

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Kleist and Haiti: The Haitian Revolution in Heinrich Von Kleist's *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo*

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This article revisits the question of how to interpret Heinrich von Kleist's short story "Die Verlobung in St. Domingo". While Kleist specialists have tended to insufficiently relate the story to the developing field of Haitian studies, scholars more attuned to the literary history of the Haitian revolution have only inadequately understood the characteristic textual ambivalences of Kleist's style and politics. In trying to bridge the gap between these two reading modes, the article discusses Kleist and his short story in a double context of Prussian and Caribbean politics.

Keywords: Heinrich von Kleist; The Haitian revolution; violence; revenge; romanticism

In an influential article from the year 2000, Susan Buck-Morss voiced the frustration that the organization of university disciplines left "the particular research constellation 'Hegel and Haiti'" without a home (Buck-Morss 2009: 23). Philosophers, she lamented, would be institutionally inclined to interpret the idealist philosophy of Hegel within a traditional canon reaching back to Aristotle. While this approach certainly had merit, it neglected the fact that Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), at the very time when he was composing the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), was closely following international news through the monthly *Minerva – Ein Journal historischen und politischen Inhalts*. *Minerva* was the favored journal of many German-speaking intellectuals and it had featured substantial articles about the situation of Saint-Domingue right from 1792, soon after news of the uprisings of the enslaved laborers first reached Europe. Upon the 1804 foundation of the state of Haiti, *Minerva* dedicated a series of articles to the young Caribbean nation. The series ran for over a year, totaled more than a hundred pages, and included a German translation of a chapter from Marcus Rainsford's 1805 *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti* (Buck-Morss 2009: 42–43; Kappeler 2016: 202–204). For Buck-Morss, the enormous interest in Haiti of early nineteenth century European observers, exemplified most glaringly by the articles in Hegel's favorite journal, was sufficient reason to ask if Hegel's idea of the relation between lordship and bondage could be contextualized differently and explained with a reference to the Haitian revolution.

This article focuses on Hegel's contemporary compatriot Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811) and his short story "Die Verlobung in St. Domingo" [Betrothal in Santo Domingo], first published in 1811 in the journal *Der Freimüthige, oder Berlinisches Unterhaltungsblatt für gebildete, unbefangene Leser* [The Open-minded, or the Berlin Journal of Entertainment for Educated, Impartial Readers]. Like Hegel, Kleist closely followed the news of the Haitian revolution but in "Die Verlobung," he juxtaposes Caribbean politics with intellectual concerns that haunt his non-Caribbean writings too: problems of epistemology, the philosophy of history, and justice. This blend of complex issues defines the style of Kleist and in this specific case it raises not only the general question of how to interpret Kleist politically. As readers, we are also confronted with the more pointed question of whether Kleist is genuinely interested in Haiti or merely uses its revolution as a dramatic setting for a reflection of wholly different concerns. Buck-Morss urged her readers to acknowledge Haiti's presence in Hegel's intellectual machine-room and I want to follow up on that impetus by asking: What is Kleist writing about when he is writing about Haiti?

I argue, firstly, that Kleist is a political author but an author whose style greatly complicates his politics. Many of the early French and U.S. fictions of the Haitian revolution were melodramas that sought to awaken the sympathy of readers or theatrical spectators (Kjærgård 2018; Kjærgård forthcoming). Unlike the rather one-sided politics of those sentimental and engaged fictions, be they pro or con the cause of the Haitian insurgents, Kleist confronts his readers with a fundamental ambivalence of justice and politics. In the words of a Kleist scholar, his stories "[elicit] affective disengagement, not affective engagement" (Holm 2017, 179–180), meaning that whereas sentimental fictions invite readers to sympathize with specific acts and characters, Kleist forces his reader to reflect upon the possibilities and limits of sympathy. Readers, in other words, are not asked to choose sides in a conflict but to reflect upon the act of choosing sides.

