

(Book Abstract)

Bodies and Pleasures in Late Kant

by

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Mark Tansey, *Robbe-Grillet Cleansing Every Object in Sight*
(1981) [Oil on canvas with crayon; 6' x 6' 1/4"; Gift of Mr. and Mrs.
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Introduction

Chapter One: “Kant’s Aliens”

Kant had a life-long fascination with the existence of intelligent life on other worlds, a fascination that sharply intensified in his late work. Why? Chapter One explores the two ways in which the philosopher puts the figure of extraterrestrial life to use in the 1790s: to investigate the limits of what it means to be human, but “safely” to place that discussion off-world; and to express his profound anxieties about “alien” forms of life that are in fact much closer to home. Those “aliens” include women, European Jews (“the Palestinians living among us,” as he says), and the Prussian nobility.

Chapter Two: “Junk Philosophy: Kant on Drugs”

Kant becomes an “anthropologist” of Europeans at the same historical moment that witnesses the emergence of the addict as a bona fide form of identity. Well known as “the sober sage of Königsberg,” Kant proves to be unusually interested in and troubled by addictive practices and other unruly consumptive behaviours. He also worries inordinately about the roles that drugs and drugged states of mind play in everyday life. Thomas de Quincey, “the English opium eater,” recognized this worry in Kant, and so this chapter begins with a consideration of both thinkers. Together they form an odd couple representing not only sobriety and addiction, respectively, but also the subtle ways in which the two states are closely intertwined, each unthinkable without the other. Chapter Two explores Kant’s remarks about habit, addiction, sobriety, and drugs, treating them as places where the philosopher must confront the furious work of inhuman desires that lie at the heart of being human.

Chapter Three: “On a Recently Adopted Inferior Tone in Philosophy: Kant’s Laughter”

Few critics notice that Kant discusses the nature of laughter in the 3rd Critique, thereby marking the seriousness with which the philosopher took the question of humour. During the period following his critical writings, Kant returns several times to what it means to laugh. What is a joke and what is humour? What happens to a joke within philosophical discourse? In Kant’s hands, these turn out to be much more complicated questions than they at first seem. Chapter Three explores how Kant puts jokes to certain forms of philosophical work. Jokes and discussions of humour provide Kant with spaces within his work to raise otherwise forbidden or hard to articulate questions about life in the 1790s.

Chapter Four: “Kant’s Wartime: The Tremulous Body of Philosophy”

Kant’s last texts are published amid the brutal intensification of militarism, armed conflict, and the war on thinking. As Kant notes in *Toward Perpetual Peace* (1795), Europe has brought itself to the very brink of something new and horrifying, namely “wars of extermination.” In what ways are Kant’s late writings inflected by this grim and globalized prospect, marred by the violence to which they also bear witness? How are the works of the 1790s made to tremble at war’s awful reality? War changes at the end of the 18th century. In Kant’s hands, thoughts of peaceableness and hope do too

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Outline of the Argument

In the last decade of his life as a practising philosopher, Immanuel Kant shifted the focus of his work from the task of transcendental critique, the systematic examination of the rational grounds of knowledge, judgment, and moral action, to more palpably empirical and cultural concerns. To be sure, this was no dramatic *Kehre* or turn of the sort that, for example, Heidegger’s work is sometimes said to have undergone, but rather a quickening of empirical impulses and an openness to new epistemic material that can be traced back to Kant’s earliest writings and that is in fact legible in the critiques. Kant conducted this social work, so to speak, under the rubric of what he sometimes called “pragmatic anthropology”—the title of his last published book, but also a term that more broadly names his interest in analyzing cultural forms and psychological phenomena that did not conventionally come under the purview of philosophy. As my book argues, anthropology for Kant is not so much the abandonment of the philosophical project as a way of writing it *otherwise*, this, by thinking philosophy through discourses that were for the most part alien to it. These discourses range from geography, education, medicine, and political theory to satire and autobiography (in the case in the strangely personal last section of *Conflict of the Faculties* [1798]), as well as “world history, biographies, and even plays and novels” [6] (the mixed archive of *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* for which Kant himself expresses some incredulity). Single texts in Kant’s late work can attest to this hybridization of philosophical labour. For example, *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797-8), whose very title registers Kant’s longstanding stake in the *a priori* principles governing knowledge, is also fantastically rich with empirical details—ranging from the lurid sexual habits of married couples, to the sentimental attachments that we have to our favourite pets, to the treatment of opium addicts, to the limits of friendship in a hostile and militarized social universe—that threaten at points to overtake his arguments about practical reason, and that signal

