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For What Can the Kantian Feminist Hope? Constructive Complicity in Appropriations of the Canon

Dilek Huseyinzadegan
Emory University, dhuseyin1@emory.edu

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For What Can the Kantian Feminist Hope? Constructive Complicity in Appropriations of the Canon

Dilek Huseyinzadegan

Abstract

As feminist scholars, we *hope* that our own work is exempt from structural problems such as racism, sexism, and Eurocentrism, that is, the kind of problems that are exemplified and enacted by Kant's works. In other words, we *hope* that we do not re-enact, implicitly or explicitly, Kant's problematic claims, which range from the unnaturalness of a female philosopher, "who might as well have a beard," the stupid things that a black carpenter said "because he was black from head to foot," the poor women "living in the greatest slavery in the Orient," to the "sheep-like existence of the inhabitants of Tahiti." In this piece, I argue that we cannot simply hope to avoid these problems unless we are vigilant about incorporating the full picture of Kant's and Kantian philosophy into our feminist appropriations. I will show that one way to minimize if not altogether avoid this risk is to follow the model of a new methodology that establishes the continued relevance of all of Kant's claims for our present. Inspired by Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, I will call this alternative methodology the "constructive complicity" approach.

Keywords: Kant, Kantian feminism, feminist interpretations, Spivak, Lorde

As scholars using Kant as a resource for feminist purposes, we assume that our own work today is exempt from structural problems such as racism, sexism, and Eurocentrism, that is, the kind of problems that are exemplified by Kant's works. In other words, we *hope* that in reproducing works on Kant's philosophy we do not re-enact, implicitly or explicitly, his problematic claims, which range from the unnaturalness of a female philosopher, "who might as well have a beard," the stupid things that a black carpenter said "because he was black from head to foot," the poor women "living in the greatest slavery in the Orient," to the "sheep-like existence of the inhabitants of Tahiti" (Kant 2007, GSE 2: 229ff., 254–255; RezHerder

8: 65–66).¹ In this piece, I argue that we cannot hope to avoid these problems if we focus only on the useful parts of Kantian thought and continue to treat these other claims as marginal or incidental to it. In particular, unless we are vigilant about incorporating the full picture of Kant’s and Kantian philosophy into our feminist appropriations, we risk inadvertently claiming that problems of sexism, racism, and Eurocentrism, as well as intersections of these systematic injustices in Kant’s texts and our lives, can be easily dismissed or evaded. I will show that one way to minimize if not altogether avoid this risk is to follow the model of a new methodology that establishes the continued relevance of all of Kant’s claims for our present. Inspired by Spivak’s (1999) *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, I will call this alternative methodology the “constructive complicity” approach.

Spivak shows us that the structural issue underlying Kantian philosophy writ large is that the subject as such in Kant, that is, the subject of culture, civilization, rationality, and philosophy, is geopolitically differentiated in and through his philosophical system and thus positioned as the white man from the Global North (Spivak 1999, 26f.). Indeed, as recent scholarship on Kant’s writings on history and anthropology also demonstrates, the question of the nature of the human being as well as Kant’s hierarchical notion of humanity bear on the entire edifice of Kantian philosophy (Bernasconi 2003 Cohen 2009; Loudon 2000; Mensch 2017; Mills 2005b). Spivak argues, however, that this geopolitical marking of what counts as human in Kantian thought should not discourage us from using his works for our purposes today; rather, she shows that especially if we presume a line of continuity between his problematic claims and our present, we will be in a better position to diagnose and critique our philosophical and political problems today. Therefore, I argue that the best thing that we can hope to achieve as feminist appropriators of canonical figures such as Kant is to employ a methodology of constructive complicity. First, we must admit that we as professional philosophers constructing and re-constructing Kantian arguments are *complicit* in the problems that Kant’s texts exemplify. Then, we must highlight and inherit these problems as our own issues rather than disavowing them as the historical limitations of the man himself or marginal empirical claims that do not infect or inflect the rest of his philosophical system. I will show that this approach requires us to take seriously the Kantian question

¹ All references to Immanuel Kant’s works are from the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant. Since this edition cites the volume and page of the Akademie Edition (Kant 1902), I cite only the latter. Kant’s works are abbreviated as follows: *Anth*: Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View; *GMS*: Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals; *MS*: Metaphysics of Morals (includes Doctrine of Virtue and Doctrine of Right); *KU*: Critique of Judgment; *GSE*: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime; *Log*: Logic; *RezHerder*: Review of Herder’s *Ideas*.

“What is the human being?” together with his problematic answer and its echoes in our contemporary moment. From such a position of complicity, we can then hope to move the conversation on Kant and systematic injustice further and offer more nuanced and honest interpretations of his work as well as our philosophico-political challenges today.

By feminist appropriations of Kant, I refer to the works that take up Kantian vocabulary or arguments in order to solve a philosophical puzzle about gender justice, or in order to construct a tenable position on various ethical and political issues; thus, a feminist appropriation assumes, from the beginning, that Kant has something useful to say about contemporary problems of injustice.² The problem is that most feminist appropriations of Kant continue to treat Kant’s unsavory claims about women’s incapacities or the inferiority of nonwhites and non-Europeans as marginally related to Kant’s philosophy overall or as not authentically Kantian. Other approaches occupy a more ambiguous position, claiming that despite the deep misogyny expressed in his writings, feminists should not give up on some of the more useful concepts, such as rights, autonomy, or the ideal of justice. Implicit in both lines of inquiry is the idea that Kant’s sexist, racist, or Eurocentric claims are not useful for feminist philosophizing.³ While I am sympathetic to these positive appropriations in general, I remain suspicious of the ease with which they move to a more useful Kant. Here, I will offer a supplementary feminist approach that instead lingers on the problematic Kant, and show that doing so will allow us to recognize the legacy of these problems in our lives in three interrelated domains: in terms of what Alcoff termed “philosophy’s demographic challenge” (Alcoff 2013); in terms of the canon formation in philosophy (Park 2013); and in terms of the so-called contradictions between (neo)liberalism and (neo)racism (Balibar 1991).