My second argument is that a political reading of “Die Verlobung” calls for a double contextualization because the story blends Haitian and Prussian politics. Kleist at one point describes the affective setting of his story as a “general frenzy of vindictive rage” (231) and with that description, I believe he intervenes in two discussions at once.¹ The first is a colonial one, centered on the legitimacy of the Haitian revolution and the possibility of peaceful interracial co-existence. The second is a domestic one, revolving around the necessity of reform and the dangers of revolution in early nineteenth century Prussia. When “Die Verlobung” was published in 1811, Prussia was militarily subdued by Napoleon Bonaparte and even though Prussian patriotism slowly grew in the years after the defeat at the Battle of Jena-Auerstedt (1806), Prussia remained haunted by a “persistent sense of crisis” (Hagemann 2015, 59). The imaginary space of Haiti presented by Kleist attains parts of its particularity from this blend of political subtexts. I consider it a crucial feature of the early nineteenth century U.S. and European fictions of Haiti that they blend the Caribbean space with different domestic concerns, a blend that has political consequences also in the case of Kleist.

I begin by presenting the ambivalence of Kleist's politics and by outlining the story's relevant political contexts. My argument then proceeds with a close reading of “Die Verlobung” and I conclude by returning to the question of the colonial/domestic interpretational frame, which I consider crucial for understanding the fictions of the Haitian revolution.

The Ambivalent Politics of Kleist: Between Prussia and Haiti

The story, composed just months before Kleist's suicide, is set in the last period of the Haitian revolution in 1803 as General Dessalines leads an army towards the island's capital, Port-au-Prince, in which the final battle against the French shall take place. Kleist seems to be making a geographical error here as the actual 1803 final battle against the French, the Battle of Vertières, took place just outside of Cap-Haïtien (known then as Cap-Français) in the Département du Nord of Haiti. This mistake apart, Kleist describes how, after the French National Convention performed the “reckless action” of liberating the slaves, ex-slaves have begun to murder the whites and revenge the “tyranny” of their former masters (231).² These large scale political conflicts are operative in the periphery of the story but more immediately important are Congo Hoango, “a terrible old negro” (231), his spouse Babekan, “an old mulatto woman” (231), and her “yellowish” (232), mestiza daughter Toni.³ When the man of the house is out fighting with other rebels, the two women lure the “white or creole refugees,” or, as Hoango likes to call them, “white dogs,” into the main building of an old plantation taken from Hoango's former master (232).⁴ Once the refugees feel safe inside, they are brutally murdered either by the women or by the summoned Hoango and his men.

The plot of the story takes off as the Swiss officer in the French army, Gustav von der Ried, seeks protection in Babekan and Toni's “den of murderers” (249).⁵ Gustav leads a group of relatives that has been left behind while he has gone ahead to find shelter for the night. Initially Toni agrees with her mother that Gustav and his companions shall be slaughtered like the Portuguese, the Dutchmen, and the Frenchmen that came before, but after hearing Gustav's moving story, she is seduced by him and the two henceforth consider themselves betrothed. Hoango, however, unexpectedly returns to the house just before Gustav's companions are to join their relative. Toni realizes that her only way of rescuing her fiancé is to tie him up, and pretend allegiance to her mother until the companions, led by one Herr Strömli, arrive. Greeting the Strömli family in the middle of the night, Toni explains the situation to them and using their knowledge to surprise the Black rebels, the Swiss company gains control of the building. Unfortunately, Gustav falsely believes he has been deceived by Toni and he shoots her in the breast, kicks her away from him, and yells “whore” after her (266).⁶ When he learns that he has completely misinterpreted the situation, Toni utters her last words: “you should not have mistrusted me” where after Gustav shoots himself in the mouth, something which in typical kleistian fashion leaves his skull “completely shattered, parts of it indeed adhering to the surrounding walls” (267).⁷ The remaining members of the Strömli family manage to escape because they have taken Hoango's two bastard children as hostages and after some quickly wrapped up further adventure, they manage to escape the island and reach “their native Switzerland” where they erect a monument to the memory of Gustav and the “faithful Toni, Gustav's bride” (269).⁸

¹ “allgemeinen Taumel der Rache.” (160). Quotations in the running text are from Kleist 2004, while the ones in the footnotes are from Kleist 2001.

² “unbesonnenen Schritte” (160); “Tyrannei.” (160). The “reckless action” of the National Convention is a reference to the temporary abolishment of slavery declared by metropolitan revolutionaries in 1794. Slavery was reintroduced by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802 and was not abolished in France until 1848.

