

Racial Imagination, Epistemic Dependence, and Epistemic Oppression: A Study of Kant's Construction of Non-Whites as Not-Knowers

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Abstract

In Kant's view, one needs a community of epistemic peers to think well or think at all. This epistemic dependence takes two basic forms. It is either dependence on others' testimonies or dependence on others' rational judgments. Distinguishing the 'scholar' and the 'commoner,' Kant depicts his *bona fide* knower as a scholar who selects his epistemic peers judiciously, seeking credible testimonies and worthwhile rational judgments only from other scholars, that is, only from those who satisfy a stringent scholarship condition. I study this account of epistemic dependence in connection with Kant's characterizations of non-whites as lacking requisite motives or cognitive capacities to be recognized as worthy epistemic peers. I utilize Kristie Dotson's three-tiered framework of 'epistemic oppression' to shed light on the depth and complexity of the ongoing challenges posed by this construction of non-whites as not-knowers. My analysis ends with a reflection on the state of mainstream Kant scholarship, followed by a rallying call to those who can see beyond a false dichotomy between 'Kant scholars' and 'Kant's critics' and be open to the possibility of what I call 'critical Kant scholarship.'

Keywords: epistemic dependence, epistemic community, scholarship condition, racial imagination, epistemic oppression.

Imaginación racial, dependencia epistémica y opresión epistémica: Un estudio de la construcción kantiana de los no blancos como no-conocedores

Resumen

Según Kant, uno necesita una comunidad de pares epistémicos para pensar bien o, incluso, para simplemente pensar. Esta dependencia epistémica adopta dos formas básicas: o bien es dependencia de los testimonios de otros, o bien es dependencia de los juicios racionales de otros. Al distinguir entre el 'erudito' y el 'común', Kant presenta a su conocedor genuino como un erudito que selecciona a sus pares epistémicos de manera juiciosa, buscando testimonios creíbles y juicios racionales

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valiosos únicamente de otros eruditos, es decir, solo de quienes cumplen con una estricta condición de erudición. Estudio este planteamiento de la dependencia epistémica en relación con las caracterizaciones kantianas de los no blancos como carentes de los motivos o de las capacidades cognitivas necesarias para ser reconocidos como pares epistémicos dignos. Para ello, recurro al marco tripartito de Kristie Dotson sobre la ‘opresión epistémica’, a fin de arrojar luz sobre la profundidad y complejidad de los desafíos actuales planteados por esta construcción de los no blancos como no-conocedores. Mi análisis concluye con una reflexión sobre el estado de los estudios kantianos en la corriente principal, seguida de un llamamiento a quienes puedan ir más allá de la falsa dicotomía entre ‘especialistas en Kant’ y ‘críticos de Kant’ y estar abiertos a la posibilidad de lo que denomino una ‘crítica kantiana desde dentro’.

Palabras clave: dependencia epistémica, comunidad epistémica, condición de erudición, imaginación racial, opresión epistémica.

1. Introduction

Kant claims that daring to use one’s “*own* understanding” is “the motto of Enlightenment” (WA, AA 08: 35).² He treats “to think for oneself” as one of the “maxims” or “unalterable commands” for all thinkers (Anth, AA 07: 228). Some readers interpret such claims as expressions of a rugged epistemic individualism that is antithetical to all forms of epistemic dependence (Hardwig, 1985, p. 340). Kant himself would beg to differ. In his view, one *needs* a community of epistemic peers to think well or think at all. This epistemic dependence takes two basic forms: dependence on others’ testimonies (narrowly understood as assertions of facts) and dependence on others’ rational judgments. Distinguishing the scholar (*der Gelehrte*) and the commoner (*der gemeine Mann*), Kant envisions his *bona fide* knower as a scholar who selects his epistemic peers judiciously, seeking

² 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). 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 of Kant’s texts are my own.

credible testimonies and worthwhile rational judgments only from other scholars. I will refer to this as Kant's 'scholarship condition.'

After explicating these points in Section 2, I will examine how Kant depicts various non-white 'races' in epistemically relevant terms: each race emerges as a special sort of *not*-knower by the standards implicit in the scholarship condition (Section 3). I will then use Kristie Dotson's notion of a three-tiered "epistemic oppression" to reveal the depth and complexity of challenges posed by the construction of non-whites as not-knowers (Section 4). Since this analysis ends with a reflection on the state of mainstream Kant scholarship, I will conclude with a rallying call to those who can see beyond a false dichotomy between 'Kant scholars' and 'Kant's critics' and be open to the possibility of a critical Kant scholarship (Section 5).

2. Kant on Epistemic Dependence and How to Choose One's Epistemic Peers

To appreciate the nature and significance of each form of epistemic dependence mentioned above, let us begin with Kant's distinction between historical knowledge (cognition), of which testimony is a paradigmatic example, and rational knowledge (cognition).³ The distinction is either subjective or objective. Only the latter is relevant here: objectively historical knowledge is possible only based on experience (either one's own or someone else's), as in history and geography; objectively rational knowledge is possible only as "cognition *ex principiis*, which has been drawn from grounds *a priori*," as in philosophy and mathematics (V-Lo/Wiener, AA 24: 797, 830–831; see V-Lo/Blomberg, AA 24: 20, 99–100; Log, AA 09: 22; KrV, A835–837/B863–865).

Lacking either historical or rational knowledge results in ignorance or cognitive 'poverty.' Lacking historical knowledge—such as the ancients not knowing "the existence of the new world"—is *material* ignorance; lacking rational knowledge regarding the "grounds" of things—either what these grounds are or how something follows from them—is *formal* ignorance (V-Lo/Blomberg, AA 24: 66; see Log, AA 09: 44). Kant argues for extending knowledge on both fronts. To begin with, one needs to grow historical knowledge because this "must lay the ground for all rational

³ I use 'cognition' and 'knowledge' interchangeably in this paper.

cognition.” Kant therefore rebukes “the brooder who shuts himself up in his room and wants to attain much rational cognition”: such a person “will not get far if he has not first acquired historical cognition through experience from books, or from contact, from association with other people” (V-Lo/Blomberg, AA 24: 49, modified translation).

These remarks point to one form of epistemic dependence: we depend on others’ testimony (*Zeugnis*; *Erzählung*) or reports (*Nachrichten*) about experiences that we cannot obtain in person. As embodied epistemic agents, the extent to which we can directly experience the world is limited. We must therefore “extend our knowledge through the testimony of others,” such as “testimony concerning foreign and remote countries, as if we had lived there ourselves” (PG, AA 09: 159; see Log, AA 09: 77–78; V-Lo/Blomberg, AA 24: 245; V-Lo/Wiener, AA 24: 870). While trusting others’ testimony no doubt carries “many risks,” it is no riskier than trusting one’s own experience: the latter is susceptible to deception as much as the former is (V-Lo/Wiener, AA 24: 896). One must have the humility to know that someone else may be better equipped to make more accurate and thorough observations in many cases. If I know, for example, that another observer is “an attentive man, and that I am probably overlooking something in the matter,” then “I must not trust my observations as much as” his (V-Lo/Wiener, AA 24: 891).

The suggestion that being an attentive observer can make someone a more trustworthy witness (*Zeuge*) or testimony-giver is worth highlighting. It reflects a view on when to trust someone else’s testimony: one must have reasons to think that this person is a *credible* witness. Kant distinguishes “seeing belief” and “blind belief” in others’ testimony: the former “leads to truth” because it “is combined with examination of the witness and rests on this”; the latter is “the path toward error, thus harmful,” because it “accepts testimony without examination or investigation of its credibility” (V-Lo/Blomberg, AA 24: 249). If I depend on others’ reports about what “I cannot find out by myself,” I must ensure that such reports “come from persons who have such prestige with us that we believe them” (V-Lo/Wiener, AA 24: 870; see Log, AA 09: 77–78). Only the testimony of a witness who is irreproachable (*unverwerflich*)—on account of possessing

“*authenticity* (competence) and *integrity*”⁴—can be accepted “with the same certainty as if we had attained it through *facts* of our own experience” (Log, AA 09: 72n.).

To be more specific, a credible witness must have “logical” (cognitive) and moral qualifications. Logically, the subject must have i) the capacity “to obtain an experience,” which presupposes a capacity for “rational reflection,” ii) the capacity “to preserve faithfully the experience obtained [,] or have a good memory,” and iii) the capacity “to declare the experience obtained, to expound it, and to acquaint everyone with it.” Morally, the subject must have the “mental constitution to represent faithfully, not otherwise, and to declare the experiences as they were obtained by him” (V-Lo/Blomberg, AA 24: 244). Whoever “publishes a false report,” Kant argues, thereby “offends against mankind” because spatiotemporally limited humans depend on others’ truthful testimonies to expand their cognitive horizons.

Besides speculation, I have only two ways of enlarging my cognitions: by experience, and by testimony. But now since I cannot experience everything myself, if others’ testimonies were to be false reports, the thirst for knowledge could not be satisfied. [...] once we declare that we are telling the other our thoughts and fail to do it, we have broken the *pactum* and acted against the right of humanity (V-Mo/Collins, AA 27: 447–448, modified translation).