both his fascination with and respect for the irreducible complexities of life in the Prussian bourgeois quotidian. Kant's curiosity about this life, coupled with his astute sense of its consequences for philosophical reasoning, are subjects that my book explores in detail. A question that Kant asks towards the conclusion of *Metaphysics of Morals* nicely captures the problematic at hand: "How should people be treated in accordance with their differences in rank, age, sex, health, prosperity or poverty *and so forth?* (584)," he muses, ostensibly speaking to the matter of "ethical duties toward one another" but also evoking the risk—the possibilities and problems—of the anthropological investigations that he was elsewhere also pursuing by that name. Kant's phrasing here is telling, for it registers an indeterminacy about the encounter between reflective judgment and the differends of the social universe; "*and so forth*" marks the indeterminate zone where his text trails off into a world populated by ever more finely differentiated bodies towards which all the philosopher can do is gesture interrogatively but from which he finds it impossible, finally, to turn away. Kant never ceased to be the rational philosopher par excellence, but he also devoted considerable energy to the unpredictable and often other-than-rational heterogeneity of the Prussian social body—a body of which, I argue, he was a vital part, passionately playing the role of an *embedded* anthropologist who loved peace and dreaded war.

Overshadowed by the critical power and philosophical distinction that is usually accorded to Kant's critical period, Kant's anthropological writings have only recently become the subject of sustained discussion. Robert Louden, the editor and translator of some of Kant's most significant late work, says it best: "nearly two hundred years after his death and who knows how many books and articles," this material "unfortunately remains a well-kept secret, even among Kant scholars" (vii). Like the recent work of Peter Fenves, my book seeks to rectify this lacunae in Kant scholarship, the objective being to attend to the complex relationships that obtain between eighteenth-century material culture and Kant's fervent anthropological rapport with that culture. As I suggest, the texts from the 1790's remain crucially important in this regard, not least because we see modelled in them questions that evoke some of our own hopes and fears for a genuine cosmopolitanism. Moreover, Kant's decision to write and to publish philosophy in the mode of anthropology augurs the birth of the human sciences—as Foucault first recognized—whose prestige in the universities today obscures their deeply ambivalent origins in the philosopher's last published works. Anthropology, both as a philosophical genre, with its own narrative conventions and readerly competences, *and* as a particular relationship to knowledge, was attractive to Kant from the start of his career. Yet it isn't until the last decade that he chose, for example, to consolidate his lectures on the subject and to make them available to what he fantasized as "the general reading public" (*Anthropology* 6). What specific historical forces account for this change in Kant's intellectual itinerary, a change, I argue, not only in the subject matter of philosophical reflection but also in the very way in which philosophy is conducted and consumed? What hybrid forms of analysis and intervention come of this renewed interest in what Kant calls "knowledge of the world" (4)? These are two principal queries that my book seeks to answer through a close reading of a range of late texts, including *Anthropology from a Pragmatic*

Point of View, Conflict of the Faculties (1798), *Towards Perpetual Peace* (1795), as well as Kant's considerable correspondence from the period.

To be sure, Kant's turn to the social universe proves quite difficult to execute, first, because he remains to his last days drawn to the possibilities of writing a systematic philosophy that does not need to sully itself with the myriad and ultimately uncontainable details of empirical life, and second because anthropological discourse itself proves to be an oddly mixed thing for the philosopher---tantalizing precisely for tarrying with the pressing questions of bourgeois dailyness (From whom should I keep secrets? How does one combat boredom? Are drugs good or bad for me?), but also arduous for repeatedly exposing him to what Foucault might call the realm of "bodies and pleasures," i.e., the opaque, uncertain but ever-present social and psychic phenomena that prove resistant to philosophical reasoning and that mark the troubled boundaries of Enlightenment thinking when it comes to addressing shifting cultural forms and borderline psychological conditions. My book investigates the matters and subjects--the bodies and pleasures--of apparently minor interest to Kant and Kant studies--such as drugs and habituation, laughter and jokes, "freaks" and "extra-terrestrial rational beings"--in order to demonstrate that these are of major significance to the philosopher's work. In their very marginality, I argue, they form a uniquely powerful optic through which to reconsider themes that are more conventionally considered to lie at the heart of Kantianism: the nature of respect, the limits of knowledge, and the power of judgment. In other words, *Bodies and Pleasures* responds to a movement of thought that thrums through Kant's late work; namely, the philosopher frankly addresses the intricacies of individual cultural and psychological phenomena in a way that also sheds light on the practice of anthropology as a special form of philosophical reflection.

