (KU, AA 05: 297), the latter of which is said to be a necessary precondition of pure, disinterested aesthetic judgements. Kant thus introduces a historical dimension into the most fundamental (and seemingly timeless) of all aesthetic principles. In precisely this context of aesthetic education as civilization, the Iroquois, already disparaged in §2, reappear. For Kant writes:

and thus, at first to be sure only charms, e.g., colors for painting oneself (roucou among the Caribs and cinnabar among the Iroquois), or flowers, mussel shells, beautifully colored birds’ feathers, but with time also beautiful forms (as on canoes, clothes, etc.), that do not in themselves provide any gratification, i.e. satisfaction of enjoyment, become important in society and combined with great interest, until finally civilization has reached the highest point makes of this almost

⁹ “‘Enlarged thought’ is the result of first ‘abstracting from the limitations which contingently attach to our own judgment,’ of disregarding its ‘subjective private conditions... by which so many are limited,’ that is, disregarding what we usually call self-interest, which, according to Kant, is not enlightened or capable of enlightenment but is in fact limiting. The greater the reach the larger the realm in which the enlightened individual is able to move from standpoint to standpoint – the more ‘general’ will be his thinking” (Arendt, 1992, p. 43).

the chief work of refined inclinations, and sensations have value only to the extent that they may be universally communicated (KU, AA 05: 297).

However, this stadial theory of civilizational progress towards aesthetic refinement is not Kant's last word on the acquisition of aesthetic taste, *sensus communis*, or civilization. In the following paragraph, Kant reformulates his account of aesthetic education and categorically excludes some humans from the process of civilization when he writes: "But, first, this immediate interest in the beautiful nature is *not* actually common, but belongs only to those whose thinking is either already trained to the good or especially receptive to such training" (KU, AA 05: 301, my emphasis).

This concluding formulation of the possibility to acquire taste, *sensus communis*, or civilization implies that some people are already aesthetically educated, while others are in principle 'susceptible' of such training but not yet civilized, i.e., not yet sufficiently aesthetically educated. However, Kant's remark obviously implies that not all human beings are "eminently susceptible of such training." In other words, some are categorically excluded from the process of acquiring aesthetic taste or *sensus communis* and, at the same time, from acquiring civilization, humanity in the fullest sense, and participation in the bourgeois culture of sociability and cosmopolitanism. In this way, the capacity to think cosmopolitically and universally is principally restricted to those educated by aesthetic experiences, i.e., the male part of the Western European bourgeoisie, as the Third Critique's second part makes entirely clear. In other words, taste, *sensus communis*, or aesthetically refined humanity, is equally a matter of an inward demarcation vis-à-vis the lower classes and genders who might be susceptible to learning taste, as it is vis-à-vis the colonial outside, as Kant's derogatory remarks about the Iroquois and Caribs reveal. However, the more systematic exclusion of many non-Europeans from aesthetic educability towards true humanity, Kant's views of the lower classes, and what he calls the 'fair sex' are elaborated only in later parts of the *Critique of Judgement* to which I will turn now.

3. Why all the seeming tensions make sense if racism is taken into account

As already mentioned, the opening sections of the *Critique of Judgement* are fraught with tensions: a seemingly unconditional universalism is contradicted by harsh (mostly racist) exclusions, a transcendental endeavor is thwarted by historical learning processes, the most rigorous aesthetic autonomy is foiled by increasingly explicit connections between the beautiful and the good (see §42). At least in part, the perhaps unexpected turn of events can be explained by the fact that the last quoted paragraphs 41 and 42, in which Kant elaborates on historical learning processes and the interdependence between the good and the beautiful, were added to the “Analytic of the Beautiful” (KU, AA 05: 203–356) with a year’s delay. They were thus added to the part which, before the revision, was supposed to only be about the transcendental reconstruction of the four decidedly timeless characteristics—dubbed ‘moments’ by Kant—of aesthetic judgements.

As John H. Zammito’s (1992; see also Carter, 2008, pp. 79–121; Hostettler, 2020) research on the genesis of the *Critique of Judgement* has meticulously demonstrated, Kant’s initially exclusively aesthetic project of a transcendental “Critique of the Power of Aesthetic Judgement” was supplemented, indeed completely revised, in a second phase by an epistemological-anthropological enterprise. This new enterprise revolves around the question of the order of nature (with a special emphasis on man’s role in nature) that Kant attempts to answer with the help of the concept of the reflective power of judgement that he had developed in his elaboration of a theory of aesthetic judgments. In an even later, third phase Kant focused on the connection between the two parts of the *Critique of Judgement*—aesthetics, on the one hand, and natural history with an emphasis on the role of humans in nature on the other—which allowed the *Critique of Judgement* to culminate in a moral-metaphysical enterprise to answer the question of the destiny of mankind.