In Kant’s view, any breach of an implicit pact with others to give truthful testimony can make one irrevocably untrustworthy. Truth-telling is not just a duty of self-respect or a duty that one owes to others.⁵ It also has consequences for one’s standing in an epistemic community: if one lies, then one “loses all credibility” in the eye of another—so much so that, for the society (*Gesellschaft*), one virtually becomes “a mute” (*Stummer*) in all his narrations (V-Mo/Vigil, AA 27: 605).

Kant recognizes that it is not feasible to determine the credibility of every potential witness based on direct knowledge of their logical or moral

⁴ Kant may be using the legal concepts of authenticity (*Authenticität*) and integrity (*Integrität*). This makes sense given the legal root of his notion of witness (Lu-Adler, 2022, p. 11).

⁵ Kant often uses testimony to illustrate the duty of truth-telling. Besides the passages cited here, see V-Mo/Vigil, AA 27: 487, 491, 506–507.

qualities. He resorts to such *heuristics* as a person's social standing. He holds that the learned person or scholar "has far more credibility" than the commoner in cognitions like history and geography, which "always presuppose the experiences of others." Someone's standing as a scholar indicates not only that he has the cognitive wherewithal to give accurate and truthful reports but also that, regardless of his moral character, he has the social stakes—an "honor" to lose—to want to tell the truth (V-Lo/Blomberg, AA 24: 246). By contrast, the commoner is easily "distracted" and "overcome by fear" and other emotions that can distort experience; he is less attentive and more likely to overlook things; and he cannot narrate his experience with precision. This characterization resonates with the three logical qualities listed above, qualities one must have to be *recognized as competent*. Besides, the commoner is presumed to lack *integrity*, being cavalier about lies and "too crude to place great value on the truth." The scholar, by contrast, is expected to be truthful at least from social-reputational pressure if not from a sense of moral duty. In modern times, Kant claims, such is the case when "everyone had to be quite exact in his reports, and if someone deviated from the truth only a bit in his writings, he was ridiculed and dishonored." In such a social context, "historical belief carries with it astonishing credibility because the witness must have so many properties in order to speak the truth." Accordingly, history and geography can be securely "grounded on the testimony of other men"—on that of other *learned* men to be exact (V-Lo/Wiener, AA 24: 898–899).

Kant will reach a similar conclusion about the scholar vis-à-vis the commoner in his account of the other form of epistemic dependence, namely, dependence on others' rational judgments. This account is implicit in his arguments for the public use of reason, defined as the use that one makes of reason "*as a scholar* before the entire public of the *world of readers*" (WA, AA 08: 36; see SF, AA 07: 18–20). Kant defends this use of reason from a conception of humans as finite epistemic agents: "Men have a natural inclination to communicate to others the judgments that their understanding has made," and this communication is "the only[,] most certain means to test one's cognitions properly [...] and to verify them"; therefore, one must enjoy "the right to think without constraint and to bring one's thoughts to light"; whoever takes away this right thereby "takes away from men the one true means they still possess forever uncovering, becoming aware of, and correcting the frequent deception of their own

understanding and its false steps” (V-Lo/Blomberg, AA 24: 150–151; see V-Lo/Wiener, AA 24: 874–875).

Having complete freedom to *publicize* one’s thoughts is so fundamental that the freedom to *think* would amount to little without it. As Kant puts it, the “external power which wrenches away people’s freedom publicly to *communicate* their thoughts also takes from them the freedom to *think*.” After all, the ability to “think as it were in community with others to whom we *communicate* our thoughts, and who communicate theirs with us” is the *only* way by which “we can devise means of overcoming all the evils of our condition” (WDO, AA 08: 814). To that extent, free public use of reason or “freedom of the pen” is “the sole palladium of the people’s rights” (TP, AA 08: 304; see Anth, AA 07: 128–129). In other words, “all improvement of which our condition is capable must come from this” freedom, on account of which it is an “original” right that “must not be curtailed” (KrV, A752/B780; see SF, AA 07: 27–29).

This defense of public reason suggests that, for Kant, using one’s *own* reason is not the same as thinking *alone*. On the contrary, one must use one’s reason “socially” (*gemeinschaftlich*) or in community with others; whoever treats the judgments of others as “utterly dispensable in the use of his own reason” is a conceited “logical egoist”; this, as a way of thinking (*Denkungsart*), is not only “ridiculous” but also “blameworthy” because it is “most contrary to real humanity” (V-Lo/Blomberg, AA 24: 151; see V-Lo/Dohna, AA 24: 740; V-Lo/Wiener, AA 24: 873–874; Log, AA 09: 80; Anth, AA 07: 128–129). Egoistic thinking goes against “human reason’s particular and excellent disposition to communicate.” Moreover, “if one judges alone [...] then one is never really certain whether the judgment does not spring from a certain delusion.” The only remedy against such delusional thinking is to make an “experiment” and check “whether what we think is universal, whether others accept it, or whether it is not in agreement with reason.” Therefore, whoever thinks egoistically has relinquished “the sure touchstone of the understanding” (V-Lo/Blomberg, AA 24: 178). In short, thinking communally with other human beings is not only natural and beneficial. One is also called (*berufen*) to it (V-Lo/Blomberg, AA 24: 151; WA, AA 08: 38).

Now let us try to imagine what it is like to *communicate under concrete social conditions*. Presumably, one does not communicate one’s

thoughts to others indiscriminately. Rather, one is selective about one's audience: these are people who one *recognizes* as epistemic equals, as agents capable of understanding and meaningfully responding to one's judgments by a shared set of rules and standards besides a shared language (Lu-Adler, 2024). Just as Kant taught that one should only accept the testimony of a presumptively competent and trustworthy witness, so would he advise that one only value feedback from epistemic equals when it comes to rational judgments. In particular, to ascertain one's judgments as "universally valid," one must seek the agreement of "others who can have science" about them. These must be agents who can, at the very least, "understand the judgment of others and not misinterpret it" (V-Lo/Blomberg, AA 24: 95). This means that they must have the intellectual wherewithal—besides a good will—to take up what one communicates, interpret it correctly, and respond constructively. After all, unlike an act of mere *expression*, which others may tolerate simply by "doing nothing," the kind of communication Kant advocates "requires some sort of recognition or uptake by others" to be effective (O'Neill, 1986, pp. 526–527).

The Kantian thinker does not seek meaningful uptake by just any human being. When Kant writes that public reason addresses "the public in the strict sense, that is, the world," (WA, AA 08: 38), he is not referring to "an *unrestricted plurality*, the world at large" (O'Neill, 2011, p. 147). Rather, he emphatically restricts the audience to "the world of readers" (WA, AA 08: 37). This restriction is implicit in "the scholarship condition" built into Kant's defense of public reason (McQuillan, 2018). What is being defended is the use of reason someone makes "as a scholar, who by his writings speaks to the public in the strict sense" (WA, AA 08: 38). Written communications are intelligible only to a *reading* public—not just a literate public but a public that, as I noted above, has the intellectual wherewithal to interpret and respond appropriately to the writings of a "scholar." After all, the relevant notion of scholarship requires an ability to think by universal rules of reason, which must, in turn, be cognized *a priori* and *in abstracto* (McQuillan, 2018, p. 61). This explains why Kant advises that one seek agreement of "those who can have science" about what is communicated (V-Lo/Blomberg, AA 24: 95). To have "science" (*Wissenschaft* or *scientia*) about something is to be able to "prove its conclusion strictly *a priori* from secure principles" (KrV, Bxxxv). Given Kant's scholar-commoner dichotomy, it follows that the agent who purportedly has a calling and a

right to publicize his reasoned judgments is, strictly speaking, a scholar addressing other *scholars* who are presumptively capable of having as much “insight” (*einsieht*) into what is communicated as he does (V-Lo/Blomberg, AA 24: 96).⁶

So, Kant’s interdependent community of epistemic agents turns out to be a narrow circle of people who *recognize* one another as competent and trustworthy knowers. For reasons that will become clear in the remainder of this paper, I call these ‘dominant knowers.’ Besides distinguishing scholars and commoners, Kant makes various moves to exclude entire categories of people, based on their perceived gender or race, from being recognized by dominant knowers as equally capable epistemic agents. Take women, for instance. While a woman may have “just as much understanding as the male,” hers is supposed to be “only [...] a beautiful understanding” (whereas the man’s is a deep and sublime one). “Even if a woman could get very far” with intellectual practices such as “deep reflection and a long drawn out consideration,” Kant claims, these “destroy the merits that are proper to her sex, and [...] weaken the charms using which she exercises her great power over the opposite sex.” Someone like Émilie du Châtelet, a brilliant philosopher of science, who “conducts thorough disputations about mechanics” is at best regarded as “an object of a cold admiration”—due to the “rarity” of her sort—and at worst ridiculed as a woman who “might as well also wear a beard” to “better express the mien of depth for which they strive” (BGSE, AA 02: 229–230). Thus, if women are not intellectually inferior by nature, they are to be *inferiorized* through socialization. A woman, raised according to Kant’s gendered theory of education, would be treated as if she were a creature incapable of reasoning from principles and thus incapable of rational cognition.⁷ She is not one to have ‘science’ about or ‘insight’ into matters of reason. Accordingly, Kant’s scholarly knowers would not seek her judgments on such matters; they might not even trust her

⁶ Insight (*Einsicht*) as Kant understands it is rather demanding. It comes with a cognition of the *necessity* of the ground of something; it must therefore be a cognition *a priori* following certain *universal* principles (V-Lo/Blomberg, AA 24: 133–136; V-Lo/Dohna, 730–731; V-Lo/Wiener, AA 24: 846).