Once Kant had been content with surveying "reason itself and its pure thinking," where, he contended, it was possible to make a inclusive "inventory:" "To obtain complete knowledge of these," he writes in the Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, "there is no need to go far afield, since I come upon them in my own self...In this field nothing can escape us" (26, 29). But during the last decade of his work, Kant's claims grow less panoptically certain and more self-consciously circumspect. "It is as if just a few places on the vast map of our mind were illuminated," he says wearily and warily in the *Anthropology*--a startling admission for the exemplary *Aufklärer* to make, but one that reminds us that "Enlightenment" means different things even to the philosopher with whom the term is virtually synonymous. The chiaroscuro of that mental cartography reproduces, I argue, Kant's experience of navigating the undiscovered countries making up the world--or rather worlds--of the Prussian bourgeoisie, where it is not the extent of the terrain but its very nature that thwarts the demands of light and truth. Moreover, the world of bodies and pleasures proves to be the realm in which Kant's stake in "reflective judgment"--outlined in the Third Critique--is most rigorously and problematically put to the test, faced as the philosopher is with the prospect of creating rules for a cultural universe of particularities for which there are no rules. Anthropology, I argue, is the philosophical discourse in which Kant risks the argument that "determinate judgment," in which a general law is applied to a particular case, is less valuable than he had once claimed because it fails to do justice to the

new worlds and new world order that he is encountering not only in his role as philosopher but at the level of his lived experience in the hustle and bustle of a garrison town like Königsberg. What comes of that singular meeting of philosophical subject and object has direct consequences for how Kant writes philosophy, as Diane Morgan intimates when she notes that unlike determinate judgment, reflective judgment is “more artistic and experimental, [and] more difficult” (55). Kant’s anthropological writings register this combination of ardour, creativity, and contingency, I contend, in the tissue of their arguments, illustrations, narrative, and rhetoric, at once quickened and unsettled by the chance that reflective judgment is—as Tilottama Rajan has written-- “our only way of accommodating the unfinished and the unthought, ...what is still becoming” (9). In making room for these alterities, as fitful and ambivalently accomplished as that labour of adjustment often is in his late work, Kant makes philosophy strange to itself.

Kant’s anthropological experiments are complicated by other imperatives to which my book attends, especially his felt need to secure a productive place for philosophy amid an emerging Prussian bourgeoisie, and to construct a meaningful habitus for himself within a discipline or “faculty” that was itself undergoing rapid and not altogether happy change. It is useful in this context to recall that the Jena School, the site of so many consequentially disruptive pressures from within philosophy, coalesces during the years that Kant’s last texts are published, the same period that sees his status as an intellectual celebrity peak. The Prussian material culture of which *Bodies and Pleasures* is mindful thus includes the peculiar tensions characterizing the philosophical and institutional *métier* in which Kant toiled and indeed competed to be heard. Because it is at once immersed in and critical of this context, I suggest, Kant’s late work is characterized by several telling fractures and competing pressures, and it is the purpose of my book to explore these indeterminacies—not to catch Kant out, as it were, but to read the self-differences rippling through his texts as a productive site of philosophical and cultural theorization and action. Modelled on the example of readings of Kant by thinkers like Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Peter Fenves, and Sarah Kofman, *Bodies and Pleasures* attends specifically to the rhetorical features of the late writings, including their narrative strategies, illustrations, and linguistic turns, as well as their hesitancies, redoublings, and self-conscious stagings of the philosopher as a figure in his own work. Kant’s texts, I argue, apprehend and produce epistemological and ethical indeterminacies that at once trigger some of his most dogmatic claims about human life and test the limits of their coherence. Focussing specifically on the varying affective intensities of the late work, I develop what I call a *symptomatic* reading, one that waits on that work’s desires and incomplete exclusions, the signs of which constitute a form of speculative labour in its own right. My objective is to locate Kant’s thought in a particularly charged moment of European social history, one that witnesses the fitful emergence of the subject of modernity in the midst of unprecedented levels of war violence. Far from reproducing the image of the magisterial thinker with which the philosopher is sometimes identified, *Bodies and Pleasures* imagines Kant as human, all too human, a man whose work is desirous and vexed, framed by the problems and questions it frames.

Any reconsideration of the self-differences in Kant’s thought owes a great deal to the seminal work of Harmut and Gernot Böhme, whose *Das Andere der Vernunft* [*The Other of*