As mentioned, Kant discovered the power of reflective judgments in his analysis of aesthetic judgments, but he immediately used the newly discovered idea to further advance his reflections on anthropology, which he had previously mainly developed in lecture courses. Reflective judgements in the field of aesthetics are about judging an empirically unverifiable purposiveness of the cognitive powers of imagination and understanding for

each other. In the second part of the *Critique of Judgment*, which deals with man's position in natural history, Kant refers to reflective judgements to make the purposiveness of nature and its history plausible. Moreover, Kant uses reflective judgements to prove that (aesthetically refined and civilized) man is the highest point and the ultimate purpose of natural history. In Kant's view, civilized man is not only able to perceive the purposeful order and development of nature, but also that it is moral progress that is the highest purpose of civilized man.

At first, according to Kant, it is nature that urges man—or rather: certain men—towards civilization and regulates the civilizing influence of civilized men on each other. But once nature has reached its civilizing end in certain men, they take over the civilizing mission that leads from culturally (respectively aesthetically and scientifically) refined civilization and the concomitant imperative to subdue inner and outer nature, to morality, or rather, an ethicotheology (see KU, AA 5: 442ff.) This turn within the second part of Kant's Third Critique, entitled "Critique of Teleological Judgment," echoes Kant's claim about the relation between the two subjects on which he regularly gave lecture courses until the end of his life: physical geography on the one hand and pragmatic anthropology on the other. Whereas physical geography considers "what *nature* makes of the human being" (Anth, AA 07: 119), pragmatic anthropology engages with what man has made and should make of himself.

Against this backdrop, it cannot come as a surprise that the intertwined ideas of an ultimate purpose of nature that points beyond nature also emerge in the *Critique of Judgment*, particularly in §83 titled "On the Ultimate End of Nature as a Teleological System." Kant leaves no doubt that said end consists in man being capable of

setting a final end for his own existence and of agreeing with that end. Thus among all his ends in nature there remains only the formal, subjective condition, that, namely, of the aptitude for setting himself ends at all and, (independent from nature in his determination of ends) using nature as a means appropriate to the maxims of his free ends general, as that which nature can accomplish with a view to the final end that lies outside of it and which can therefore be regarded as its ultimate end (KU, AA 05: 431).

In the beginning it is with the help of all kinds of miseries and oppressions that nature pushes humans toward setting ends for themselves. Later, however, it is culture that enables humans to conceptualize and, in some unclear future, to reach their ultimate goal: morality.

However, Kant immediately adds that the seemingly universal goal of nature to enable (if not enforce) the development of culture in all humans is not universal at all. Kant not only differentiates between hierarchically ordered stages of culture. He also adds: “But not every kind of culture is adequate for this ultimate end of nature” (KU, AA 05: 431). Moreover, Kant is of the opinion that inequality among humans is a necessary condition for some to be able to reach the highest forms of culture, which will prepare mankind for morality.

Skill cannot very well be developed in the human race except by means of inequality among people; for the majority provides the necessities of life as it were mechanically, without requiring any special art for that, for the comfort and ease of others, who cultivate the less necessary elements of culture, science and art, and are maintained by the latter in a state of oppression, bitter work and little enjoyment, although much of the culture of the higher class gradually spreads to this class (KU, 05: 432).¹⁰

After some brief remarks on “a whole, which is called *civil society*” (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*) and ultimately “a *cosmopolitan* whole” (*ein weltbürgerliches Ganzes*) as necessary preconditions for nature to reach its ultimate end in humans, Kant returns to the different stages of culture and puts fine arts and the sciences at the top of culture’s ranks (KU, AA 05: 432f.).

When Kant equates the fine arts and sciences with the most advanced form of culture and conceives of them as the bridge between culture and the even higher realm of morality in the *Critique of Judgment*’s

¹⁰ It is passages like these that make the link between the ‘civilizational’ and the labor-related components of Kant’s norm of subjectivity explicit. Whereas the above quote might (in isolation) be read as the promise that even the most disadvantaged may work their way up to true and full subjectivity, Pascoe (2022) has convincingly shown that this is not the case as far as different forms of labor are concerned. To establish that something similar holds for the ‘civilizational’ component of Kant’s norm of subjectivity, is the aim of this essay.

second part, Kant uses the very terms that he chose to describe the goal of aesthetic education in §41:

Beautiful arts and sciences, which by means of a universally communicable pleasure and an elegance of refinement make human beings, if not morally better, at least better mannered for society, very much reduce the tyranny of sensible tendencies, and prepare humans for a sovereignty in which reason alone shall have power (KU, AA 05: 432).