⁷ In the *Anthropology Friedländer* (1775–1776), the section “On education” (V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 722–728) immediately follows the section “On the difference of the two sexes” (AA 25: 697–722). In the latter, Kant concludes that the education of women and that of “the masculine sex” must be different especially concerning morality: while the latter education must be based on moral principles and duties, the former must solely revolve around “honor and propriety,” as women are “incapable of these principles” (AA 25: 722; see V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1170, 1172–1173).

to give credible testimony of her own experience, insofar as such testimony also presupposes a capacity for “rational reflection” (V-Lo/Blomberg, AA 24: 244). Being thus denied the status as a dependable knower, a woman would be silenced when it comes to matters of reason; worse still, she might well silence herself (I will take up this point in Section 4).

Likewise, as I shall elaborate in Section 3, Kant depicts non-whites in such terms that they appear as varieties of *not*-knower—the Amerindians as almost mute and lacking the drive for any social intercourse, the ‘Negroes’ as ridiculous and stupid, and the Hindus and Chinese (representing the yellow race) as intellectually immature and unable to think *in abstracto*. Such racial constructs can silence non-whites in epistemic transactions by preemptively rendering whatever they may have to say untrustworthy or unintelligible to the dominant (white male) knowers. This, as I shall explain in Section 4, is a form of epistemic oppression.

3. Kant’s Construction of Non-Whites as Not-Knowers

Kant divides the human species into four principal races based on skin color: copper-red American Indians, black ‘Negroes,’⁸ olive-yellow Asians (especially Hindus), and whites (mainly Western Europeans).⁹ Although his characterization of each of the non-white races varies from context to context, there is one prevailing image associated with each of these races that is epistemically consequential. These images will be my focus.

Let us begin with the race represented by the Amerindians. Kant places this race at the lowest rung in his classificatory scheme for being “too weak for hard labor, too indifferent for industry and incapable of any culture” (ÜGTP, AA 08: 176).¹⁰ This alleged inability for culture is traced

⁸ For Kant, ‘Negro’ has a special meaning and is not interchangeable with ‘black.’ It refers to the “true Negroes” in the West-African region of Senegambia (VvRM, AA 02: 441–442). The air in this region is so “phlogistized,” Kant argues, that only those with the blackest skin can survive there (BBM, AA 08: 103; ÜGTP, AA 08: 169–170n.).

⁹ Kant argues for this division in three dedicated essays on race, published in 1775 and 1777, 1785, and 1788 respectively. For an overview of all three essays, see Mikkelsen (2013, pp. 18–28). On their philosophical significance, originality, and relation to other parts of Kant’s system, see Lu-Adler (2023a, pp. 111–240).

¹⁰ It is important that Kant characterizes each race in terms of its capacity for culture (*Bildung*). According to his teleological conception of history, culture is a necessary intermediary stage between nature and freedom, the highest form of which is moralization (for discussion, see Marwah, 2012).

to their phlegmatic temperament.¹¹ Kant associates phlegm with “inactivity” (V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 639). While “phlegm in the good sense” or “fortunate phlegm” is a “natural gift of apathy,” as a “lack of affect that does not reduce the strength of incentives (*Triebfedern*) to action” (Anth, AA 07: 252, 254),¹² Kant attributes “phlegm as weakness” to the Amerindians. A human being ruled by phlegm in this bad sense “never earnestly pursues (*triebt*) anything” and “does not once grasp anything with zeal either” (V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1166). Such a being lacks even “the cruder incentives, such as lust for money, etc.,” let alone finer prosocial feelings—such as caring about other people’s opinions—that are needed to “drive (*anzutreiben*) indolent human nature to actions for the common weal” (BGSE, AA 02: 218–220). In these terms, Kant depicts the Amerindians as beings who are insensitive (that is, lack affects and passions), have no motive or driving force (*Triebfeder*), and “do not care for anything”; a manifestation of this characteristic is that they “hardly speak at all” (V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1187).

To appreciate the epistemic implications of this denigrating image, recall Kant’s argument for public reason from the nature of humanity. His argument has a teleological dimension. It invokes a certain *drive* in human nature. “There is a natural drive (*Trieb*),” Kant claims, to communicate one’s cognitions to others, and this is why “freedom of communication is a human right” (V-Lo/Dohna, AA 24: 721). In other words, “Providence [...] has placed in us the drive” to expound our judgments in community with others; even if this is “nothing more than the motive (*Triebfedern*) of vanity” in some cases, it still serves to achieve “the purpose of providence” by driving us to “exert ourselves better” (V-Lo/Wiener, AA 24: 874). Given this providential purpose behind the communicative drive, Kant sometimes calls the free exercise thereof a “holy” right (A752/B780). Meanwhile, he does not see natural provisions as equally distributed among all races. Only the white race supposedly contains all the motives (*Triebfedern*) and talents needed for intellectual and moral development (V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1187). Lacking one or more of those motives or talents spells doom for each non-white race in terms of its cultural prospects. In particular, Kant’s

¹¹ On Kant’s account of “temperament” and his racial views, see Mensch (2017).

¹² This good phlegm is supposedly exemplified by “the German’s correct understanding and profoundly reflective reason,” as one can expect from “any other people capable of the highest culture” (Anth, AA 07: 318).

construction of the Amerindians as a race deprived of even crude motives renders their existence virtually purposeless. Imagined as a people who lack the basic drive to socialize or communicate with others and who therefore barely speak, they would appear as not-knowers in the eyes of the dominant (white) knowers.

Kant depicts ‘Negroes’ as the extreme opposite of the Amerindians. If the Amerindians are weak, the ‘Negroes’ appear as robust animals (thanks to the tropical climate of their motherland),¹³ whose extraordinary bodily toughness makes them uniquely fit for the harsh labor in the West-Indian sugar colonies (VvRM, AA 02: 438). If the “mark” of the Amerindians is an “exceptional lack of feeling” (BGSE, AA 02: 253–254), Kant imagines ‘Negroes’ as *excessively* sensitive: they are full of affects, including the fear of beating, wherefore they can be disciplined and acquire the “culture” of servitude (V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1187; see V-Anth/Pillau, AA 25: 843). In Kant’s imagination, this alleged excess in feelings goes hand in hand with a deficit in intellect. Repeating the trope that ‘Negro’ slaves love to dance, Kant describes their dances as *ape*-like bodily contortions and claims that, generally speaking, dance tends to promote a mere play of “feelings,” not that of “ideas” (V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1000). The same “lively” beings also come across as garrulous (*schwatzhaft*), meaning that they are tiresomely talkative and full of gibberish (V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1187). Thus, whatever they say is bound to be dismissed as mere chatter.

Kant’s dismissal of ‘Negroes’ as unintelligent is most palpable in his remarks about them on two occasions in the *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764). In each case, he invokes the testimony of a trusted scholar—David Hume and Jean-Baptiste Labat, respectively. He is not just regurgitating someone else’s report, however. Rather, Kant massages Hume’s and Labat’s narratives in a way that “forecloses the possibility of a Black subject” (Parekh, 2023, p. 50). On both occasions, Kant links black skin to low intelligence. He takes the difference between whites and the “Negroes of Africa” to be so “essential” that it must be “just as great with regard to the capacities of mind as it is with respect to color” (BGSE, AA 02: 253). To confirm this point, Kant invokes Hume.

¹³ Kant sees tropical peoples as physically robust, athletic, and exhibiting acute senses—all features of animality (PG, AA 09: 316; V-GEO/Holstein, AA 26.1: 93–94). For a comprehensive study of Kant’s theory of animality and its relation to race, see Baumeister (2022, especially pp. 108–112 on “black animality”).

Mr. Hume challenges anyone to adduce a single example where a Negro has demonstrated talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who have been transported elsewhere from their countries, although very many of them have been set free, nevertheless not a single one has ever been found who has accomplished something great in art or science or shown any other praiseworthy quality (BGSE, AA 02: 253).