³ “ein fürchterlicher alter Neger” (160); “eine alte Mulattin” (160); “Gelbliche” (161).

⁴ “weißen Hunde” (161).

⁵ “Mördergrube” (177).

⁶ “Hure” (192).

⁷ “Du hättest mir nicht mißtrauen sollen!” (193); “ganz zerschmettert, und hing [...] zum Teil an den Wänden umher.” (194).

⁸ “ihr Vaterland, die Schweiz” (195); “der Verlobten [...], der treuen Toni” (195).

It is immediately clear from the storyline that questions of race, violence, family and revolutionary excess are dominant themes in “Die Verlobung” and it is tempting to jump at a political interpretation. Tempting because “Die Verlobung,” like other of Kleist’s *Erzählungen*, interrogate political topics such as the bureaucracy and misuse of political power in “Michael Kohlhaas,” the attempt to found society anew in “Das Erdbeben in Chili,” and the revolution of “Die Verlobung.” These narratives depict decisively *political* situations but their political message is difficult to decipher because they abound with paradox, irony, and ambivalence.⁹ While his narratives are political in the issues they treat, their narrative style destabilize fixed political positions before they have a chance to mature. The dilemma of political contents and an ironical style can probably explain the prevalent schism in the Kleist research literature between historicist and deconstructivist readings.¹⁰ I favor historical contextualization but in the case of Kleist, I acknowledge the presence of textual ambivalence and feel a particular need to develop a dynamic form of contextualization. Let me begin doing that by situating Kleist in the two relevant discussions of his day, those of Prussian and colonial politics.

Prussia was in severe economic, cultural, and military crisis between the Battle of Jena-Auerstedt (1806) and the Vienna Congress (1814–15). Observers at the time, argues Karen Hagemann, explained the crushing military defeat at the hands of Napoleon in two different ways. Historian Ernst Moritz Arndt (1769–1860) preferred a political interpretation and claimed that Prussia, in part due to the “treachery” of the German princes, had long failed to make necessary state reforms and was now trailing behind other European nations (Hagemann 2015, 49). In this line of thought, Napoleon’s victory was seen as a timely punishment for the political and administrative failure to keep up with the evolving European *Zeitgeist*. The other explanation was a cultural one and its adherents described the Prussian crisis as a “decay” of “German customs and morals” and lamented “the absence of a ‘national spirit’ of self-sacrifice” (Hagemann 2015, 50).¹¹ These two interpretations were not mutually exclusive but whereas the former called for reform of the administrative apparatus, the second one sought to develop a popular spirit of patriotism in the broader cultural sphere.

Kleist was no stranger to Prussian politics. On 24 October 1806, ten days after the defeat at Jena and at a time when he was suffering from “Constipation, anxiety, sweating and fantasizing” and his “nervous system was destroyed” (Kleist 2000, II: 770), Kleist wrote to his sister, Ulrike von Kleist: “It would be horrible if this tyrant [Napoleon] should establish his empire. Very few people comprehend how ruinous his rule would be. We are the subject peoples of the Romans. The aim is to plunder Europe in order to enrich France” (Kleist 2000, II: 771. Qtd. in Anderson 1966, 124). At this time, Kleist’s anti-French sentiments had not yet developed into full-fledged nationalism but perhaps in part because of his seven months incarceration in France in 1807, Kleist later hoped to found and edit a nationalist journal with the name *Germania*. He failed to finance the endeavor but nonetheless wrote an editorial for it in 1809. “This journal,” he wrote, “shall be the first breath of German freedom. It shall express all the things that the French pressure of the last three years have silenced in the breasts of upright Germans: all the anxiety, hope, misery and all the happiness” (Kleist 2000, II: 375).¹² The letters and occasional writings of Kleist, despite their failure to find an audience, testify to an author deeply engaged in the Prussian crisis of his day.