I start by outlining the methodological issues facing feminist appropriations of Kant and show that the hermeneutic choice undergirding these appropriations is a dangerous one. I then analyze the major contemporary trends in Kantian feminisms, all of which have the implicit effect of treating Kantian philosophy as a reservoir of unconnected and inherently good ideas. As a necessary supplement to

² Note that in this paper I only take up the positive *appropriations* of Kant, what Cynthia Freeland called the “inheritance approach.” (Freeland 2000, 380). Thus, I hereby leave aside feminist readings of Kant’s work that articulate its gendered, colonial, and racial logic; for examples, see Hall (1997); Klinger (1997); Kofman (1997); Marwah (2013); and May Schott (1997). I thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments on clarifying my position on this.

³ I take it for granted that philosophers attuned to the dangers of sexism must also care about other intersecting forms and dimensions of oppression, including racism and Eurocentrism.

these existing methodologies, I push us to rethink what it means to own Kant's corpus *as a whole* and suggest that we perform a comprehensive feminist reading of Kant. In the final part of the essay, then, I sketch out this alternative way of how to be a Kantian feminist or to perform feminist appropriations of Kant. Here I suggest that we adopt an intersectional feminist methodology: rather than focusing only on gender and sexuality, that is, we move toward a feminist hermeneutic à la Spivak that accounts for the various interlocking forms of oppressions, concerning race, class, and geopolitics as well as gender, from a position of constructive complicity with *all* of Kant's works. While Spivak's (1999) main concern in *A Postcolonial Critique of Reason* is *not* how we can read Kant in a feminist way, I will show that we can nonetheless learn a lot from her method and adopt it for a better version of Kantian feminism, which would amount to emphasizing a continuity between Kant's problematic claims and our contemporary issues.

A final word about the stakes of this paper: while the issue of how to be a Kantian feminist will bear on the feminist appropriations of other canonical figures of Western philosophy, such as Aristotle or Hegel, who also made racist, misogynist, or Eurocentric claims, I take my contribution here to be primarily about Kantian feminism. I aim to offer a meta-theory of intersectional feminist readings of Kant by putting mainstream Kantian feminist scholarship, which implicitly or explicitly often includes the conviction that Kant can be saved from himself, into conversation with recent feminist, anti-racist, post- and decolonial scholarship, which points out the complicated legacies of this particular canonical thinker. My main question is not what constitutes good and authentic Kant or feminist scholarship *per se*; rather, I am concerned with what we reproduce when we reproduce Kant's work in feminist philosophy. As such, I am looking at the effects of using Kant on our own thinking and will develop constructive complicity as *a matter of orientation* toward reading Kant for feminist purposes.

“What Is the Human Being?” Methodological Issues Facing Feminist Appropriations of Kant

While reflecting on how various elements of philosophy form a complementary whole in his *Jäsche Logic*, Kant highlights a particular question and subfield as the cornerstone of his critical philosophical system; he writes,

The field of philosophy in the cosmopolitan sense can be brought down to the following questions: 1. What can I know? 2. What ought I to do? 3. For what may I hope? 4. What is the human being? *Metaphysics* answers the first question, *morals* the second, *religion* the third, and *anthropology* the fourth. *Fundamentally, however, we could reckon all of this to anthropology, because the first three questions refer to the last one.* (Kant 1992, Log, 9: 25)

Here we see that the nature of the human being emerges as the central question of Kant's critical philosophy, because the field of anthropology gathers together and matters a great deal to all the questions of being, knowledge, morality, and religion, with which his system is concerned. His own answer to this question has been thoroughly hierarchized along gendered and racialized lines: for instance, when it comes to the ability to develop and act on rational principles, Kant argues that white people fare better than nonwhites and men do better than women (Kant 2007, GSE 2: 229–240; Anth AA 7: 209; 303–311). Furthermore, as Jennifer Mensch points out, Kant did not develop his anthropology as an afterthought to his critical system; rather, “it is precisely in Kant's assessment of anthropology as a field capable of providing an encompassing report on the nature of human life that we are finally able to discern the link between anthropology and the critical system, namely, human being itself, in its materially determined and empirically observed existence, but also in its spontaneous or free moral character thought to lie at its basis” (Mensch 2017, 129).

Until recently, Kant's anthropological writings (which most explicitly deal with the question, “What is the human being?”) have been considered peripheral. The mainstream scholarship draws this distinction between central and peripheral writings of Kant in two ways: one distinction is *chronological* in that it draws the line at the publication of the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781 and catalogs any writings prior to this date to be ‘pre-critical’ and any writings after this date as ‘critical;’ here, we are urged to study or inherit only his critical corpus.⁴ Another way to make the central-peripheral distinction is *systematic* in that it draws on Kant's own classification of ethics and politics as having pure and impure parts, a classification that is then taken to imply the philosophical superiority and importance of the pure or ideal theory over the empirical part (Hill and Boxill 2001; Loudon 2000; Wood 1999). According to both of these distinctions, then, only his critical and central writings are worthy of our scholarly attention, and Kant's legacy today should refer only to his ideal theory, such as the three *Critiques*, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, *The Doctrine of Virtue*, and “Perpetual Peace,” and not to the less important writings on anthropology, pedagogy, geography, and history, such as *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, and lectures on *Physical Geography*.

⁴ The distinction between pre-critical and critical works of Kant is so pervasive in mainstream Kant scholarship that it is impossible to cite all those who maintain it; one may refer to the series which contain the complete English language edition of Kant's works, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, edited by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1995 – present).

Interestingly enough, however, both the chronological and the systematic way of dividing Kant's works agree that the racism, sexism, Orientalism, and Eurocentrism found therein can and must be safely ignored, be it as pre-critical or peripheral. Even recent works that began to pay more attention to Kant's anthropology and geography have a tendency to downplay his racism and sexism. They celebrate Kant on his insight that philosophy must have an empirical part, but they do not seriously engage with these issues of race and gender as genuine philosophical problems. In short, mainstream Kant scholarship would have us believe that Kant's philosophical and political legacy today does *not* include his racist, sexist, and Orientalist claims (Louden 2000).⁵

However you cut it, the most problematic aspects of Kant's work often fall by the wayside: this alone must arouse our suspicion as Kantian feminists. Furthermore, and more importantly, critical philosophers of race and postcolonial theorists, including Bernasconi (2003), Eze (1997), and Mills (2005b), have effectively shown in the past few decades that the distinction between central and peripheral writings of Kant is not only philosophically unjustified but also politically dangerous to maintain. The problem with the *chronological* distinction is that even after 1781 we find racist and sexist arguments in Kant's critical or mature works, e.g., the argument that women are passive citizens in *The Doctrine of Right* (Kant 1996, MS 6: 314ff.) or the claim that South Sea Islanders are lazy in the *Groundwork* (Kant 1996, GMS 4: 423). The problem with the *systematic* distinction is that even in his central works on pure and ideal theory Kant resorts to arguments from the 'impure' disciplines of history, pedagogy, and anthropology, e.g., arguing that application of the Categorical Imperative requires an anthropology in *Groundwork* (Kant 1996, GMS 4:412; Louden 2000, 8).