This passage captures Hume's conjecture that the Negroes are "naturally inferior to the whites," that certain perceived differences between them can only be explained by "an original distinction between these breeds of men," and that, of all the "Negro slaves dispersed all over Europe" as well as in the colonies, "none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity" (Hume, 1826, p. 236). Tellingly, however, Kant also omits Hume's reference to an unnamed Jamaican 'Negro.' "In Jamaica, indeed, they talk of one Negro as a man of parts and learning; but it is likely he is admired for slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly" (Hume, 1826, p. 236).

The unnamed Jamaican is Francis Williams (1702–1770). Hume's caveat that "they talk" of Williams as learned suggests that *positive testimonies* about Williams's exceptional intelligence were in circulation.¹⁴ Hume at least found those testimonies worth mentioning. His attempt to deflate them may nevertheless provoke curious readers to find out more about the 'Negro' in question. If Hume's dismissive reference to Williams therefore leaves open the possibility of a knowing Black subject, such possibility is entirely "covered over" in Kant's reproduction of Hume's footnote (Parekh, 2023, p. 69). Kant conceals this literary sleight of hand, whereby the image of a Black knower is rendered invisible, by giving the impression that he was merely repeating Hume's observation (Parekh, 2023, p. 67).

Kant does the same when he draws from Labat's popular travelogue *Nouveau voyage aux isles de l'Amérique* (first published in the 1720s), a prime example of testimony by Kant's standards (Lu-Adler, 2022). Labat was a French West-Indian missionary and colonist active in the late seventeenth century through the early eighteenth century. His *Nouveau voyage* is ideologically ambivalent. According to scholars who study it, it is

¹⁴ On Williams, see Carretta (2023). On Hume's treatment of Williams, see Parekh (2023, pp. 23–28).

susceptible to “an almost shockingly wide array of judgments of the missionary’s attitude toward slaves and the institution of slavery in the New World”: just as the text reveals Labat’s “infamous acceptance and promotion of slaves as property to be used (and abused),” so does it show an “appreciation of the *nègres* as a potential source of knowledge” (Toczyski, 2007, pp. 486–487). In the latter respect, Labat performed the role of “a scholar,” a proto-anthropologist whose interactions with a diverse range of individuals in some of the West-Indian colonies were “predicated upon a desire for knowledge, for a diversity of knowledge, to which, he recognized, his African slaves could amply contribute” (Toczyski, 2007, p. 493). This dimension of Labat’s text completely disappears from Kant’s reference:

Father Labat reports that a Negro carpenter, whom he reproached for haughty treatment of his wives, replied: *You whites are real fools, for first you concede so much to your wives, and then you complain when they drive you crazy*. It seems as if there were something in this that might deserve consideration, but in short, this bloke was completely black from head to foot, a distinct proof that what he said was stupid (AA 02: 254–255, modified translation).

In this passage, Kant distorts Labat’s original account partly by describing the carpenter in more negative terms and partly by inventing a speech for the latter only to spurn it as stupid solely on account of *who* said it. If the carpenter in Labat’s account appeared “dialogically and capable of reproaching and correcting Labat,” Kant’s literary maneuver renders him “mute” in a particularly insidious manner, whose “sound is being figured” only to be snubbed as brainless chatter (Parekh, 2023, pp. 69–71).

This categorical dismissal of a non-white character’s speech as insignificant is also conspicuous in Kant’s depiction of the yellow race. In comparison with other non-whites, this race (along with “Oriental” whites like the Persians) must have been perceived by some of Kant’s contemporaries as culturally accomplished and thus posed the greatest threat to his white- and Western-supremacist worldview. To counter such a perception, Kant contends that this race has stalled in its historical progress and whatever it has achieved is not yet the finest culture; in particular, it is incapable of anything that can be called a proper *scientia* (including philosophy), because its people experience the world *in concreto* but cannot

conceptualize, understand, or reason about it *in abstracto* (this ability is supposedly essential to a mature, systematic, and universalizable use of reason). This view is reflected in Kant's following (among many) remarks about the Chinese and Indians as representing the yellow race and the 'Oriental.'

The Hindus [...] acquire culture in the highest degree, but only in the arts and not in the sciences. They never raise it up to abstract concepts; [...] The Hindus always remain as they are, they never bring culture further, although they began to cultivate themselves much earlier (V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1187).¹⁵

The Indians and Chinese appear now to be at a standstill in their perfection; for their history books show that they now know no more than they have known for a long time (V-Anth/Pillau, AA 25: 843).¹⁶

All Oriental nations are completely incapable of judgment in accordance with concepts. [...] hence they are capable neither of a philosophy nor of mathematics, nor of being able to have insight into something through concepts (V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 655).

So, as Kant sees it, while the Hindus may "look like philosophers" (V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1187), they cannot be real philosophers; likewise, while the Chinese may deal with objects of reason such as God and the immortality of the soul, they cannot *philosophize* about those objects

¹⁵ This passage from Kant's *Menschenkunde* (based on his anthropology lectures from the 1780s) profiles all four races concerning their relation to culture. Like all other transcripts of Kant's popular lectures on anthropology, the *Menschenkunde* must also be in broad circulation beyond the lecture hall. Indeed, it was circulated well after Kant's death. It was published in 1831 as a standalone book representing Kant's "philosophical anthropology." The original racial profiles were reproduced verbatim (Starke, 1831, p. 353). For similar profiles in some of Kant's lectures, see V-Anth/Parow, AA 25: 450–451; V-GEO/Hesse, AA 26.2: 119–123; V-GEO/Dönhoff, AA 26.2: 900–901, 907–908.

¹⁶ This claim about the Indians and Chinese follows separate claims about why the Americans and "Negroes" are also "no longer susceptible" to further development. Having alleged that non-whites are all developmentally stunted in one way or another, Kant turns to the following question: "On what, then, rests the achievement of the ultimate vocation of human nature?" (V-Anth/Pillau, AA 25: 843). This suggests that, if the task of Kant's anthropology is to establish the hope—as "an idea which is possible"—that the human species "will attain the greatest degree of perfection" (V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 696–697), this hope is reserved for the white race. This race, Kant emphatically tells his students, "must be considered in a bit more detail" precisely because it is gifted with all motives (*Triebfedern*) and talents; accordingly, the seemingly colorblind account of human nature—the primary subject of Kantian anthropology (V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 471)—is meant to be "information concerning it" (V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1187). For discussion, see Lu-Adler (2023a, pp. 53–54).

because they do not know how to use reason *in abstracto* (Log, AA 09: 27; V-Met-L₂/Pölit, AA 28: 535).

Kant looks for linguistic clues to support this view. He calls the Chinese language, for example, a “symbolic language” made of sheer pictures (*Bildern*) or sensible images (V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 536).¹⁷ “All the oriental peoples speak with pictures,” Kant claims, meaning that they still have “a child’s language of humanity” (V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1232–1233). If “who speaks by means of symbols indicates that he lacks understanding” (V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 536; see Anth, AA 07: 191), it follows that those peoples are still in “the childhood of the understanding” (Refl 1486, AA 15: 710). This must be because, Kant speculates, *nature* has “failed them with regard to the faculty of judging from concepts” (V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 536).¹⁸ Understanding, which Kant contrasts with sensibility, is the faculty of thinking through *concepts* (KrV, A68–69/B92–94). Linguistically, Kant believes that only *words* (as opposed to pictorial symbols) are suitable signs for concepts;¹⁹ ergo, “without words one cannot think” at all (V-Lo/Pölit, AA 24: 588; Log, AA 09: 109). Having a language of words is a *sine qua non* of effective exercises of the faculty of understanding. This is the logic behind Kant’s caricature of the Chinese and others as linguistically childish and intellectually stunted.

This caricature reflects an anxious attempt to fend off any meaningful epistemic exchange with the supposedly inferior Other. Even learning their language is frowned upon. “It would be ridiculous for us, who have a more masculine language,” Kant warns his students at one point, “to exchange this for the child’s language of the Oriental peoples” (V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1233). In this way, Kant eagerly guards the “Occidental talent” against the influence of Oriental language, insofar as it signifies a childish way of thinking. He urges his students not to “imitate this manner

¹⁷ Kant contrasts “symbolic language” with a language of “words.” In his view, the latter alone—as a proper language of *concepts*—is suitable for forming and expressing universally communicable judgments. See Lu-Adler (2023b, 2024) for expositions of this distinction and its practical implications.

¹⁸ See V-Met/Mron, AA 29: 757–758; Refl 451, AA 15: 788–789. Such is how Kant makes sense of the cultural stagnation he attributes to “the Hindus, the Persians, the Chinese, the Turks, and in general all Oriental peoples”: “If a people in no way improves itself over centuries, then one may assume that there already exists in it a certain natural predisposition which it is not capable of exceeding” (V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1181).

¹⁹ For Kant’s theory of signs or signification, see Anth, AA 07: 191; V-Met-L₁/Pölit, AA 28: 238; V-Met/Mron, AA 29: 881.

of writing,” for fear that this would cause “the degeneration of Occidental taste” and “wrong the understanding,” whereby the precious Occidental spirit (*Geist*) would be “ruined” (V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 536, 552).