This account of fine art corroborates Kant's idea of autonomous art as interest in disinterestedness and freedom from sensual pleasure. The essential bridging role that the fine arts play at the junction between "what nature makes of the human being" and "what *he* as a free-acting being makes of himself" (Anth, AA 07: 119), i.e., the fine arts' role in preparing humans for becoming moral beings also explains why in §42 aesthetic refinement was already linked to morality or, at least, a propensity towards morality.¹¹

However, §83 not only harks back to the results of Kant's aesthetic theory in the first part of the *Critique of Judgment*. The different forms of culture that are said to bring humans closer to the sciences and arts or, conversely, keep them at bay, also refer to Kant's lecture courses on anthropology. There, he elaborates much more extensively on the different stages of culture to which he alludes rather vaguely when he writes in the *Critique of Judgment*: "But not every kind of culture is adequate for this ultimate end of nature" (KU, AA 05: 431).¹² Most often, Kant differentiates between four stages of culture linked to the four human 'races' (see Krogh, 2022, p. 49ff.). When Kant ascribes different stages of culture to different racialized groups of human beings, he not only refers to skin color but also to character traits. Most explicitly and, at the same time, most appallingly,

¹¹ As already mentioned, The *Critique of Judgment*'s §§41, 42 were not part of the first draft of Kant's transcendental aesthetics but only added in a later stage. The same goes for Kant's remarks on the sublime that is also linked to morality and thus to the ultimate end of nature that lies outside of nature.

¹² Cf. e.g. the following passage from Kant's "Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View," which is almost identical with the passage I quoted from the *Critique of Judgment*: "The human being is destined by his reason to live in a society with human beings and in it to *cultivate* himself, to *civilize* himself, and to *moralize* himself by means of the arts and the sciences" (Anth, AA 07: 325). Krogh (2022) points out the overlaps between Kant's differentiation between cultural stages in his *Critique of Judgment* on the one hand and his pedagogy on the other.

he does so in his lecture course entitled “Menschenkunde.” Here Native Americans are said to “acquire no culture.” Black people are said to “acquire culture but “only a culture of slaves; that is, they allow themselves to be trained.” “Hindus,” on the other hand, “acquire culture in the highest degree, but only in the arts and not in [...] abstract concepts.” Finally, whites are said to reach the highest degree on the scale of civilization, and it is this achievement that then, according to Kant, enables these humans to also strive for the ultimate end that lies beyond nature: morality (V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1187; Krogh 2022, p. 49ff.).¹³ In his private notes, however, Kant continued advocating much bolder exclusions as his infamous *Reflexion zur Anthropologie 1520* (Refl, AA 15: 875–884, esp. 877ff.) reveals. Here, he contends that only the white race will survive, whereas all other so-called races will go extinct.¹⁴

In summary, this amounts to the claim that below the long-discussed mixing of transcendental with empirical presuppositions of aesthetic judgements in the first part of the *Critique of Judgement* as well as below the tension between the book’s two parts, there is a fairly consistent endeavor: the determination of man in the full, civilized sense; a determination that is built upon the exclusion of those whom Charles W. Mills (2017c) dubs ‘subhumans’ or *Untermenschen*.¹⁵ With a sensorium inspired by Mills’s readings of Kant’s moral and political philosophy, the ideology of the exclusion of many humans from *sensus communis* and at the same time from pure aesthetic judgements and, herewith, also from striving towards morality, does not have to be dug up drudgingly. Instead, said ideology is quite openly exposed in the *Critique of Judgement* and inscribes Kant’s subject of civilizing aesthetic experiences in an anthropology that is

¹³ The cross-references between Kant’s account of stages of culture in his lecture courses on anthropology and his remarks on culture in the Third Critique leave no doubt as to the entanglement between the seemingly transcendental approach in the Third Critique and the more empirically oriented lecture courses.

¹⁴ For the overlaps between the four stages of culture in “Menschenkunde” and the “Reflexion #1520” see Larrimore (2010, p. 112f.).

¹⁵ The conclusion of Mills’s much-debated essay “Kant’s *Untermenschen*” is, in the words of one of Mills’s critics, that Kant is either a “inconsistent egalitarian” or a “consistent inequalities” (Kleingeld, 2007, p. 576). Mills’s pointed emphasis which many, among which Kleingeld, considered over-exaggerated needs to be credited for having stimulated the debates to which I referred to in the opening paragraphs of this essay. Moreover, I argue that Mill’s analysis is correct and particularly fruitful to make sense of Kant’s Third Critique. Already in his earlier engagement with the racism that undergirds social contract theories Mills (2022, p. 55) used terms such as “subperson” or “*Untermenschen*” to refer to those whose exclusion makes Western universalism possible, “*Untermenschen*” clearly being a Nazi term.