If we take seriously Kant's claim that moral theory requires an anthropology for application, then his argument that women and people of color are especially at a disadvantage with respect to the development of moral principles, for instance, will have important consequences for interpreting his moral philosophy overall. For this reason, critical philosophers of race point out that there is no neutral philosophical criterion by which we can decide which writings of Kant's are central and must be studied exclusively today (Bernasconi 2003, 16ff.; Mills 2005b, 170ff.).⁶

⁵ Note that the essays in a recent volume on Kant's writings on geography edited by Stuart Elden and Eduardo Mendieta, *Reading Kant's Geography*, seem to be of two minds about this issue: see Elden and Mendieta (2011).

⁶ Mills demonstrates why this distinction between Kant's central and peripheral writings is unjustified most effectively in his "Kant's *Untermenschen*." To restate his eloquent rendering of the problem very briefly: the central-peripheral distinction

Thus, the supposedly neutral or systematic distinction between central and peripheral works of Kant is dangerous for feminist aims, because it tends to hide the uglier aspects of Kant's philosophy and forecloses the opportunity to study them in depth. This then takes us further away from being able to recognize that in reproducing Kant's work in our own thought we may be reproducing some of the problems that Kantian philosophy exhibits.

Feminist appropriations of Kant have to make an important methodological decision, which, as I have shown, is fraught with many problems of its own. In what follows, I look at a number of major trends in feminist interpretations of Kant's work that redirect our focus exclusively to what is salvageable in Kant's work. While this methodology has its merits—as it is perfectly acceptable to pick what is useful in Kant and leave the rest alone—it unfortunately also leads us to miss an important opportunity to address problems of sexism, racism, and Eurocentrism head-on, and more often than not, this line of inquiry inadvertently has the effect of reconstructing an almost fictional Kant or a piecemeal Kantianism. In Bernasconi's terms, we do not know where the “real Kant” would stand,⁷ even if we wanted to hold him accountable for all of his claims.

“Not Throwing the Baby Out with the Bathwater” and “Reading Kant against Himself”: Major Trends in Feminist Appropriations of Kant

One line of feminist approaches is exemplified in positive appropriations of some Kantian terms and positions, such as self-respect (Hay 2013), rational selfhood (Piper 1997), and moral and political ideal of character development (Rumsey 1989) at the expense of Kant's more problematic claims. In her “Development of Character in Kantian Moral Theory,” Jean Rumsey (1989, 261) relies on the distinction between Kant's intelligible and empirical accounts of character to argue that women's subjugation is inconsistent with his ideal theory of moral and political development, and that Kant's views on women are not actually “Kantian.” Adrian Piper's (1997) famous essay “Xenophobia and Kantian Rationalism” argues that Kant's conceptualization of rational selfhood allows us to diagnose and eventually resist xenophobic tendencies in our consciousness (22ff.). Similarly, Carol Hay's (2013)

begs the question. When we make this distinction, we determine, from the beginning, that Kant cannot be sexist or racist because of this distinction, and then we justify this distinction by means of arguing that Kant is not sexist or racist (Mills 2005b).

⁷ Bernasconi points out the irony that, on the one hand, we have a real historical Kant, who *did* make racist and sexist claims; on the other hand, we want to claim that the “real Kant,” who is worthy of our scholarly attention, is *exempt* from the actual things that he did say (Bernasconi 2003, 16ff.).

recent book, *Kantianism, Liberalism, and Feminism: Resisting Oppression*, makes a convincing argument that if we put aside Kant's peripheral writings on the secondary status of women in civil society or on women's inability to fully develop their rational capacities, then the Kantian liberal notion of self-respect offers us an important tool to resist and combat sexist oppression (50ff.). All of these approaches explicitly bracket and therefore choose not to engage Kant's more problematic claims regarding racial, ethnic, and gendered hierarchies, treating them to be inconsistent with his ideal theory (Rumsey 1989), irrelevant to his theory of cognition (Piper 1997), peripheral to his moral-political philosophy or a part of the historical limitations of the man (Hay 2013). Thus, they can be grouped under the category of "not throwing out the baby [i.e., Kant] with the bathwater," for they buy into the distinction between Kant's central and peripheral writings, constructing a form of Kantianism, either altogether or in large part, as devoid of the problems of sexism and racism.⁸

A second set of feminist authors occupy a more ambiguous position regarding Kant's sexism or heterosexism in that they do not deny these problems in order to make room for a positive appropriation; rather, they urge us to propose feminist revisions of some key Kantian concepts either by exploring other unproblematic threads or by proposing a gender-neutral form of Kantianism.⁹ Rae Langton recounts the story of Kant's misogynistic treatment of his contemporary Maria von Herbert, calling this "the severe Kant" of the *Groundwork*, who is partly responsible for equating women like von Herbert with mere things (Langton 1992). As opposed to this misogynist "severe Kant," Langton urges us to turn to what she terms the "sane Kant," whose more feminist-friendly views on embodiment, cultivation of emotions, and genuine friendship can be found in the *Doctrine of Virtue* (501). Barbara Herman (1993) wonders if it is worth thinking about Kant on sex and marriage, pointing out the surprising congruity between his arguments and contemporary feminist positions against sexual objectification. Herman admits the

⁸ For a diverse set of positive appropriations of Kant's philosophy that urge us to disregard or revise its problematic tendencies, see Nagl-Decakal (1997) adopting Kant for care ethics; Wilson (1997) using him for ecofeminist approaches; Kneller (1997) and Moen (1997) using elements of the third *Critique*; Mikkola (2011) urging us to dismiss severe feminist critiques of Kant on account of the fact that he is inconsistent at best.