Thus, the community of epistemic peers that Kant’s truth-seeking scholar addresses does not include people like the Chinese and Indians (let alone other non-whites). These people are excluded not only because they are perceived as intellectual minors incapable of making or reciprocating rational judgments but also because, as one can gather from the remarks just quoted, epistemic exchanges with them purportedly threaten to derail the (Occidental) white men’s path toward enlightenment. Thus, the exclusion is *strategic*. It deploys what Uday Singh Mehta calls “exclusionary strategies,” particularly “civilizational infantilism.” The resulting exclusion is “neither a theoretically dictated necessity nor a mere occasional happenstance of purely contingent significance”; rather, it stems from the space opened up between a purportedly universal ascription of capacities and “the conditions for their actualization,” a space that allows the theorist to “raise the ante” for inclusion (Mehta, 1999, pp. 48–49).

Kant, as a theorist, excels at opening up this kind of space. On the one hand, he claims that certain germs (*Keime*) are “innate to human nature” and that “a savage Indian,” for instance, has “the same germs as a civilized human being” in Europe; on the other hand, he believes—without having to contradict himself—that those germs are “not yet developed” in some humans (V-Anth/Fried, AA 25: 694).²⁰ Indeed, Kant would add, those germs will *never* be fully developed in non-whites (V-Anth/Pillau, AA 25: 843). His construction of the three non-white races shows how he would reach such a conclusion: those races, each in a special way, lack the inner *conditions*—the totality of the motives and talents that the white race alone contains in itself—that are necessary for the full *development* of the germs innate to human nature. Thus, the progress in enlightenment that Kant envisions, for which “nothing is required but [...] freedom to make *public use* of one’s reason in all matters” (WA, AA 08: 36), is ultimately a (Western-centric) “white progress” (Marwah, 2022). Non-whites, imagined

²⁰ This claim about “germs” pertains to Kant’s monogenism: different races belong to the same species and derive from the same original stock (*Stamm*). Monogenism is central to Kant’s raciology and, contrary to what one may assume, it does not entail egalitarianism (Lu-Adler, 2023a, pp. 111–240). It also holds the key to understanding why there is no contradiction between Kant’s pure moral theory and his racist views (Lu-Adler, 2023a, pp. 33–75). On the relation between Kant’s race thinking and his teleology (*Keim* is a key concept in both), see Marwah (2022).

as varieties of not-knowers, are granted no say (although plenty may be said about them as *objects* of knowledge) and no agential role to play in the knowledge production that supposedly marks continued human progress.

One may be tempted to shrug off this picture as a historical relic not worth dwelling on or as an unfortunate anomaly that can be easily neutralized through judicious applications of certain core philosophical principles of the Kantian system.²¹ As James Baldwin puts it so well, however, history “does not refer merely, or principally, to the past”; rather, it is “literally *present* in all that we do” and we are “unconsciously controlled by it in many ways.” Its grip on us comes from us owing “our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations” to it. It has placed each of us where we are presently and formed our collective “point of view.” Realizing this “force of history” can trigger a sense of “pain and terror” (Baldwin, 1965, p. 47). With this trigger warning, I now turn to the literature on epistemic oppression to demonstrate how difficult it will be to even out the “uneven knowing field” (Bailey, 2014) that the likes of Kant helped establish through discursive constructions of non-whites as not-knowers.

4. Racial Imagination, Epistemic Oppression, and the State of Kant Scholarship

Patricia Hill Collins explains how stereotypes of African-American women—as mummies, welfare recipients, and so on—function as “controlling images.” Such images justify their oppressions by making injustices against them “appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life.” The images can be “remarkably tenacious” even after the initial conditions that gave rise to them have disappeared. This has much to do with African-American women’s status as “outsiders”: assumed as “dumb strangers,” their viewpoint is often “discredited” by dominant knowers, who are unwilling or unable to hear testimonies about social realities *from them*; so, the dominant knowers get to talk *about them*, to “define their normality,” without them having any say in the process (Collins, 2000, pp. 69–70). This analysis suggests that what is most

²¹ This is a standard approach among Kant scholars. For a critical overview, see Lu-Adler (2023a, pp. 3–10).

important here is not so much the “technical accuracy” of specific images as “the power dynamics underlying the very process of definition itself” (Collins, 2000, p. 114). As Kristie Dotson puts it, what is important is Collins’s understanding of “black women as belonging to an objectified social group, which hinders them from being perceived as knowers.” A vicious cycle ensues: the perception of black women as not-knowers leads to a pernicious sort of *ignorance*—“not as a simple lack of knowledge, but as an active practice of unknowing”—on the part of dominant knowers; such ignorance in turn “facilitates a recurring failure of audiences to communicatively reciprocate black women’s attempts at linguistic exchanges by routinely not recognizing them as knowers” (Dotson, 2011, pp. 242–243).

In this way, Collins’s account of controlling images points to a mechanism of “testimonial quieting,” which happens when “an audience fails to identify a speaker as a knower.” This practice of silencing is a form of “epistemic violence,” defined as “a failure of an audience to communicatively reciprocate, either intentionally or unintentionally, in linguistic exchanges owing to pernicious ignorance” (Dotson, 2011, p. 242). This violence can also manifest itself in “testimonial smothering.” This happens when one truncates “one’s own testimony in order to insure that the testimony contains only content for which one’s audience demonstrates testimonial competence” in an epistemic exchange that is characterized by the involvement of “unsafe and risky” testimonial content and “testimonial incompetence” on the part of the audience as a result of pernicious ignorance (Dotson, 2011, p. 244). A common cause of testimonial smothering is the experience of micro-invalidations, communications (such as an unnecessarily skeptical question or tone) that have the effect of invalidating one’s thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences because of one’s perceived identity (Dotson, 2011, p. 247).

Typically, a certain form of *power dynamics* underlies such practices of silencing. In cases where one is silenced because of one’s perceived race, what is at play is, as Miranda Fricker calls it, “identity power.” The operation of this power depends on “shared imaginative conceptions of social identity” such as gender. Fricker illustrates this with an example from *The Talented Mr. Ripley*: Herbert Greenleaf silences Marge’s suspicions of the murderous Ripley with the patronizing statement “Marge, there’s female

intuition, and then there are facts”; this is how Greenleaf excises the identity power he has as a man over Marge as a woman. He is “using gender to silence” Marge by “invoking a collective conception of femininity as insufficiently rational because excessively intuitive.” Indeed, in “a social context in which it is part of the construction of gender [...] that [women] should never pitch their word against that of a man,” Greenleaf might not even have to *do* anything to silence Marge: she “might already be silenced by the mere fact that he is a man and she a woman.” This silencing stems from an “imaginative social co-ordination” facilitated by collective conceptions of what it is to be a man or a woman, “where such conceptions amount to stereotypes [...] about men’s and women’s respective authority on this or that sort of subject matter.” Importantly, such conceptions “need not be held at the level of belief in either subject or object, for the primary *modus operandi* of identity power is at the level of the collective social imagination.” Social imagination can “control our actions even despite our beliefs” (Fricker, 2007, pp. 14–15).

Having thus registered the power of social *imagination*, let us return to Kant. In Section 3, I shed light on Kant’s belief that non-whites are temperamentally, linguistically, and intellectually lacking, wherefore they are not to be recognized as knowers by whites (Occidental white men to be exact). What concerns me most here is not just Kant’s convictions, however. Rather, it is important to consider his construction of racial profiles in light of how he was situated. Specifically, we should consider not only the historical, intellectual, and socio-political context in which he presented those profiles but also his *positionality* as a prominent scholar and a lifelong educator within a nexus of other meaning-makers and social actors. Within such a nexus, we can expect his claims about non-whites to have ideology-forming and world-making effects. Among other things, those claims can have an intractable *subliminal* impact on his audiences, as they frequently conjure up mocking *imageries* of the non-white Other—the lackluster and almost speechless Amerindian, the chatty and silly “Negro,” and the Hindu who merely looks like a philosopher (Lu-Adler, 2023a, pp. 255–256).