violently exclusionary in several respects, but above all racist.¹⁶ Noticeably, it is precisely from the cosmopolitan thought experiment of the *sensus communis*, the foundation not only of Kantian aesthetics but also of moral reasoning, that many remain excluded.¹⁷

4. Why Western philosophical aesthetics is at the center of the violent mode of subjectivation that keeps racial capitalism going

Thus, in my reading, Kant's Third Critique is not on a par with the first and the second Kantian Critiques. Much rather than delineating a third realm next to theoretical and practical judgements (which Kant envisioned when he first drafted his critique of aesthetic judgements that then turned out to be only the opening part of the book) the *Critique of Judgment* is about the formation of the (racist, sexist, and also classist) autonomy of the very civilized subject that is needed for knowledge and—even more—for morality. And, as I would add, for the functioning of racial capitalism, when it could no longer hide its racism behind liberal ends.

However, this does not contradict the fact that the first and aesthetic part of the book heavily contributed to the formation of the societal sphere of art and its philosophical theories of aesthetic autonomy, a sphere that is declared by Kant and many of his followers to be completely independent of epistemological and moral concerns (see Kant 2008, §2, p. 26f.).¹⁸ As far as Kantian philosophical aesthetics of autonomy is concerned, Charles Mills's considerations not only sensitize us to the racializing strand in the *Critique of Judgment*'s first part. Against the backdrop of Mills's (see 2017b) reflections, it also becomes clear that Western philosophical aesthetics as a normative theory has been committed to ideal theorizing ever since Kant. For there is a strong tendency in aesthetic theories to define and postulate an ideal of normatively correct aesthetic experience that completely abstracts from the seemingly only empirical problem of accessibility to this realm to

¹⁶ For Kant's sexism, that is equally deeply rooted in Kantian aesthetics as his racism, see Marwah (2013) and Huseyinzadegan and Pascoe (2023).

¹⁷ Arendt (1992, p. 42ff.) is certainly right in emphasizing the moral and political implications of the *sensus communis* that Kant establishes as the eye of a needle through which anybody who wants to become a moral being needs to go. However, Arendt is deaf as to the intersecting exclusions which are part and parcel of Kant's provincial universalism on which I will focus in the next section.

¹⁸ For a contemporary plea for such autonomy see Menke (2013, p. 11).

this very day.¹⁹ In other words, ideal aesthetic theorizing contributed significantly to making the racism of philosophical aesthetics negligible.

The particularly racist exclusivity of the Kantian normative ideal enshrined in philosophical aesthetics has everything to do with this discipline's formation in 18th-century Western Europe (see Gikandi, 2011; Lloyd, 2019; Sonderegger, 2018). This is the time when the colonial conquest had almost been completed, when the transatlantic slave trade reached its peak, and the Western European bourgeoisie had risen to power in the wake of colonial capitalism's practices of dispossession and pillaging. But it was also when the bourgeoisie was confronted with ever more news about and critique of colonial atrocities that were at odds with the bourgeoisie's affirmation of the universality of Enlightenment morality. In my view, it is as a reaction to such abolitionist and anticolonial critique that philosophical aesthetics emerged, and it appeared as an educational enterprise revolving around ideals of civilization. Such aesthetics enabled Enlightenment thinkers like Kant to find (morally seemingly valid) arguments to legitimize the exclusion of large parts of humanity from true humanity. Thinly disguised skin color racism took on the form of a theory of aesthetic education that was and is obviously more digestible than openly racist thinking.²⁰

In other words, aesthetics as the discipline of civilizing experiences made it possible to declare exclusions from universality part and parcel of Enlightenment universality and to legitimize a restricted 'equality among equals.'²¹ Moreover, Enlightenment aesthetics, particularly its Kantian variant, forged a theory of civilizing aesthetic education that favors a form of individual and detached contemplation tailored to materially well-secured

¹⁹ See for instance Rancière's (2004) harsh critique of Bourdieu's analyses of the exclusions and discriminations that the art field reproduces and reinforces to this day.

²⁰ Although I deem it important to hold Kant accountable for the racism that he helped to make acceptable, such blame runs the risk of belittling racism as a societal structure that cannot be reduced to the viscious beliefs of one or several individuals. This is why Lu-Adler's engagement with Kant's powerful position as a university professor and public intellectual is of utmost importance. However, it appears similarly important to me to emphasize that Kant could have been more attentive to his powerful position within the network of influencers of his day and that, as far as racist views are concerned, there were alternative voices in his days to which he was completely deaf. In both respects Kant's former student Johan Gottfried Herder is a good case in point. Herder not only questioned some of Kant's racist views. Moreover, Kant's engagement with Herder makes it more than clear that Kant was constantly busy with his career and utterly concerned about his leading role as an intellectual (see Zammito, 1992, particularly pp. 1–44). As for Kant's unwillingness to listen to voices against the racism of his day see, e.g., Lu-Adler (2022).