⁹ For other examples of such feminist appropriations, see Baron (1997) correcting the Kantian notion of emotional detachment in ethics; Korsgaard (1996) prioritizing a gender-equal or gender-neutral ideal of Kingdom of Ends and (1992) for a gender-neutral ideal of friendship; Langton (1995) on analyzing sexual solipsism and objectification on Kantian grounds.

oddity of turning to Kant for a feminist rethinking of sex and marriage, given “his misogyny, his disdain for the body, and his unhappy status as the modern moral philosopher feminists find most objectionable;” but she wishes to force Kant “to go beyond what he otherwise casually accepts” (51). Lastly, Helga Varden (2006) reconstructs a Kantian conception of rightful sexual relations, including sex in heterosexual and gay marriages, and prostitution, based on his relational account of justice. These approaches can all be summarized as “reading Kant against himself.”

I do not wish to dismiss any of these reconstructions of Kant; from a pluralistic perspective, all of the approaches I have outlined here are all authentically Kantian and feminist. However, because all of these approaches take inspiration from some Kantian argument or term but do not deal with Kant in a wholesale way, I will suggest in the remainder of the essay that we call them *Kant-inspired*, not Kantian, feminisms, and that we reserve the term “Kantian” for a comprehensive account of all of Kant’s work. An important reason to do so comes from how Kant constructed his critical system of philosophy; as I have mentioned earlier, he views his entire philosophical system to be enveloped in the question “What is the human being?” Additionally, as well established in his writings on anthropology, the Kantian answer to this question is thoroughly gendered, racialized, and Eurocentric. For this reason, a gender- or race-neutral construction of human nature first and foremost goes against what Kant himself understood by this question (Kleingeld 1993, 145; Mills 2005b, 33ff.). Thus, we cannot properly or straightforwardly call our position *Kantian* in this comprehensive sense if we are answering a question about morality or politics independently of the question of what the human being is for Kant. We can at best be *Kant-inspired* if we are using a handful of Kantian concepts to reconstruct a tenable ethical or political position today.

One may suggest that such a comprehensively Kantian position is found in Varden’s (2015) more recent piece, “Kant and Women.” Varden argues, via an in-depth analysis of both Kant’s central and peripheral writings, that the Kantian philosophy does not collapse in contradiction between egalitarianism and sexism. Rather, the critical system overall gives us both a descriptive account of human nature and a normative account of moral ideals as well as the argument that the latter should correct the former—even if in Kant’s own thought it did not (20ff., 33).¹⁰ Her argument advances the current feminist readings, for she focuses not only on gender but also on sexuality as well as their intersections. She defends a *better*

¹⁰ Note that Varden’s more nuanced reading is almost diametrically opposed by another teleological reading by Inder Marwah (2013); her argument that Kant’s central works are written in a gender-neutral language is also contested earlier by Pauline Kleingeld (1993).

Kantianism on the grounds that Kant “made sure that his philosophical system safeguarded against perpetuating such prejudicial, rationalized mistakes through his conception of morally justifiable construction of related legal-political institutions” (Varden 2015, 19).

However, in the end, Varden too relies on the distinction between ideal and descriptive theories of morals in Kant *and* on the primacy of the former over the latter, a move that implicitly and sometimes not so implicitly forecloses the possibility of analyzing the more complex forms that misogyny and sexism take in Kant’s writings and how these problems may spill over to our present. That is, when we subordinate his descriptive (in this case, sexist) claims to the normative claims in the text, we are already allowing Kant to get away with a lot, since now we cannot analyze what power those descriptive claims held for Kantianism and for us. A number of defensive moves in Varden’s essay exemplifies this issue: she calls for a “sympathetic” reading of Kant’s problematic claims (14, 22) and tells us to “cut him some slack” by pointing out his oppressive-traditional context and his inexperience with women (23, 27); she further argues that Kant “meant no offense” (23ff.) and that his seemingly disparaging remarks about women’s emotional capacities were in fact meant to flatter the social intelligence and power of women (12, 13, 16ff., 22). Thus, although Varden’s feminist appropriation of Kant is comprehensive and much more nuanced than the earlier ones I described here, it also originates out of the motivation, in her own terms, to “resist the conclusion that Kant was an incorrigible sexist” (22), implying that we should be more sympathetic to Kant if we want to employ his ideas for feminist purposes, for otherwise we would need to dismiss him out of hand. In sum, although Varden’s version does sound like a better form of Kantianism, I would suggest that we cannot *hope* to get there so quickly, especially if we immediately insist on “cutting him some slack,” as she does.

This brings me to the second reason why Kantian feminism would be well served if it became comprehensive in a way to emphasize the continuity between our problems and Kant’s. A common tendency in the secondary feminist literature on Kant that I have surveyed here is to suggest, if indirectly, that anything useful for feminist purposes, for example, arguments against sexual objectification and oppression, for legal egalitarianism, or for the importance of friendship, is Kantian, while maintaining that anything distasteful, such as misogyny or racism, is not truly “Kantian.” In brief, the effect of this kind of feminist appropriations ends up being more celebratory than critical of Kant’s ideas. This is what Freeland (2000) calls an ideological position regarding the canon; she warns us feminist interpreters against situating “ourselves as inheritors of a valuable tradition, one from which we seek justifications and legitimacy, [which] may require us to consider it more valuable than it actually is. We may be too respectful toward our forefathers (or masters) and toward canons of historical scholarship about them (such as employing the principle

of charity [or I would add, cutting him some slack])” (389).¹¹ As a result, some feminists argue that we cannot use Kant for feminist purposes at all, because his views are imbued with problems that undermine even the most egalitarian commitments of his philosophy (Schröder 1997). Relatedly, Freeland (2000) argues that *all* feminist appropriation is ideology, buying into the (false) idea that canonical figures are good. Indeed, when we call only good things such as egalitarianism or resisting oppression Kantian and when we claim that things like racism and sexism are not Kantian or negated by other parts of Kantian philosophy, then it does sound like we are ideologically inclined to cut Kant some slack no matter what.