The second political context of “Die Verlobung” is the revolution in Saint-Domingue and its place in the imaginary of European and German authors. As Marlene Daut has shown in detail, authors from Europe and the U.S. published literally hundreds of texts about the Haitian revolution and produced what she calls a “transatlantic print culture of the Haitian revolution” (Daut 2015, 3).¹³ She focuses on recurring tropes or discursive patterns in this large material and argues that “the U.S., French, Haitian, German, and British authors [...], though they may have had different overt reasons for writing about the Revolution, still wrote about it with largely the same implicit ‘racial’ tropics” (Daut 2015, 35). While her study helpfully locates and scrutinizes these transnational ‘racial’ tropics, I believe Susanne Zantop is right to insist upon the importance of “national specificity” in the European context “particularly at the turn of the eighteenth century” (Zantop 1997, 6). National specificity is important in this literature, firstly, because it was written at a moment when intellectuals and administrators struggled to found or re-shape numerous European nation-states. For many European and U.S. authors, Haiti partly served as a projective screen for reflections about domestic nationhood, revolution, and political order. Secondly, the colonial involvement of European states was highly uneven both geographically and historically. French eighteenth century colonial observers often focused on the harms caused by Oriental, British, or Spanish colonialism and thus displaced their own considerable involvement in the trade and exploitation of enslaved laborers onto either oriental others or geo-political competitors (Dobie 2010). Germany was only unified in 1871 and

⁹ For a reading of Kleist’s usage of irony and its relation to contemporary figures such as Friedrich Schlegel and Jean Paul, see Fischer 1990.

¹⁰ The opposition between historicist and deconstructivist readings of Kleist is well-documented, see e.g. Schmidt, 43–48 or Howe, 3–4.

¹¹ Hagemann is here quoting from the anonymously published pamphlet *Frauensteuer and der Wiege des wiedergeborenen Vaterlandes: Von Elisabeth von F.* (1814).

¹² “Diese zeitschrift soll der erste Atemzug der deutschen Freiheit sein. Sie soll alles aussprechen was, während der drei letzten, unter dem Druck der Franzosen verseufzten, Jahre, in den Brüsten wackerer Deutscher, hat verschwiegen bleiben müssen: alle Besorgnis, alle Hoffnung, alles Elend und alles Glück.”

¹³ The fictions of the Haitian revolution are too numerous to list here but Marlene Daut has listed more than a hundred titles on her very helpful webpage <https://www.haitianrevolutionaryfictions.com/>. Page last visited 26 June 2018.

because the different German-speaking principalities, kingdoms, and duchies had no overseas colonies in the early nineteenth century, “German colonial fantasies were different,” writes Zantop (Zantop 1997, 6). She continues:

By virtue of existing in the ‘pure’ realm of the imagination, ‘untainted’ by praxis, German fantasies were not only differently motivated, but had a different function: to serve not so much as ideological smokescreen or cover-up for colonial atrocities or transgressive desires, but as *Handlungersatz*, as substitute for the real thing, as imaginary testing ground for colonial action. (Zantop 1997, 6.)

Like Johann Gottfried Herder’s *Negro Idylls* (1797) and August von Kotzebue’s *The Negro Slaves* (1796), “Die Verlobung” is a contribution to this tradition of German colonial literature. There is no agreement concerning the precise sources Kleist consulted when he composed his short story but Helmut Sembdner, the editor of Kleist’s collected works, suggests an influence from both Marcus Rainsford and Jean-Louis Dubroca, excerpts of whose historical works had been published in *Minerva* (Sembdner in Kleist 2000, II: 904). Gilman sees no definitive evidence that Kleist drew from these texts and cites passages from Bryan Edwards’ *Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of St Domingo* (1797, German translation in 1798) to illustrate the multitude of potential sources Kleist might have drawn upon (Gilman 1975, esp. 661–665). It may be impossible to pinpoint Kleist’s exact sources but we do know that he was incarcerated in Fort Joux, the very same prison in which Haitian revolutionary leader Toussaint L’ouverture (1743–1803) ended his life after he was captured and deported by Napoleon’s envoys.¹⁴ We also know that Kleist translated a pro-slavery article by Louis de Sevelinges from the *Mercure de France* and published it in the *Berliner Abendblätter* in 1810, strangely claiming that it was a review of an English book by Henry Bolingbroke (Wilkins 1931, 111–118). One of the arguments in the article, a standard pro-slavery argument, is that the enslaved laborers of the Caribbean colonies enjoy much better conditions in the Americas than their African brethren, something which makes it outrageous for them to rebel (Kleist 2000, II: 440–443). Kleist thus had the knowledge and the inclination to intervene in the discussion of the Haitian revolution.