²¹ This is the wording of Lucious Outlaw quoted by Mills (2022, p. 56).

bourgeois subjects (see Sonderegger, 2020). And, what is more, the long-lasting success of such aesthetic subjectivity is not yet over. Even such progressive aestheticians as Theodor W. Adorno or Jacques Rancière adhere to a solitary subject of aesthetic distance as both the idealizing norm of their aesthetic theories and, simultaneously, the epitome of emancipation.²²

5. How to move beyond the autonomous, detached, and disinterested bourgeois subject and its *sensus communis*

Despite all his warnings against hopes that Kant can easily be sanitized and grave doubts as to whether a truly universalist Kantianism should still be called Kantianism, even Mills is eventually intent to take a reformed Kantian liberalism to its next and truly emancipatory level. It is in this vein that in his last book *Black Rights / White Wrongs* Mills (2017d) sets out to conceptualize what he calls a 'Black Radical Kantianism.'²³ He does so in full awareness that radically transformed Kantianism is maybe no Kantianism at all, which might explain the scare quotes in the title of his seminal essay.²⁴

Mills appears to be particularly optimistic as to the possibility of sanitizing Kantian universalism if such transformation is combined with reparations that right past and present wrongs; and he repudiates misgivings about Kant's theory of liberal personhood that is based on aesthetic training. On ever new occasions Mills engages with critics of Kant's idea of the autonomous, liberal subject, that is detached from everything but its faculties, only to then, again and again, resolve all doubt. However, I find that Mills's respective arguments do not engage exhaustively enough with possible alternatives to liberal personhood; much rather, the alternatives that

²² Defenders of Adorno and/or Rancière might make the objection that both philosophers of art emphasize the destabilization of fixed subject positions by way of aesthetic experiences. While this is certainly true, I would retort that such destabilization serves the purpose of strengthening the subject's autonomy in its confrontation with all kinds of overwhelming influences from outside. I have engaged with this problem in Sonderegger (2024).

²³ See also the last footnote (no. 46) of the re-printed version of "Kant's *Untermenschen*" in *Black Rights / White Wrongs* (Mills, 2017c, p. 230): "I should clarify that [...] my criticism of Kant is not at all meant to rule out a revisionist anti-racist appropriation of his thought. On the contrary, in the epilogue of this book I make a case for a 'black radical Kantianism,' which is intended to retrieve and radicalize Kant's insights on personhood in the context of white supremacy." For an extended version of Mills's thoughts on Black Radical Kantianism, see Mills (2020).

²⁴ For the question as to whether Mills's Black Radical Kantianism should still be called Kantianism, see also Huseyinadzegan (2022).

he discusses are straw man alternatives. On the one hand Mills emphasizes that defenders of liberal personhood do not need to completely exclude the support of other humans that is indeed needed to reach liberal autonomy. On the other, Mills contends that substituting the liberal subject by communitarian collectives is not a solution either as collectives have turned out to be no less racist and oppressive than individual subjects (2017a, p. 70; Pateman and Mills, 2007, p. 102).

On a few occasions, Mills (Pateman and Mills, 2007, p. 246) seems to resort to a third and purely pragmatic argument in the defense of the liberal subject. As the whole world is ruled by liberal, racial capitalism, or so Mills appears to argue, the language of liberal autonomy is what particularly those in power are used to and what they understand; Mills even seems to imply that it is the only language that people in powerful positions understand. Moreover, it is very unlikely that they will ever learn a new language and alternative ways of subjectivation. Therefore, or so Mills implies, let's make the most out of the ideas that are already around. But why should the profiteers of racial capitalist liberalism listen to Mills's arguments after not having shown any interest in substantial changes for more than 500 years? And, to come back to Mills's other arguments in favor of liberal personhood, is there really nothing but atomistic subjects, on the one hand, and totalitarian collectives on the other? And finally, does Mills's concession that liberal subjects need the support of others to become autonomous, take human dependency and the social ontology such dependency implies seriously enough? Is the relation with others rather something that can be thrown away like the Wittgensteinian ladder once liberal subjects have become fully autonomous?