I nevertheless resist the skeptical position that Kant is not at all useful for feminism or that all uses of Kant lapses into ideology in Freeland’s sense of the term. I will show in what follows that we have the resources to combat this skeptical position and that furthermore we have valid philosophical and political reasons for continuing to push for a more comprehensive Kantian feminism. I thus join Varden and others in thinking that a better Kantianism or a better Kantian feminism must be possible; I differ in how we can go about reconstructing it. The question of how to appropriate Kantianism for feminist purposes can be formulated in Audre Lorde’s (2007) terms as one of whether or not the master’s tools can really dismantle the master’s house.

Can the Master’s Tools Really Dismantle the Master’s House?

In her speech entitled “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” Lorde claims that unless we are willing to take a good critical look at ourselves and at the ways in which we consciously and unconsciously might have inherited the patterns and tools of white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy, we cannot hope to fully dismantle the various forms of oppressions in our own lives (Lorde 2007, 112ff.). This claim is important for my purposes, since Kant’s works, for better or for worse, are considered to be master texts of Western philosophy, with all the resonances that the term “master” has: they are master texts in the sense of inaugurating and legitimizing a certain way of doing philosophy, they designate certain social identities as masters, and they are currently revered and reproduced in our field with more frequency than others. At the same time, these texts provide major tools for critique, and to that extent, as Spivak (1999) puts it, “our sense of critique is too thoroughly determined by Kant for us to be able to reject [him] as a motivated imperialist” (6). Here I will modify Lorde’s (2007) claim slightly and argue that the master’s tools *alone* will never dismantle the master’s house, that we also need to account for the effects of the master’s tools on our own thinking before we

¹¹ Also see Mills (2005a).

can reclaim these tools.¹² We first need to acknowledge the problems of the entire house, analyze how these tools may have shaped our world and worldview, and critique the tools as well as the house. From this position, we can continue to dismantle the old house and rebuild a more inhabitable place.¹³

It proves difficult to detach the Kantian tools from the entirety of the edifice, and this will give us more reasons to be skeptical of using Kant for feminism. For instance, feminist critiques point out that the Kantian ideal of moral autonomy portrays a gendered, male-centric view of morality and ethical relations (Jaggar 1983; Lloyd 1986); queer theorists argue that his argument for the seemingly egalitarian marriage contract supports and reproduces a heteronormative understanding of sexual intimacy (Floyd 2009); and political philosophers show that his ideal of civilization that prioritizes arts, letters, and commerce at the expense of other forms of living envisions a Eurocentric view of culture (Serequeberhan 1996; Zöller 2011). Now, if we want to reclaim any of these Kantian notions such as autonomy, marriage, or culture, we need to grant that these very tools are often implicated in the construction of the Eurocentric, imperialist, white supremacist, and hetero-patriarchal house in which we live, and that therefore they cannot be unambiguously or unproblematically appropriated for feminist concerns. At any rate, using Kant for feminist purposes comes with a problematic baggage, and we need to think carefully about what we want to do with this baggage.

The feminist approaches that I have outlined thus far are not unaware of this baggage; they choose to take what is useful for contemporary feminist and anti-racist concerns and leave the rest untouched and unanalyzed. While this pragmatic orientation has been useful, I am worried that without paying particular attention to the ways in which the Kantian tools are structurally interconnected, we inadvertently risk erasing, downplaying, disavowing the fullness of Kant's work, or worse, we might end up merely *remodeling* the master's house as opposed to *dismantling* it entirely. In this sense, then, feminists cannot rely on the Kantian tools alone to dismantle oppression; we need to take a good critical look at the effects of these tools on our own thinking as well.

¹²Lorde is obviously talking about the white feminist establishment and how its very tools (white supremacist heteronormativity) will not dismantle the patriarchy. My point is slightly different and refers to method of appropriating master's texts for dismantling current structures of Western philosophy and our lives. I thank Lucius Outlaw for pushing me to clarify this point regarding Lorde's claim.

¹³ I take Charles Mills's more recent work on Black Radical Kantianism (Mills 2017) to be this kind of rebuilding that can only come after first acknowledging the problems of Kantianism, as his earlier work did.

One way to minimize the risk of merely remodeling the master's house, as well as to heed Lorde's (2007) warning, would be to follow Mills' suggestion that we re-read Kant's writings with the realization that we are presented with two different aspects of the same theory and that therefore his racism is not contrary to his egalitarianism but forms a complementary whole (Mills 2005b, 170ff.). Indeed, bypassing the sexism, racism, and orientalism located in his texts in favor of an ideal theory has the effect of severing the link between Kantian arguments for white supremacy, patriarchy, Eurocentrism and our contemporary liberal sensibilities and positions. To restore this connection, we need to explicitly deal with the fact that in one and the same breath Kant's work articulates autonomy and racial hierarchy, and analyze how this has logically and historically been possible.

In the remainder of this essay, I will introduce another necessary feminist orientation toward Kant's work that *both* admits the problems that Kantianism exhibits *and* appropriates him for enabling a constructive complicity between our position and his thought. Acknowledging that Kantianism can mean *both* a racist, sexist, Eurocentric worldview *and* an egalitarian system, to put it somewhat directly, does *not* have to be an obstacle against taking him up for feminist or anti-racist aims. I suggest that we redirect our focus from what is salvageable (the good Kant or Kantianism) to inheriting Kantianism as a whole, and that we make Kant's texts ours (i.e., feminists') by reclaiming them in their entirety, the good, the bad, and the ugly. To be a Kantian feminist in this comprehensive sense that I advocate, then, requires that we pursue the question of the human being as it figures and shapes the rest of Kant's philosophy; such a pursuit has the additional benefit of offering a form of Kantian feminism that is intersectional.¹⁴ The origins of such a comprehensive methodology, albeit with different goals and stakes, are located in Spivak's (1999) complicit construction of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.

Enabling a Constructive Complicity in Feminist Readings of Kant: The Case of Spivak

In her *Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a Vanishing Present*, Spivak (1999) offers a re-reading of what she calls the three wise men of Europe, namely,

¹⁴ With the exception of Herman (1993) and Varden (2006, 2015), the feminist interpretations that I have analyzed focus only on one aspect of oppression, mainly on gender or sexuality, without attending to the ways in which Kant's texts enact an intersectional account of identity and oppression. If the term "Kantian" will have to mean a systematic or comprehensive construction of Kant's arguments, then subjecthood as such in a Kantian system must be grounded not only on maleness but also on whiteness and Europeaness. This is another way to heed Lorde's warning about the pitfalls of white feminism.