If there are good historical reasons to read Kleist politically, the next question is how to do that. In the case of “Die Verlobung,” critics have often opted for a discursive approach. Daut notes that Kleist’s tale is “primarily meant to underscore the human tragedy and epistemological problems involved in violent revolutions” but also stresses how he “presents female revolutionaries of color [...] as demonic or pitiful” (Daut 2015, 298). In her vocabulary, this means that Kleist builds upon the trope of the tropical temptress, “a naturally dangerous and seductive woman of color whose innate lasciviousness often makes her an agent of radical revolution” (Ibid., 6). In a postcolonial study, Herbert Uerlings likewise draws upon discursive analysis but suggests that “Die Verlobung” stages a number of different colonialist discourses such as that of “the noble savage”, “sexual otherness”, and “the white man’s burden” (Uerlings 1997, 34; 34; 49).¹⁵ Uerlings’ analytical strategy is akin to Daut’s and both seek, first, to determine what colonial tropes Kleist produces and reproduces in his narratives and, second, to investigate how and to what extent those tropes undergo changes in Kleist.

In opposition to such postcolonial discursive analysis, Jochen Schmidt makes the surprising and, to my mind, wrong claim that “colonialism and the problems of race are mere media for an underlying historical reflection” (Schmidt 2003, 248–249).¹⁶ Postcolonial and discursive readings fail, he writes, because Kleist’s narrative “cannot be accommodated into one coherent ‘discourse’” (Ibid., 248).¹⁷ The Haitian revolution for Schmidt is a mere setting used by Kleist to explore a philosophy of history.

Kleist pessimistically diagnoses the aporetic situation of the present. The ‘beginning of this century,’ which marks the actuality of events right from the start, leaves no room for hope and solutions, because the conditions that have existed for ‘many centuries’ have fatally marked not just the social reality but also the behavior, the feeling, and the consciousness of the people. (Schmidt 2003, 253).¹⁸

The quoted passage reads like a fatalistic interpretation of Kleist but elsewhere Schmidt emphasizes that Kleist had no belief in a “fatalistic power” but understood reality as “historical and man-made” (Schmidt 2003, 40).¹⁹ Despite this potential contradiction in Schmidt’s interpretation, I do recognize the picture of kleistian characters (e.g. Jeronimo and Josephe from “Das Erdbeben in Chili”) who struggle to decide their future but are unable to escape norms of the

¹⁴ On this part of the history of the Haitian revolution, see e.g. Dubois 2004, 251–280.

¹⁵ Like Uerlings, Carl Niekerk discusses the importance of the “noble savage” and the *Inkle and Yarico* story. (Niekerk 2013, 235).

¹⁶ “Kolonialismus und geschlechterproblematik nur Medien einer übergeordneten Geschichtsreflexion sind.”

¹⁷ “nicht in einem kohärenten ‘Diskurs’ unterbringen ließ.”

¹⁸ “Pessimistisch diagnostiziert Kleist das Aporetische der gegenwärtigen Situation. Der ‘Anfang dieses Jahrhunderts’, der gleich zu Beginn die Aktualität des Geschehens markiert, läßt keinen Raum für Hoffnungen und Lösungen, weil die schon ‘seit vielen Jahrhunderten’ bestehenden Verhältnisse nicht bloß die soziale Realität, sondern auch die Verhaltensweisen, das Empfinden und das Bewusstsein der Menschen in verhängnisvoller Weise geprägt haben.”

¹⁹ “Schicksalsmacht”; “das historisch Gewordene und von Menschen Gestaltete.”

past. My reason for invoking Schmidt here, however, is another one. He is right, I think, to problematize the discursive analysis preferred by Uerlings and Daut because their interpretative strategy is too one-dimensional to grasp the complexity of Kleist's text. Schmidt's own reading, however, makes a similar mistake when he dismisses the questions of colonialism and race in order to focus exclusively on Kleist's philosophy of history. In *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism*, Frederick Beiser describes the politicization of late eighteenth century German thought in a way which resonates with Kleist's fiction.