Although I do not find Mills's defense of liberal personhood and its seemingly emancipatory intentions convincing, it is an illuminating demonstration of the ongoing success of and widespread desire for rescuing liberal subjectivity as it was contrived by Enlightenment thinkers and particularly in Kant's aesthetic theory. The fact that one of the harshest and to my mind most convincing critics of the racial implications of Kant's account of personhood and its concomitant racialized cosmopolitanism ultimately sticks to a supposedly sanitized version of Kantian personhood is more than remarkable. Moreover, such investment in the sanitation of Kant testifies to the hegemony of affective and habitual attachments to the liberal

social ontology despite the engagement with arguments that speak against such ontology. Even more remarkable, however, might be, that Mills remains troubled by the Kantian subject as his ongoing engagement with feminist critics of discrete, liberal personhood makes entirely clear. One almost gets the impression that Mills could not entirely convince himself of his own belief in the possibility of sanitizing Kant. I do not conceive of such hesitancy as contradiction but rather as a twisted form of open-mindedness even sensitiveness—an open struggle with affective and habitual attachments that appear to be stronger than arguments. Therefore, I want to take Mills's struggles with the—particularly feminist—critique of liberal personhood more seriously and further than Mills took them.

Particularly the closing part of his article on “Kant's *Untermenschen*,” where Mills engages with Susan Moller Okin (Mills, 2017c, p. 111f.),²⁵ is a good starting point to go beyond Kantian personhood and the biased universalism of *sensus communis* that is such personhood's complement. Here Mills seems to firstly accept Susan Moller Okin's argument that a mere gender-neutral account of personhood is not sufficient. Much rather, he writes, “the originally sexist theory's basic conceptual apparatus, assumptions and pronouncements” needs to be completely reconsidered “if a case can be made that a tacitly masculinist experience has grounded their formation” (2017c, p. 111f.). Mills then suggests that it is analogously insufficient to make Kantian personhood race neutral. Instead, Mills proposes that Kant's understanding of civilized personhood, and its concomitant universalism are so closely linked to ideas like ‘inclination’ or ‘savagery’ as their opposites²⁶ that unbiased personhood and un-assimilationist understandings of *sensus communis* respectively universalism are no longer possible. To put it differently, there is no civilization without so-called savagery as its necessary opposite, no personhood without the disdain for so-called inclination (Mills, 2017c, p. 112). Or, as Mills writes in another essay:

²⁵ For a more defensive account of liberal subjecthood see Mills's engagement with Carole Pateman's feminist critique in their *Contract & Domination* (Pateman and Mills, 2007). However, it is not only feminist critics of liberal personhood, with whom Mills engages in this book rather defensively but also post- and decolonial critics. See, e.g., Mills's rejection of Lewis R. Gordon and Anthony Bogues's critique of Mills's liberalism (Pateman and Mills, 2007, p. 246f.) as well as his engagement with critics from the Caribbean (Mills, 1998b).

²⁶ Not for nothing both the concept of inclination and the concept of savagery take center stage in Kant's aesthetic theory.

But the problem, at least in the West, is that historically this kind of universalism has usually turned out to be a white particularism in disguise, in that it is really the ‘other’ ethnic/racial groups [...] who have to give up their ethnicity/race and assimilate to the majority population. What we really need to strive for is a rainbowed rather than an abstract – in effect a white – universalism (1998a, p. 92).

But to be honest, Mills does not plainly state the impossibility of the discrete liberal subject and its civilizing *sensus communis* but rather suggest the necessity of an alternative ontology by way of unanswered questions like: “How is cosmopolitanism to be realized on a globe shaped by hundreds of years of European expansionism?” (2017c, p. 112). Moreover, all his rather subversive questions do not prevent Mills from returning to “a Kantianism radically transformed by the challenge of addressing the moral demands of the sub-person population” (2017c, p. 112).

In my view, Mills’s position on the liberal sovereign subject is contradictory in several ways. Not only is there no evidence that might suggest that liberal rulers will be more open to the unfulfilled promises of their universalist Sunday speeches in the future than they were in the past so that it does not make much sense to strategically address them in a language, that they seemingly understand; apart from the fact that authoritarian tendencies in many places have long since left liberalism and its egalitarian promises behind. Furthermore, Mills’s own reflections in his exchanges with feminist theorists strongly suggest that liberal subjecthood is a dead end. Therefore, I see no reason not to take this diagnosis more seriously than Mills himself is prepared to do.

To take that very step beyond Kantian personhood, that Mills eventually is not willing to take, we need to return to (Kantian) aesthetics once more with which Mills, as said, never engaged. An in-debt engagement with Kant’s aesthetic theory is indispensable if we want to understand the procedures and promises by which the racialized, and sexualized discrete, liberal subject was and still is forged.²⁷ On one hand, these procedures ensure that the liberal subject starts to desire disinterestedness, autonomy as well as a universalist gaze from nowhere that abstracts from everything but such subject’s faculties of reason and understanding; on the other hand, said

²⁷ A similar claim about the centrality of aesthetics regarding the formation of the liberal subject, that is indispensable for racial capitalism, can be found in Chuh (2019).

procedures ensure that so-called persons develop a disdain for inclination no less than for the dependency on others and the world around them. In other words, and in high contrast to Kant's claims such subjectivation towards self-rule is a deeply emotional enterprise, an enterprise to teach humans to desire the subjectivity of white male supremacy.