Kant, Hegel and Marx, with a view to show that they are not merely transparent or motivated repositories of ideas but are also remote discursive precursors of postcolonial theory. She undertakes this reading with the hope that it will do more than merely point out their imperialism and that it will find a reader who will discover a “*constructive rather than a disabling [sic] complicity* between our positions and theirs, for there often seems no choice between excuses and accusations” (3–4, emphasis added). The *disabling*, or rather the *discouraging*, complicity she talks about is the result of a strategy of reading canonical philosophical figures in a way that merely accuses them of being racist, sexist, or imperialist. For instance, such a reading would either excuse Kant for being limited to his historical circumstances or accuse him of initiating the current systemic oppressions that we experience now. Either way, they imply that there can be no productive engagement with the complexities of Kantian thought because any engagement is doomed to get stuck between defensiveness and finger-pointing. *Constructive* complicity approach, however, refuses this simplistic binary and argues for a more ambiguous position regarding the founding figures of Western thought. Rather than assuming that Kant is incorrigible, Spivak’s feminist and postcolonial reading of Kant uses Kantian philosophy to elaborate on the basic premise of postcolonial theory, namely, that the white upper-middle-class male subject of the Global North is understood to be *the* subject of philosophy and how the non-European non-male subject was foreclosed from humanity, as if by a mere rhetorical gesture. By focusing on a seemingly accidental moment in a central text such as the *Critique of Judgment*, Spivak provides a positive philosophical construction that traces a line of continuity and complicity between Kant’s position and our post- and neo-colonial present (9).

Spivak begins by arguing that Kantian philosophy must be understood systematically and comprehensively, and that even a “critical” or “central” work such as the *Critique of Judgment* relies on arguments from the so-called peripheral writings on anthropology and history. More specifically, she analyzes a passage about the final purpose of human existence in the *Critique of Judgment*, where Kant makes a remark about how difficult it is to know the purpose of the existence of human beings, “*especially when it comes to the New Hollanders or the Fuegians*” (Kant 1998, KU 5: 378). She points out that if we bypass this remark as a minor rhetorical detail or just historical bias, we ignore and deny the ways in which Kant’s text is grounded in a particular history and geography, namely that of Europe, while purporting to a universal and all-inclusive subjectivity (Spivak 1999, 16ff.). This is an important textual moment for Spivak, since this is where the subject of philosophy and rationality is named by ejecting, by means of a passing remark, those who does not count as full persons. This claim about full personhood is repeated in and therefore continuous with Kant’s purported peripheral anthropological writings as

well. Thus, in the first place she thoroughly deconstructs the central-peripheral distinction.

Through Spivak's reading, we come to the realization that the most important Kantian question, namely, the question of what the human being is, runs through and determines the entirety of Kant's corpus. Her feminist appropriation of Kant in this way exposes a certain geopolitical "norming of personhood" (Mills 1997, 53ff.), that is, the allocation of more importance to some lives at the expense of others based on their geographical location and social identity. It bears repeating that she does not undertake this endeavor in order to merely blame Kant or Kantian philosophy; as she puts it, "Ostentatiously to turn one's back on, say, [Kant], when so much of one's critique is clearly if sometimes unwittingly copied from them, is to disavow agency, declare kingdom come by a denial of history" (Spivak 1999, 9). Taking for granted that Kant and Kantianism have deeply shaped our present, Spivak's interpretation of this "wise man of Europe" is systematic and teases out this important line of continuity about the notion of humanity between Kantianism and postcolonial theory as well as between Kant's and our historical contexts.

I cannot possibly give a full account of Spivak's (1999) appropriation of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in her *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, nor would that serve my aim here. Her main goal is to trace the genealogy of contemporary postcolonial theory, which became complicit with European hegemony, back to Kant, Hegel, and Marx. Nonetheless, I take the following to be the major gain of Spivak's constructive complicity with, or a complicit construction of, Kant's work: she neither denies Kant's racism in order to use some of his tools such as autonomy, nor dismisses Kant's philosophical importance out of hand because Kant doubts that indigenous lives have a purpose at all. Instead, she offers a third, more ambiguous path, beyond a vacillation between a pure palatable Kant or a piecemeal Kantianism. The lesson that I draw from Spivak's complicit construction or constructively complicit reading, then, is that in order to make these "master texts our servants once more" in her words, or in this particular case, in order to make Kant truly useful for feminist, anti-racist, anti-colonial theorizing, we need to look at his text in its entirety, including its seemingly accidental or minor moments in which Kant makes problematic claims about women and nonwhite or non-European peoples.

Enabling a constructive complicity with Kant requires that we go back to these "master" texts of philosophy, not only in order to salvage bits and pieces that are useful, but also and more importantly in order to show our determination by and complicity with them. A feminist appropriation of Kantian philosophy like Spivak's shows us that *the more* we can question and problematize the neat but ultimately false choice between a neutral, good, pure Kantianism and a problematic Kant, the better we will be able to critique our present and diagnose the extent to which our current philosophical and political commitments may bear implicit or

explicit traces of racism, sexism, and Eurocentrism as enacted by a certain Kantianism itself. In brief, it is despite and especially because of all their problems that the canonical texts such as Kant's can serve critical feminist thought today. In what follows, I will tease out this point about the continuity between Kantian problems and our contemporary issues in more detail.

Toward a Constructive Complicity with the Good, the Bad (and the Ugly) in Kant's Work

As feminists and critical philosophers of race in thinking about these issues have taught us, when we unproblematically replace "men" with "all of human kind" in canonical works (as opposed to reading them as just men or just white, western European, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied men of upper-middle class), then we are in fact distorting and misrepresenting these texts and their contemporary legacies. We are making it impossible to recognize the link between the canon and the present and moving away from taking responsibility for the oppressive structures that the arguments of these canonical texts erect and support. Kleingeld (1993) suggests that the so-called "contradictions" regarding sex and gender in Kant's writings can be productive for feminist aims (145). Similarly, Bernasconi (2003) argues that these contradictions regarding race and ethnicity will perhaps say something interesting about today's cosmopolitan ideas, and it will remind us to be vigilant in assuming that cosmopolitanism is automatically race-inclusive or race-less (18). In what follows, I will show by means of concrete examples that a productive way to engage with these supposed contradictions between a hierarchical notion of humanity and egalitarianism as well as their legacies in our thinking today would need to reclaim the whole of Kant's thought and not downplay, nor dismiss, nor pass over quickly the problematic aspects. For we all know these contradictions exemplified in Kant's work are in fact representative of the larger contradictions of our lives today and not so easily undone. In order to develop a constructive complicity approach to Kant's work, then, we must start with the premise that Kantianism includes the ideal of kingdom of ends as well as the beginnings of scientific and cultural racisms, a reinforcement of patriarchy, and a casual Eurocentrism. This requires that we enact a complicity with the good, the bad, and the ugly of Kantianism.