These imageries can then function as controlling images, making exclusions of non-whites from knowledge production seem natural. Non-whites are *objectified* to the point of ceasing to be subjects in the worldview that Kant presented to his white male students. They are, as Irfan Ahmad

puts it, “construed as empirical objects” to be speculated about from a safe distance, “not thinking subjects” (2017, p. 25). This objectification, coupled with Kant’s specific depictions of non-whites as varieties of not-knowers, hinders them from figuring in the dominant (Occidental white male) knowers’ imagination as epistemic agents. The community of mutually dependent knowers Kant was envisioning, then, is an insular circle of (Occidental) white men; these men, moreover, operate with a rarified, elitist view of what constitutes genuine knowledge (*scientia*) and what conditions someone must satisfy to be recognized as a competent and trustworthy knowledge co-producer. In the meantime, they present their worldview as universal by making their provincial standpoint invisible. To quote Ahmad again, Western universalism claimed that “it is *for all* and *to all*” just as it “disregarded *from all*” (2017, p. 25).²²

Such was how Kant sought to prepare his students to become cosmopolitans or world-citizens (*Weltbürgern*). He wanted his popular lectures on anthropology and geography, in which he repeatedly vocalized his white-supremist views, to give his students the world-knowledge (*Weltkenntniß*) that would ready them for the world as *their* “stage” (VvRM, AA 02: 443).²³ Insofar as this involved knowing others, it could only be knowledge *about* non-whites and non-Westerners as mere objects of understanding. The latter, imagined as not-knowers for lacking the requisite motives, cognitive abilities, or moral qualities, would be preemptively discredited and muted. The dominant knowers in Kant’s epistemic community would see no need to consult their testimonies or judgments. A combination of “white ignorance” (Mills, 2007) and “Western ignorance” (Said, 1994, p. 62) would follow as a result. This combined ignorance can be traced to the various discursive acts by which white Western elites during the Enlightenment era collectively constructed the non-white and non-Western Other—by “making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it” and so on (Said, 1994, p. 3). This is using words to alienate, control, and silence the Other.

Identity-based silencing, Fricker argues, is an “intrinsic injustice” against the subject whose “capacity as a knower” is being undermined: if one assumes—as a Kantian does—that “our rationality is what lends

²² I am grateful to Riad Alarian for bringing Ahmad’s critique to my attention.

²³ These remarks are included in the appendix to the 1775 edition of Kant’s first essay on race.

humanity its distinctive value,” then being “degraded *qua* knower” is being “wronged in a capacity essential to human value” and thereby “symbolically degraded *qua* human.” Meanwhile, preemptively silencing marginalized subjects “damages the epistemic system”: it poses an “obstacle to truth” by, for instance, “creating blockages in the circulation of critical ideas” (Fricker, 2007, pp. 43–44). A Kantian today who is committed to egalitarianism in all domains of human life may propose that we solve this problem through a more equitable distribution of credibility. The solution may manifest itself in efforts to bring women of color, for instance, into their epistemic community. The good-willed Kantian may even take a step further and, as a gesture to compensate for the historically inherited effects of those women’s “epistemically disadvantaged social identity” due to a curse of unbelievability (Townley, 2003), practice a form of radical trust in what they have to say.

Such efforts, however, would at best address what Dotson calls “first-order epistemic oppression,” which arises from an “inefficient credibility economy” (2014, p. 126). Epistemic oppression is “persistent epistemic exclusion that hinders one’s contribution to knowledge production,” epistemic exclusion being “an unwarranted infringement on the epistemic agency of knowers,” namely, on their ability to use shared epistemic resources “to participate in knowledge production and, if required, the revision of those same resources” (Dotson, 2014, p. 115). Dotson distinguishes three orders of such oppression, each calling for a distinct solution. Insofar as first-order epistemic oppression arises from “inefficiencies *within* shared epistemic resources,” what is needed to address it is an internal “reform” that keeps intact the dominant epistemological framework, including its schemas of sense-making and criteria of epistemic trustworthiness (such as competence and sincerity). Even this limited reform is by no means easy: how “epistemic power” is distributed in a given epistemic landscape is a product of historically formed, often entrenched social, political, and economic relations, and it is predictably difficult “to convince some that their privilege is possibly unwarranted and not their right” (Dotson, 2014, pp. 125–126).

Further challenges can arise when non-white knowers enter a space dominated by white knowers. Consider Dotson’s case of a Black woman who has to truncate or entirely suppress her accounts of reality when she

perceives her audience as incapable of comprehending her accounts accurately (2011, pp. 244–245). A speaker is “vulnerable” in that she depends not only on her audience’s goodwill to hear her out but also on the latter’s ability to *make sense* of what she has to say (Dotson, 2011, p. 238). Whether this condition of intelligibility is met depends on the sufficiency of shared epistemic resources. As Gaile Pohlhaus explains, as *interdependent* knowers, we need collectively shared epistemic resources—such as concepts, language, and standards of judgments—to make sense of, articulate, and evaluate our experiences. In a socially embedded and historically formed epistemic ecosystem with a significant distinction between dominantly and marginally situated subjects, “dominant resources of knowing” tend to be ill-suited for making sense of the experiences of marginalized knowers (Pohlhaus, 2012, p. 717). Maria Lugones, speaking as a Hispana, makes this point while addressing her white counterparts.

We and you do not talk the same language. When we talk to you we use your language: the language of your experience and your theories. [...] We cannot talk to you in our language *because you do not understand it*. So [...] we either use your language and distort our experience [...] or [...] we remain silent (Lugones and Spelman, 1983, p. 575, emphasis added).

The pressure for a woman of color to remain silent or give a distorted account of her experience stems from the fact that she cannot authentically or fully relate her experience using the dominant epistemic resources. Yet, oftentimes she has no choice but to adapt herself to the dominant ways of knowing and standards of intelligibility while recognizing that such efforts may not be reciprocated. So, Lugones continues,

When we are in your world we ourselves feel the discomfort of having our own being Hispanas disfigured or not understood. And yet, [...] *we have had to* learn your culture and thus your language and self-conceptions. But *there is nothing that necessitates that you understand our world*: understand, that is, not as an observer understands things, but as a participant, as someone who has a stake in them understands them (Lugones and Spelman, 1983, p. 576, emphasis added).

The italicized parts of this passage speak of a hermeneutical inequality rooted in an unequal power structure. The white woman in Lugones's narrative does not need to understand the Hispana's world because, as Fricker puts it, "[o]ur interpretive efforts are naturally geared to interests, as we try hardest to understand those things it serves us to understand." The resulting hermeneutical marginalization is a form of powerlessness: while the marginalized knower has the nominal option to withdraw from hermeneutical participation altogether, she cannot afford to. This marginalization is epistemically bad as "it renders the collective hermeneutical resource *structurally prejudiced*," issuing biased interpretations "unduly influenced by more hermeneutically powerful groups." This structural prejudice is discriminatory and therefore also morally bad: it affects people "in virtue of their membership of a socially powerless group, and thus in virtue of an aspect of their social identity." The result is hermeneutical *injustice*, "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource" (Fricker, 2007, pp. 152–155).

This points to what Dotson calls "second-order epistemic oppression," which consists of epistemic exclusions due to the *insufficiency* of collectively shared epistemic resources. This insufficiency results from how those resources "have developed over time." In particular, "the dominant shared language and instituted social imaginaries have been formed largely to reflect the experiences of [...] more credible groups." Marginalized or excluded knowers have no suitable epistemic resources to communicate their experiences to dominant knowers meaningfully. We cannot address this problem simply by making first-order epistemic reforms mentioned above. Rather, it requires second-order changes that "call into question the operative epistemic resources themselves." Such changes are difficult to motivate or enact because, like first-order epistemic oppression, second-order epistemic oppression is also rooted in historically formed social inequalities. The populations that tend to suffer the consequences of hermeneutical marginalization are "hardly ever accidentally chosen populations." Epistemically disadvantaged social identities were historically constructed by the populations that had power and have been reinforced through "a range of ignorance-producing social/political exclusions." In this way, "historical, social and political factors determine who will possess that

epistemic power and who will be relatively powerless.” This power differential can mean an “inertia” on the part of the epistemically privileged (Dotson, 2014, pp. 126–129). If the silencing of historically marginalized populations on account of their identities thus “reveals a systematic pattern of power and authority,” as Lugones’s white interlocutor Elizabeth Spelman puts it, the problem ultimately calls for a “political” response (Lugones and Spelman, 1983, p. 574).

The reducibility of first- and second-order epistemic oppressions to social and political factors also distinguishes them from third-order epistemic oppression: the latter is not solely reducible to those factors; rather, it “follows from a feature of epistemological systems themselves, that is epistemological resilience” (Dotson, 2014, p. 116). In this case, the problem goes deeper than the inefficiency or insufficiency of existing epistemic resources. It is about “the system *upholding* and *preserving* those resources” (Dotson, 2014, p. 131). An epistemological system consists of “all the conditions for the possibility of knowledge production and possession,” such as “operative, instituted social imaginaries, habits of cognition, attitudes towards knowers and/or any relevant sensibilities that encourage or hinder the production of knowledge.” The resilience of a system is the magnitude of externally originated disturbances that it can absorb before it has to *restructure* itself. A historically formed epistemological system tends to be overall resilient because “our situated perspectives and collective epistemic resources [...] combine to shape stable domains of epistemic habits and instituted social imaginaries that can be difficult to change” (Dotson, 2014, p. 121).