Even if it were possible to conceive of a Kantian universalism that does not depend on racialized others and if additionally one fine day all humans were given access to the aesthetically induced procedure of *sensus communis* both the *sensus communis* and the cosmopolitanism that is said to result from it remained provincial;²⁸ tied to a very specific norm of personhood to which everybody would have to assimilate—particularly the peripheralized, marginalized and racialized of the world. In other words, Kant is wrong in claiming that the *sensus communis* is above any empirical common sense. Much rather the favored *sensus communis* is the very particular common sense of that group of humans to which Kant himself belonged and that was forged towards the end of the 18th century by white, male *hommes des lettres*—in silent or not so silent support of the politics of racial capitalism. Consequently, the only emancipation Kant allows for is assimilation to a very particular form of universalism.

However, once we start to fathom the violence and persistence of the cruel educational project that aesthetics in the wake of Kant is, we also get hints as to how it could be dismantled by way of aesthetics.²⁹ In other words, focusing on the racial violence of Western aesthetics as it was inaugurated by Kant implicitly also guides us to denigrated and oppressed alternatives that have existed below and above hegemonic aesthetic practices—in the days of Kant and to this very day. They not only teach Kantians like me ways of relating to others beyond the provincial restrictions of a *sensus communis* that only provides equality amongst a

²⁸ Whereas Krogh (2022) is of the opinion that Kant leaves open as to whether this is possible, Huzeyinzadegan and Pascoe (2023), in my view, provide convincing arguments that a Kantian universalism cannot overcome the exclusions produced by it. Moreover, they make it very clear, that we and our contemporaries, particularly we Westernized subjects, are still in the grip of such violent universalism and, therefore, should not assume that we can easily leave it behind. Instead of just blaming Kant, they convincingly argue that we need to refrain from “projects that seek to fix or ‘upgrade’ (rather than reject) Kantian political thought” (Huzeyinzadegan and Pascoe, 2023, p. 49). Important as their denial of quick fixes may be, we should not lose sight of the manifold alternatives that have been kept alive and invented again and again by those who were and remain excluded from Kantian personhood and cosmopolitanism. It is to these alternatives that I will turn in the remainder of this essay.

²⁹ I share this conviction with Chuh (2019).

restricted group of liberal equals. Moreover, if taken seriously stifled aesthetic practices and traditions have the potential to teach persons who long for discrete autonomy and the concomitant liberal politics that such politics is based on an aesthetics; an aesthetics, that allows for some sensual experiences to be truly aesthetic and, at the same time, declares others to not be disinterested or pure enough but rather ‘primitive’ or worse.

In my view, we should not shy away from moving beyond liberal Kantian assimilationism out of fear of relativism but rather elaborate on what Mills once dubbed rainbow universalism but did not work out more concretely. However, there is much to learn in this regard from Donna Haraway (1988, 2016) and many other feminist scholars who have demonstrated that only rich accounts of the social location from and with which we search for knowledge ensures truth. Feminist epistemology has already worked out that and how situated knowledge production works and anthropologist like e.g. Marilyn Strathern (2004) or Marisol de la Cadena (2015) have engaged with social and political ontologies that allow for ethically responsible partial connections among humans and more than humans across differences. Philosophical aesthetics, particularly Western philosophical aesthetics, on the other hand, is only beginning to think in such rainbow-like direction although inspiring practices have always been there. Particularly amongst those who had been deemed unfit for aesthetic education or who have been relegated to the eternal “waiting room of history” (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 8), or the “vestibular” (Spillers, 1987, p. 67). They have, to use Fred Moten’s wording, refused what was refused to them with good reasons:³⁰ promises of emancipation after everlasting learning processes, disinterested aesthetic practices, discrete liberal personhood, and a universalism from nowhere.

It is against this backdrop that Fred Moten has worked since many years on what he calls ‘social aesthetics,’ ‘aesthetics of social life,’ ‘ensemble,’ or simply ‘performance.’³¹ All these concepts are invitations to think beyond autonomously isolated aesthetic practices and beyond the no

³⁰ “I think of a phrase I often use – and I always think of it in relation to Fannie Lou Hamer, because it’s just me giving a theoretical spin on a formulation she made in practice: to refuse that which has been refused to you [...]. And that doesn’t mean that what’s at stake is some kind of blind, happy, celebratory attitude toward all the beautiful stuff that we’ve made under constraint. I love all the beautiful stuff we’ve made under constraint but I’m pretty sure I would love all the beautiful stuff we’d make out from under constraint better” (Moten and Hartman, 2018).