Put very briefly, what I mean by constructive complicity in appropriations of Kantianism amounts to first acknowledging and accounting for Kant's arguments for the second-class status of women and people of color in his critical system overall. We must pay attention to just what we are doing when we are reproducing Kant's work by asking ourselves if our reconstruction of Kantianism has the effect of *foreclosing* the possibility of talking about the more problematic aspects of his thought such as racism, sexism, and Eurocentrism, or if it leads us to evade

responsibility for the problems of the master's house in which we live. The best thing for which the Kantian feminist can hope, then, is not to merely remodel—or worse, to inadvertently reinforce the foundations of—the master's house. More specifically, following Spivak's (1999) constructive complicity approach in re-reading Kant and owning up to Kant's thought as a whole today would lead to recognizing the full legacy of Kantianism in the present.

While this is not a complete list, here are some concrete ways in which we can enable a constructive complicity between Kantianism and the current race and gender gap in philosophy, its exclusive canon formation, and the supposed contradictions between racism and liberalism:

1. *Enabling a Constructive Complicity between Kantianism and Philosophy's Demographic Challenge:*

It would behoove us to consider what Linda Alcoff (2013) termed “philosophy's demographic challenge,” namely, the current gender, race, and ethnicity imbalance in professional philosophy as a continuation of the claims made by the canonical figures of Western philosophy (21). This problem can be understood particularly as concrete instantiations of Kant's arguments that it is unnatural for a woman to be a philosopher, or that black people, because they are black, say stupid things and have no intellectual abilities. We can then begin to see some of the data concerning the gender and race gap in academia, especially in the discipline of philosophy, as a direct legacy of Kant's claim that a woman whose head is full of Greek goes against her nature or of his agreement with Hume that people of African descent are no more than parrots (Kant 2007, GSE 2: 229ff., 2: 253).

According to this constructive complicity approach, then, an important reason why philosophy has a demographic challenge is that we may have inherited from Kant, even in our explicit disavowals, the hierarchical or exclusionary ways to think about who can be a philosopher or what philosophy is. We can trace this very informative line of continuity, however, only when we take responsibility for the uglier parts of Kant's claims and assume a position of complicity with them. Kant very likely did not mean “all human beings” when he employed the German word for mankind [*Mensch*] or when he used masculine pronouns. We can of course now extend some of these claims to be more inclusive, but we need to do so by first going over Kant's usage of the term, that is, without erasing its historically exclusionary meaning and the contemporary resonances of this meaning. Hearing these contemporary resonances allows to give an account of the pervasive “culture of justification in professional philosophy” in Kristi Dotson's (2012) terms as a continuation of those very Kantian claims about the innate rational capacities of certain kinds of people. We can also understand Bill Lawson's (2012) point about

how the idea of the intellectual inferiority of Blacks still haunts the achievements of Black scholars in the discipline of philosophy (192).

2. *Enabling a Constructive Complicity between Kantianism and Canon Formation in Philosophy:*

When we include Kant's full body of work rather than dismissing his remarks about non-Europeans as minor rhetorical details, we will be able to diagnose and better understand how Kantianism shaped philosophical thinking since the 1780s in the Global North, i.e., the canon of (Western) philosophy, in a very particular way. For instance, Kant remarks in the Introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason* that Egyptians were merely groping about concepts of mathematics until the Greeks came to the scene and turned it into a systematic science (Kant 2000, BXVI). This claim legitimizes only a certain kind of theoretical inquiry, that is, a systematic one, as scientific and therefore philosophical. Following this claim and through extensive historical analysis, Peter Park's (2013) recent book demonstrates in a striking way Kant's major role in defining what counts as philosophy or who counts as philosophers today. Park shows that it was Kant's immediate successors who included only systematic, scientific, and therefore Western thinking in philosophy textbooks, and they did so by following Kant's remarks about the nature of "genuine" philosophy as systematic. Taking a closer look at Kant's notion of "system" or "science" and at how these notions are connected to the idea of the "West" and philosophy, then, no matter how unpalatable we find it, will be helpful for diagnosing the ways in which Kantianism gave rise to and is complicit with an exclusive understanding of the philosophical canon then and now (Park 2013, 27).

3. *Enabling a Constructive Complicity between Kantianism and (Neo)Liberalism/(Neo)Racism:*

It is no secret any longer that Kant was among the first thinkers who helped to create and solidify a scientific notion of race (Bernasconi 2001, 11ff.). Additionally, his views on civilization center around European ways of living and being. Thus, he is crucial to race-thinking in terms of both Eurocentrism and a certain scientism. An intersectional feminist appropriation of Kant that investigates the link between scientific racism and cultural supremacy together with Kant's versions of racism will be able to trace the historical continuity between Kant and the present. In this way, we will find valuable tools for diagnosing and working through the rise of white supremacy in Europe and the US today in the midst of ostensible liberal democracies.

As Étienne Balibar (1991) points out, ever since we supposedly left behind scientific or biological racism, a somewhat new form of racism, namely, the idea that certain cultures and ways of living are incompatible with and inferior to European or

American ideals of freedom, has emerged as its replacement; in this way, culture has become the new race for liberal thought. This is evidenced by the rise of Islamophobia and anti-immigration policies in Europe as well as in the US, where the rhetoric about the incommensurability of the culture and practices of Muslims and immigrants have been repeatedly used to bolster this “neoracism,” not only by right-wing conservatives but also by liberals. Relatedly, in today’s mainstream liberal political theory, it is perfectly acceptable to explain away global economic inequalities in terms of “a culture of poverty,” that is, some culture’s inherent lack of ability or talent, or as an entire continent’s haplessness and “resource curse.”¹⁵ Because these claims find an uncontested place in liberal thinking today, we cannot easily presume that we left behind problems of Eurocentrism or Western white superiority that Kant’s work exemplifies. Drawing a line of continuity between Kant’s claims about Tahitians’ lack of rational abilities, South Sea Islander’s laziness, Africans’ lack of talents, and current neoliberal ideologies will be useful for being able to identify the neo-racism implicit in certain strands of global economic and political liberalism.