Reason] brought out, as never before, the dialectic of Enlightenment operating at the heart of Kant's project, and pointed theorists and philosophers alike to the complex roles that bodily alterities play in unsettling the pretensions of Enlightenment reason. Like recent studies by Diane Morgan and Susan Shell, however, *Bodies and Pleasures* is not principally psychoanalytic in nature; nor, more importantly, does it seek to indict Kant, as the Böhmes finally do, for having faith in an Enlightenment that the atrocities of the twentieth century proved was disastrously misplaced. At the same time, I do not seek to abstract Kant's philosophy from its eighteenth-century cultural and material contexts, a tendency to which even a reader as informed as Loudon can succumb. Loudon is hardly the only philosopher who argues from the perspective that "Kant's theory is fortunately stronger than his prejudices, and it is the theory on which philosophers should focus" (105). As a non-philosophical reading of Kant's philosophy (a corpus which, for my purposes, includes his anthropological experiments—experiments that in effect fold a philosophy of bodies into the body of philosophy), *Bodies and Pleasures* stands somewhat to the side of these polarized interpretative stances, and seeks to show how the anthropological writings are particularly vivid instances of Kant's life and ideas in difficult but productive dialogue. Because Kant's "theory" is irreducible to the sum of his "prejudices," it is not a mere reflex of the social, political, and economic forces operating in late eighteenth-century Prussian culture, as Katherine Faull and Andrew Cutrofello contend, and as Gayatri Spivak appears to suggest in her *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. Neither is it possible or desirable to abstract a Kantian "theory" from the culture in which it was made and about which, after all, it has such interesting and problematical things to say. My approach is rather to take seriously Foucault's observation that Kant was unusually alive to his own age, immediately and intensely attentive to both the problems *and* the possibilities of the Enlightenment. As I argue, the anthropological writings bring out a curious but revealing fact: that the philosopher who gave modernity a written answer to the query, "What is Enlightenment?," also held that question open *as* a question, notably when he was confronted with cultural shifts, historical events, and psychological phenomena that proved there were many different Enlightenments, not all of them illuminating and progressive in nature. These instances of Europe's "other-headings" (to borrow a phrase from Derrida) included: the increasing rationalization of the labour of the university; the persistence of addictive and habituated desires in a culture of consumption (disregulated appetites require "special consideration in pragmatic anthropology," he says [*Anthropology* 59]); the presence of Jewish communities claiming their own Enlightenment, some of them in explicit opposition to his thought; the militarization of Europe in the name of peace; the sense that "vast regions" of the mind remained unknown and perhaps unknowable to reason; the disorganization of Kant's own mental powers, and the melancholic sense that the work of philosophy was somehow to blame.

Tilottama Rajan has recently claimed that Kant possesses a "double identity whose thinking on culture marks him very much as a figure of the Enlightenment, anxious to close off the Romantic openings that his philosophy creates" (9). My book takes up Rajan's useful and original characterization, exploring the ways in which Kant's last books and essays constitute a rich if revealingly ambivalent instance of "thinking on culture," an "anxious" analysis of bodies

and pleasures that is written along an imaginary fault line dividing “Enlightenment” from “Romantic” desires about the present and future of cosmopolitan life in Europe. The wager of my book is that there are many more than two philosophical identities at play in the under-read body of his late work, this, because the distinction between a “Romantic” Kant and an “Enlightenment” Kant reproduces differences within each stance. This deconstructive multiplication of Kant’s philosophical body is perhaps never more palpable than in the case of his morphing self-characterizations, as if he were trying out different styles, voices, and disciplinary personae, even as Willi Goetschel has shown to be the case leading up to the critical period. The “Kants” that we see here range from an apologist for Prussian biopower and European racism, to an exacting critic of the instrumentalization and rationalization of knowledge that will soon become the norm for social scientific investigation; from the writer of a conduct book for the middle-class to a self-described “patient” enduring the sickness of European modernity; and from the cool-headed rationalist interested only in “what man makes or should make of himself” (*Anthropology* 3) to the hungry “collector and curator of museums” (*Anthropology* 168) restlessly scouring the world for strange cultural artifacts and malformed bodies for which “wonder” as well as knowledge seems an apposite response. What makes Kant’s anthropological work authoritative, I suggest, is that its multiple allegiances, neither “Romantic” nor “Enlightenment” but both at once, add up to a critical reflection on the usefulness of these and cognate terms in writing a history of literate European culture in the 1790s. In other words, the late writings are of much more than an historical interest. Inasmuch as they yield up plausible languages of social formation and cultural analysis, and to the degree that they written along the partitions dividing the Romantic and Enlightenment realms of which we are heirs, they are also important to task of writing a history of the present. The late work, I argue throughout this book, gives us a language with which to consider questions and problems in whose wake we still struggle.

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See Allison, , "Pleasure and harmony in Kant's theory of taste: Critique of the causal reading"™, in Parret, H. (ed.), *Kants Aesthetik/Kant's Aesthetics/L'esthétique de Kant* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, forthcoming). Allison's most recent thoughts on Kant's aesthetic theory can be found in *Kantian Review*, 1 (1997), 53–81. 17 Thanks to the two anonymous referees for the *Kantian Review* and a special thanks to the editor, Howard Williams. Kant's™ most influential positions in moral philosophy are found in *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (hereafter, "Groundwork") but he developed, enriched, and in some cases modified those views in later works such as *The Critique of Practical Reason*, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* as well as his. Kant's™ *Lectures on Ethics*, which were lecture notes taken by three of his students on the courses he gave in moral philosophy, also include relevant material for understanding his views. We will mainly focus on the foundational doctrines of the *Groundwork*, even