To address this problem, Dotson submits, the dominant knowers for whom the system serves all too well have to recognize the “parameters” of the system itself and become aware of their complicity in perpetuating its oppressive tendencies. This is an extremely tall order. It is difficult precisely due to the resilience of the very system that one relies on to interrogate it and reveal its limitations (Dotson, 2014, pp. 131–132). As Alison Bailey puts it (2014, p. 62), if Dotson’s conceptualization of first- and second-order epistemic oppressions shows that there is an *unlevel knowing field*, her account of third-order epistemic oppression “points to a heartbreaking conclusion”: the “structure of the unlevel knowing field itself” poses the greatest obstacle to epistemic liberation. An established epistemological

system tends to be self-preserving and self-legitimizing. It contains “the means for preserving and legitimating inadequate epistemic resources.” This structural resilience is “so powerful that even the most thoughtful revelations and strategic moves are readily absorbed into an epistemological system in ways that leave little or no trace of their impact.” As a result, conceptual innovations to fill hermeneutical gaps and efforts to bring about a more egalitarian and inclusive credibility economy “may never gain the momentum necessary to counter the unlevel knowing field’s deep epistemological resilience.”²⁴ Rather, third-order change (as Dotson envisions it) requires “taking a bird’s eye view of the unlevel knowing field, cultivating an awareness of its parameters, becoming attentive to how the underlying schemas orient our perspectives, and grappling with the resilience of the field itself” (Bailey, 2014, p. 66).

We may use Charles Mills’s work to illustrate how these observations about the difficulty of addressing third-order epistemic oppression apply to Kant scholarship. In opposition to the colorblind tendency of mainstream Kant scholarship, Mills developed a color-conscious “Black Radical Kantianism.” It was an attempt to rethink Kantian principles and ideals “*in the light of* a modernity structured by racial domination,” a “racially informed engagement” with Kantianism guided by the hope that it might provide resources for “an anti-racist retrieval” (Mills, 2018, pp. 2–3). Mills had pragmatic reasons to engage with Kantianism in this way. He noted that scholars with historically marginalized social identities were confronted with a dilemma.

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, p. 1).

This is a difficult choice. 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

²⁴ For examples that further illustrate the nature of third-order epistemic oppression and why it is so difficult to address, see Lockard (2024, pp. 5–8).

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, p. 1). Clearly, there is an unlevel knowing field here. Its structure reflects a historically inherited unequal distribution of social power. Subordinated social groups hoping to be heard and make a difference in knowledge production bear a singular *burden* to make their emancipatory projects intelligible—and even appealing—to those occupying dominant positions. Mills accepted this burden by attempting to present black radical thoughts in a familiar Kantian-liberal framework. It was a self-consciously “strategic” move on his part, a knowing capitulation to the fact that Kant occupied a place of “centrality in contemporary Western normative theory” (Mills, 2018, p. 3).

By all appearances, though, Mills’s black radical intervention has not led to the generative “dialogue” or “conversation” that he sought to promote between Afro-modern political thought and Kantian political thought (2018, p. 3). Kant scholars may occasionally mention Mills’s work, but only to resettle themselves in the same old way of conducting their scholarship, an insistent colorblind way. This well exemplifies the resilience of an epistemological system: the system may be shaken ever so slightly by externally originated disturbances like Mills’s—among various other thinkers’ (for example, Bernasconi, 2003; Eze, 1995)—critique of its racial blindness and push for a color-conscious perspective; yet, it has been able to absorb or deflect such disturbances without critically reexamining its habits of seeing or ways of knowing (see Baron, 2001; Fleischacker, 2023; Hill and Boxill, 2001; Loudon, 2000, pp. 93–106; Neiman, 2024; Wood, 2008, pp. 6–15). Mills was prescient about this when he warned of “*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” (2017, pp. 188–189).

This warning suggests a lesson for those who may be alarmed by what I have said about Kant’s construction of non-whites as not-knowers. It is not enough to make efforts to include non-whites in an epistemic community or fill whatever hermeneutical lacunas render their experiences unintelligible. It is also time to critically reexamine, for example, the

framing assumptions in how Kant envisioned the infrastructure of a productive epistemic community, such as the privileging of reason in his account of the relation between historical and rational cognitions, the presumption that the ability to think *in abstracto* and *a priori* is superior, and the scholarship condition that one must meet to be recognized as a *bona fide* knower whose testimonies and judgments are worth consulting. An exclusionary or discriminatory impulse may well be built into these assumptions. They may give rise to an “extractivist epistemology” (Alcoff, 2022), whereby certain knowers are relegated to a subordinate role of providing “data”—the materials that constitute what Kant calls “testimony”—for scholarly researchers to theorize about and generate prized knowledge (Landström, 2024). Unless dominant knowers in an epistemic community—who in our world today tend to be white male knowers occupying most of the elite social and institutional positions—attend to that possibility, they may do more harm than good when they, often from good intentions, try to incorporate the experiences and perspectives of historically marginalized groups. In particular, such attempts can result in “epistemic exploitation,” a form of epistemic oppression that tends to reinforce structures of oppression “by centering the needs and desires of dominant groups and exploiting the emotional and cognitive labor of members of marginalized groups” (Berenstain, 2016, p. 570).

5. Conclusion

This paper is a study that puts Kant’s account of epistemic dependence in conversation with his views on race. I began by foregrounding the scholarship condition in his account of how the rational and cosmopolitan knowers, who are at the center of his epistemic landscape, should judiciously choose potential epistemic peers: these must be agents who are presumed as having such logical and moral qualities that their testimonies can be trusted and their rational judgments valued. The resulting epistemic community is a limited circle of knowers who *recognize* one another as competent and credible scholars in contrast to mere commoners (Section 2). If Kant’s theory of epistemic dependence thus already exhibits an elitist exclusionary tendency, the scope of exclusion becomes enormous when we factor in his white-, Western-, and male-supremacist views. In his racialized worldview, whites alone have the requisite motives and talents to become

bona fide knowers; by contrast, non-whites are imagined as not-knowers for allegedly lacking necessary cognitive capacities or the drive for sociality (Section 3).

The unlevel epistemic field we navigate today reflects the continued impact of those racial imaginaries. Dotson's account of three orders of epistemic oppression helps to show the stickiness of this impact. To even out the epistemic field, it is not enough to welcome historically excluded agents into an epistemic community, promote a more egalitarian credibility economy, or make efforts to fill hermeneutical lacunas that have rendered their experiences or worldviews unintelligible to dominant knowers. Rather, it is necessary to address the root of each order of epistemic oppression, be it the underlying structure of power or the tendency of a dominant epistemological system to maintain its structural integrity in the face of external disturbances (Section 4).

Who is the intended audience of this study? You may wonder. I am mainly addressing people whose work involves Kant. But let me use two distinctions to tease out a more specific answer. One is a distinction from *The Epistemology of Resistance* by José Medina. While epistemic oppression affects privileged and oppressed subjects alike, Medina shows that these differently situated groups tend to accrue different epistemic virtues and vices and, accordingly, different epistemic advantages and disadvantages. Privileged subjects are more inclined toward epistemic arrogance, laziness, and closed-mindedness. These epistemic vices can lead to "active ignorance." *Color blindness* is one example. It involves "a lack of familiarity and critical awareness of one's social positionality," an attempt to distance oneself from "the social reality of racism," and a failure to acknowledge its "influence on social cognition" properly. It also reflects the larger cultural phenomenon of "the normalizing and homogenizing tendencies of a privileged perspective that protects itself by blocking our recognition of differences." Correcting it thus requires "retraining—the reconfiguration of epistemic attitudes and habits—as well as social change." By contrast, while oppressed subjects are particularly susceptible to epistemic vices like epistemic insecurity, they are more likely to develop virtues like intellectual curiosity and diligence—often out of necessity (the need to survive oppression engenders certain cognitive needs). Their main cognitive asset is "*meta-lucidity*: their capacity to see the limitations of

dominant ways of seeing.” This lucidity has a transformative potential. It puts them in a position to register and critique “different forms of insensitivity and epistemic resistance” and provide insights that can “trigger struggles” for the redrawing of our “cognitive maps,” redescription of relevant experiences, reframing of epistemological discussions, and so on (Medina, 2013, pp. 30–48).