On this note, I also suggest that every time we teach Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, we teach it alongside his views on women and people of color. We should make the so-called tensions or contradictions between universalism and sexism/racism explicit and clear to our students without trying to excuse, erase, or downplay them. Furthermore, rather than trying to show a way out of these problems, let us first invite our students to appreciate them *as important philosophical and political problems*. Allowing our students to embrace the difficulties surrounding ethical and political situations is in fact an important pedagogical lesson that will prepare them to develop complex positions: in this way, they will be able to analyze why there are still very few women in upper-level management in any given institution, how the declaration that *all men are created equal* went hand in hand with slavery for almost a century, or how a liberal constitution committed to the right to a fair trial for all citizens can coexist with a disproportionate number of incarcerated black people in the contemporary US. Lingering on these so-called tensions of liberalism will yield a deeper understanding of how, as Sheth (2015) puts it, (neo)liberalism and racism are wed.

Conclusion

On the one hand, Kant’s name is rightly associated with the ideals of egalitarianism, autonomy, and self-respect, and feminists have been returning to

¹⁵ For the resurgence of “culture of poverty” in political thought, see Small, Harding, and Lamont (2010); on the origins of the “resource curse of Africa” and its critique, see respectively Ajei and Flikschuh (2014) and Huntington (1991).

these Kantian concepts as they see fit. On the other hand, Kant's work also helped establish and gave credence to various forms of racism, including scientific and cultural ones, exhibited a casual yet dangerous misogyny, and legitimized the construction of the philosophical canon as exclusively Western and European. For these reasons, tackling these problems in the context of Kant scholarship should also be a feminist concern. Insofar as Kantianism as a philosophical system is figured by the question of the nature of the human being, and insofar as Kant's own answer to this question was racialized and gendered, then the Kantian house to which we want to give a feminist make-over has some structural issues that we also need to take up. In short, using Kant for feminist work always comes with baggage; while one way to deal with this baggage is to ignore it and focus on instead what is useful, here I have offered another necessary way that explicitly traces a line of continuity between this baggage and our contemporary problems.

I am convinced that despite our good will and best efforts, none of us can ever be safeguarded from consciously or unconsciously reproducing in our lives and work the sexist, racist, and Eurocentric structures and tendencies that coexisted with and are implicated in the tools that we want to salvage from Kant. This is why I suggest that we confront the Kantian arguments about them head-on and inherit these arguments as a fundamental part of our own thinking and situation, rather than try to dismiss or downplay their influence on the Kantian notions that we do want to reclaim. As Bernasconi (2003) suggests, if one wants to address (and I would add diagnose and combat) racism, then investigating Kant's racism in its coexistence with his commitment to various liberal ideas such as equality, freedom, and cosmopolitanism would be a good place to start (17). A scientific as well as a cultural racism, an overt Eurocentrism, and patriarchal-misogynistic arguments existed side by side with Kant's commitment to egalitarianism, just as they may exist side by side with our liberal sensibilities and philosophico-political commitments today. We should therefore take care not to sever the important connection between the canon and our philosophical and political sensibilities, for we cannot presume that our work is exempt from sexism and racism just because we use gender-neutral pronouns, explicitly denounce the biological hierarchy of races, or do not overtly proclaim other ways of doing philosophy to be inferior.

Acknowledging Kant's racism or misogyny does not mean that a Kantian antiracism or feminism is impossible; furthermore, by first taking responsibility for the Kantian edifice as a whole, we can arrive at a Kantian feminism that is more nuanced and responsive to the complexities of structural oppression. I suggest that each time we write on Kant we clarify our standpoint and methodology without committing to the ideology that Kantianism will be immediately good. That is, a feminist appropriation does not need to reconstruct an ethically or politically pure Kantianism, for such a reconstruction of the "feminist-friendly," "real," or "sane"

Kant has the effect of suggesting that we have already left behind the “insanity” that was racism, sexism, or European supremacy. The question of whether or not we really left these problems behind is exactly the question on the table for intersectional feminists. As Spivak shows us, while acknowledging Kant’s foreclosure of non-European non-male subject from rationality does implicate him in imperialist thinking, it does not make Kantian philosophy useless for postcolonial theory. On the contrary, this approach situates him as a discursive precursor to any form of postcolonial critique and makes him newly relevant for our present moment. We should therefore take care not to foreclose the possibility of using Kantianism to refer to arguments about the natural inequality of the sexes, races, and ethnicities, so that we can recognize, trace, and criticize his role in articulating and supporting contemporary political and philosophical problems, including but not limited to philosophy’s demographic challenge, the exclusivity of philosophical canon formation, and neoracism on the surge, as I have shown.

Our modern political and philosophical sensibilities are indebted to Kant. Just as Kant has strains within his philosophy that (seem to) run contrary to or undermine these liberal sensibilities or commitments, so too do we today. Just as his philosophical commitments may have determined the limits of who can be a good philosopher or what counts as good philosophy, so too do ours today. I have suggested that we offer a construction of *all* of Kant’s work, without apologizing for or excusing him or without rushing to a better Kantianism. This would mean taking into account Kant’s answer to the question of what the human being is, together with the resonance of this answer today, when we reproduce his work. Let us inherit even the more problematic aspects of Kantianism as our own issues, diagnose the structures that gave rise to them, and develop more nuanced and realistic approaches to resist and eventually eradicate them, both from the profession of philosophy and from the world outside academia.

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DILEK HUSEYINZADEGAN is an assistant professor of philosophy, affiliated faculty of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and of the Program in Global and Postcolonial Studies at Emory University. Her current research interests include social and political philosophy, Kant and German idealism, feminist philosophies, and critical philosophy of race.