³¹ Moten (see esp. 2018) develops this understanding of aesthetics in direct confrontation with Kant.

less isolated liberal subjects in favour of the performative establishment of connections, especially amongst those who have resisted their exclusion, even their complete erasure as modern subjects. What is more, they have resisted, according to Moten, by ‘refusing what was refused to them,’ namely autonomous subjectivity. Therefore, Moten’s aesthetics of sociality is about the creation or, rather, the further development of ensembles of different practices of the commons whereby the term ‘aesthetic’ refers to modes of making connections and constellations and no longer to the production of products like works, scenes, installations, or spaces. When Moten theorizes and, at the same time, practices such making of connections that hold what he calls soloists together and that are open for anyone who wants to join them, he often uses musical terms, particularly terms related to jazz. However, according to Moten, jazz is but one of the manyfold manifestations of the aesthetics of sociality, which is primarily a certain form of being together beyond both individual and collective identity; a form of togetherness that excludes no one and leaves room for singularities in repetition; singularities that Moten dubs soloists. When Moten establishes such sociality as the basis of all artistic practices he is referring among others to comments made by jazz pianist and composer Cecil Taylor in a conversation about Blackness with fellow musician Albert Ammons and the painters Piet Mondrian and Ad Reinhard, in which Taylor contends:

Western art is involved [...] with one representation of one [...] aesthetic; and I’m saying that I must be aware of that, in what that has meant to black men or to the Indians. I have to be aware of the social dynamics of my society in order to function. I don’t only have a responsibility to myself, I have a responsibility to my community (Moten, 2008, p. 197).

However, it is important to note that practices of an aesthetics of sociality can not only be found in the Black Radical Tradition, from which Moten takes inspirations, but also, for example, at the beginning of the 20th century in post-revolutionary Russia. Walter Benjamin’s engagement with Sergei Tretyakov in “The Author as Producer” (1998) exemplifies this no less than e.g. Arvatov’s *Art and Production* (2017) that reconstructs the fundamental change of artistic practices in Europe during the years when capitalism took hold only to sketch, in the very last chapter, an alternative to

the capitalist-liberal understanding of artistic practices tied to a lonely easel art artist and equally discrete recipients.

The radical change that all approaches just mentioned so ardently desired must be clearly distinguished from the simple merging of art and life or art and politics, as is often proclaimed in avant-garde theories but also in many variants of pragmatist aesthetics of the everyday. For it is not a matter of simply allowing aesthetic practices to spill over into an existing life or society. Rather, it is about transforming the colonial-capitalist society and its subjects; and, at the same time, it is about creating a sociality beyond the divisions of societies into autonomous spheres, which are perceived as modern, and beyond the autonomous subjects of civilisation.

These are just a few glimpses into aesthetic theories and practices that have (long)³² resisted the power of Western aesthetics and deserve being revisited particularly in times when it becomes more than obvious what catastrophic effect liberal, civilized personhood has on the human and more than human world.

6. Social beauty without soap. A view from the past

Let me conclude with at least one very concrete aesthetic practice of sociality. It is the aesthetic practice with which Paul C. Taylor opens his book *Black is Beautiful. A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics*. The quote I cite from Taylor is about an aesthetics that celebrates being-with-others and being-dependent-on-others as insurgent beauty—an aesthetics of beautiful protest under the most violent conditions. What I cite from Taylor is a quotation from Sidney Mintz and Richard Price's study of the beginning of African American culture; whereby Mintz and Price in turn quote the account of an eyewitness. The report of the eyewitness cited by Taylor from Mintz and Price dates from 1790, the year in which Kant's *Critique of Judgment* was published.³³ This witness reports on the arrival of a ship with enslaved people on board and bears witness to a self-empowering aesthetic practice that dwarfs autonomy, aesthetic and otherwise.

³² For an aesthetics that has resisted colonial capitalism since its onslaught see, e.g., Ayca (2023). Ayca delineates a sociality beyond humans and a rejection of Western aesthetics in light of which such mutuality has been relegated into the realm of the not-yet-civilized.

³³ For contemporary continuations of such aesthetic practices see Imayna Caceres and Ruth Sonderegger (forthcoming).

These new African Americans surprise you in only one respect. They have stars in their hair. Not real stars, of course. The new arrivals have had their heads shaved, leaving patches of hair shaped like stars and half-moons. Just as you begin to wonder how the ship's crew settled in thus way of torturing their captives or entertaining themselves, you receive a second surprise. Not far from where you are standing, a man who seems to be the ship's captain is speaking with a man who seems to have some financial interest in the ship's cargo. The capitalist asks the captain why he cut the N*s' hair like that, and the captain disclaims all responsibility. 'They did it themselves,' he says, 'the one to the other, by the help of a broken bottle and without soap (Taylor, 2016, p. 1).³⁴

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³⁴ The original quote includes the N-word.

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