The other distinction is from some Kantians. In their editorial introduction to a collection of essays on Kant and colonialism, Katrin Flikschuh and Lea Ypi differentiate “Kant scholars” and “Kant’s critics” as if these categories were mutually exclusive.²⁵ They accuse the critics of “single-minded scapegoating of an individual representative of one’s philosophical *past*,” namely, Kant. Robert Bernasconi, Emmanuel Chuckwudi Eze, and Charles Mills are singled out as such critics. By Flikschuh and Ypi’s logic, these critics’ “single-minded focus” on Kant has a “disquieting” effect of occluding “the systemic nature of philosophical racism: the racisms of Hume, Kant, Hegel, and Mill tend not to be appreciated as summing to a *tradition* of philosophical prejudice”; their critique of the *past* can also “encourage exoneration of the *present*: the more insistently we point the finger at historical wrongdoing, the less we may feel we need to examine our own philosophical proclivities on this score” (Flikschuh and Ypi, 2014, pp. 1–2). This is an astonishing line of reasoning, especially when directed at Mills. Anyone familiar with Mills’s seminal work on racial contract (1997) and white ignorance (2007) can see that, for him, historical critique is done precisely with a painful awareness of how we *carry the past* with us—not as atomic individuals but as socially situated and structurally embedded beings—in *the present* (the Baldwin quote at the end of Section 3 served to convey this point). Such historical critique *must* be done—so that we can better discern the nature and roots of present problems and develop an astute vision for social transformation. In the epistemic realm, Mills argued for alternative epistemologies. As Medina describes the core of that argument, Mills was pressing for epistemologies “that take into account non-hegemonic perspectives and thus provide an

²⁵ I first became aware of these remarks through Stellar Sandford’s review of the edited collection. What Sandford (2016) saw in it was an essentially “apologist agenda” that seeks to defend Kantianism as a vital discursive framework for present struggles such as decolonization—at a time when “we find much more powerful and informed arguments in writings from colonized peoples, especially those forged in the midst of decolonization struggles.” This begs the question that Mills (2018) grappled with: why Kant? For a more recent iteration of this question, see Marwah (2024).

alternative to the *abstract* (decontextualized and *dehistoricized*) ways of framing epistemological discussions that have dominated the Western philosophical tradition and have been too complicit with dominant or hegemonic standpoints” (2013, p. 47, emphasis added).

With these observations, I return to the question about the intended audience of my study in this paper. Let it be agents, regardless of whether they belong to privileged or oppressed social groups, who sincerely care to be epistemically virtuous, have the strength not to run away from the “pain and terror” that will inevitably come with realizations of how history shapes our ways of knowing and being (Baldwin, 1965, p. 47), can see beyond the scholar-critic dichotomy, and are willing to explore the path of a *critical Kant scholarship*. Such scholarship is “critical” not just in the sense of criticizing Kant for his racist views, for instance, but in the way critical philosophy of race is “critical.” The latter approaches the concept of race “with a historical consciousness about its function in legitimating domination,” its “historical construction,” and its relevance to “formations of selfhood” and to “the question of how to assess the existing canon of modern philosophy” (Alcoff, 2023). Likewise, critical Kant scholars do not just point a moralizing finger at Kant as an isolated individual; rather, they study his raciology, for instance, to reveal its ideology-forming and world-making power thanks to his positionality and to show how Kant scholars today may have a special burden to rectify its legacy.²⁶ In short, they conduct critical studies of Kant with an eye to social change.

The critical study conducted in this paper is done in that spirit. It identifies challenges without an exact proposal of positive solutions (although I made general points about the inadequacy of common responses). At the bottom, it is a rallying call to my intended audience. I trust that this is a growing community. It takes collective and creative efforts to tackle multiple orders of oppression. I do not fancy that we can “think, write, or argue” our way around oppression. Rather, as Alison Bailey suggests while pondering on the complex challenges uncovered by Dotson’s analysis, sometimes we may need to “sing, chant, dance, witness, cry, pray, laugh, read or write poetry, or seek out precious resources from non-dominant knowing fields that offer glimpses of worlds beyond the unlevel

²⁶ See Lu-Adler (2023a, pp. 76–107) for a critique of moralistic and individualistic approaches to (Kant’s) racism, a critique that partly builds on Mills’s ideological critique.

knowing field.” In short, we need to think “broadly, imaginatively, and courageously about the epistemic resources available to us” (Bailey, 2014, p. 67). If this means “untethering” oneself from Kant in the sense of letting go of attachments to his discursive frameworks (Marwah, 2024), so be it.

Kantian Abbreviation

Anth - Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht (AA 07) - Kant, I. (2007). *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. In *Anthropology, History and Education* (pp. 231–429). Cambridge University Press.

BBM - Bestimmung des Begriffs einer Menschenrace (AA 8) - Kant, I. (2007). *Determination of the Concept of a Human Race*. In *Anthropology, History and Education* (pp. 145–159). Cambridge University Press.

BGSE - Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen (AA 02) - Kant, I. (2007). *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. In *Anthropology, History and Education* (pp. 18–62). Cambridge University Press.

KrV - Kritik der reinen Vernunft (AA 03–04) - Kant, I. (1998). *Critique of Pure Reason*. Cambridge University Press.

Log - Logik (AA 09) - Kant, I. (1992). *The Jäsche Logic*. In *Lectures on Logic* (pp. 527–640). Cambridge University Press.

PG - Physische Geographie (AA 09) - Kant, I. (2012). *Physical Geography*. In *Natural Science* (pp. 434–679). Cambridge University Press.

Refl - Reflexionen (AA 15–19) - Kant, I. (2005). *Notes and Fragments*. Cambridge University Press.

SF - Der Streit der Fakultäten (AA 07) - Kant, I. (1996). *The Conflict of Faculties*. In *Religion and Rational Theology* (pp. 233–327). Cambridge University Press.

TP - Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis (AA 08) - Kant, I. (1996). *On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, But It Is of No Use in Practice*. In *Practical Philosophy* (pp. 273–309). Cambridge University Press.

ÜGTP - Über den Gebrauch teleologischer Principien in der Philosophie (AA 08) - Kant, I. (2007). *On the Use of Teleological Principles in*

Philosophy. In *Anthropology, History and Education* (pp. 195–218). Cambridge University Press.

V-Anth/Fried - Vorlesungen Wintersemester 1775/1776 Friedländer (AA 25) - Kant, I. (2012). Anthropology Friedländer. In *Lectures on Anthropology* (pp. 37–255). Cambridge University Press.

V-Anth/Mensch - Vorlesungen Wintersemester 1781/1782 Menschenkunde (AA 25) - Kant, I. (2012). Menschenkunde. In *Lectures on Anthropology* (pp. 281–333). Cambridge University Press.

V-Anth/Mron - Vorlesungen Wintersemester 1784/1785 Mrongovius (AA 25) - Kant, I. (2012). Anthropology Mrongovius. In *Lectures on Anthropology* (pp. 335–509). Cambridge University Press.

V-Anth/Parow - Vorlesungen Wintersemester 1772/1773, Parow (AA 25) - Kant, I. (2012). Anthropology Parow [excerpts]. In *Lectures on Anthropology* (pp. 27–36). Cambridge University Press.

V-Anth/Pillau - Vorlesungen Wintersemester 1777/1778 Pillau (AA 25) - Kant, I. (2012). Anthropology Pillau [excerpts]. In *Lectures on Anthropology* (pp. 257–279). Cambridge University Press.

V-GEO/Dönhoff - Vorlesungen über Physische Geographie 1782, Dönhoff (AA 26.2).

V-GEO/Hesse - Vorlesungen über Physische Geographie 1770, Hesse (AA 26.2).

V-GEO/Holstein - Vorlesungen über Physische Geographie 1757–1759, Holstein (AA 26.1).

V-Lo/Blomberg - Logik Blomberg (AA 24) – Kant, I. (1992). The Blomberg Logic. In *Lectures on Logic* (pp. 1–246). Cambridge University Press.

V-Lo/Dohna - Logik Dohna-Wundlacken (AA 24) - Kant, I. (1992). The Dohna-Wundlacken Logic. In *Lectures on Logic* (pp. 425–516). Cambridge University Press.

V-Lo/Pölit - Logik Pölit (AA 24).

V-Lo/Wiener - Wiener Logik (AA 24). Kant, I. (1992). The Vienna Logic. In *Lectures on Logic* (pp. 249–377). Cambridge University Press.

- V-Met-L₁/Pölitiz - Metaphysik L₁ (AA 28) - Kant, I. (1997). Metaphysik L₁. In *Lectures on Metaphysics* (pp. 17–106). Cambridge University Press.
- V-Met-L₂/Pölitiz - Metaphysik L₂ (AA 28) - Kant, I. (1997). Metaphysik L₂. In *Lectures on Metaphysics* (pp. 297–354). Cambridge University Press.
- V-Met/Mron - Metaphysik Mrongovius (AA 29). Kant, I. (1997). Metaphysik Mrongovius. In *Lectures on Metaphysics* (pp. 107–286). Cambridge University Press.
- V-Mo/Collins - Moralphilosophie Collins (AA 27) - Kant, I. (1997). Moral Philosophy: Collins's Lecture Notes. In *Lectures on Ethics* (pp. 37–222). Cambridge University Press.
- V-Mo/Vigil - Metaphysik der Sitten Vigilantius (AA 27) - Kant, I. (1997). Kant on the Metaphysics of Morals: Vigilantius's Lecture Notes. In *Lectures on Ethics* (pp. 249–452). Cambridge University Press.
- VvRM - Von den verschiedenen Racen der Menschen (AA 02) - Kant, I. (2007). Of the Different Races of Human Beings. In *Anthropology, History and Education* (pp. 82–97). Cambridge University Press.
- WA - Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung? (AA 08) - Kant, I. (1996). An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment? In *Practical Philosophy* (pp. 11–22). Cambridge University Press.
- WDO -Was heißt sich im Denken orientiren? (AA 08) - Kant, I. (1996). What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking. In *Religion and Rational Theology* (pp. 1–17). Cambridge University Press.

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