The politicization of German thought in the 1790s did not mean that philosophers abandoned the realm of abstract theory to discuss the more mundane issues of the day. Throughout the decade philosophers continued to address the classical problems of epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics, and they did so with renewed vigor. Yet even these apparently remote and abstract fields became politicized in the 1790s. An epistemological, ethical, or aesthetic theory became a weapon to justify or achieve political ends.

The politicization of German thought in the 1790s also did not mean that philosophers identified with, or committed themselves to, specific political parties or ideologies. The equivalent of modern political parties and ideologies did not exist in Germany at the time. They were in the process of formation, to be sure, but they were not developed, organized, or self-conscious. Nevertheless, German philosophers in the 1790s were politicized in a perfectly straightforward sense: they had definite views about the proper form of government and organization of society; and their epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic theories were used to justify these views or were formed in light of them. (Beiser 1992, 1)

There may be "definite views about the proper form of government" in some of Kleist's most nationalistic writings but in the case of his *Erzählungen*, such definite views remain absent. With Beiser's set of philosophers, however, Kleist shared the tendency to intertwine questions of epistemology with aesthetics and politics. Kleist might even be said to have gone a step further than his contemporary philosophical colleagues in putting his various intellectual concerns on an equal footing in his short story. In the reading that follows, I try to do justice to this intermingling of concerns by focusing primarily on his usage of the vulnerable family. Lost daughters, estranged brothers, and abusive husbands abound in the fictions of the Haitian revolution and Kleist too takes advantage of the prism of the vulnerable family in his story. He thus uses the betrothal of Gustav and Toni to examine the limitations of relational trust and the possibility of what he describes as interracial unity.

The Difficulty of Union

The vulnerable family theme is struck most significantly in the relation between Gustav and Toni. Urged by her mother, Toni welcomes Gustav when he arrives in the house of Hoango but inspired by compassion and immediate attraction, her welcoming gestures evolve into a sexual relation. For the righteous Gustav, having made love necessarily leads to betrothal. Right from the outset, however, and not unlike the blend of "bitterness" and love that Toni come to feel for Gustav (260),²⁰ Gustav has mixed feelings for Toni. "[T]here was something extraordinarily graceful about her limbs," he speculates, "and about the long lashes that drooped over her lowered eyes; but for her complexion, which repelled him, he could have sworn that he had never seen anything more beautiful" (243).²¹ The yellowish color of her skin is something of a thorn in the eyes of the otherwise completely charmed Gustav and the dilemma of the story revolves around the possibility of these lovers to unite despite the violence of their environment and their racial and cultural differences. In other words, are they able to move from the insecurity of engagement to the stability of family? This problem is developed through the usage of oppositional pairs and sub-narratives: (i) Gustav's narrative about an anonymous negress [Mädchen, vom Stamm der Negern (170)] with yellow fever, (ii) his story about his ex-fiancée Marianne Congrève and (iii) the dichotomy of the nuclear Strömli family and the hybrid house of Hoango.

The Negress with Yellow Fever

After having been welcomed in the house by Babekan and her daughter, Gustav narrates a story he heard about a young "negress" who "was lying sick with yellow fever" at the outbreak of the revolt (241).²² At the time of her enslavement, she had refused to let her master "have his way with her" and as a consequence he punished her and sold her off to another planter (242).²³ During the revolt, she invited her former master to spend the night with her and after having been together a while she "suddenly sat up with an expression of cold, savage fury and said: 'I whom you have

²⁰ "Bitterkeit" (187).

²¹ "ein Zug von ausnehmender Anmut spielte um ihre Lippen und über ihre langen, über die gesenkten Augen hervorragenden Augenwimpern; er hätte, bis auf die Farbe, die ihm anstößig war, schwören mögen, daß er nie etwas Schöneres gesehen." (172).

²² "Mädchen, vom Stamm der Negern" (170); "gelben Fieber krank" (170).

²³ "sie sich seinen Wünschen nicht willfährig gezeigt hatte" (170).

been kissing an infected with pestilence and dying of it: go now and give the yellow fever to your kind!" (242).²⁴ This young negress, speaking in the voice of an Old Testament prophet, seems a perfect example of what Daut terms the tropical temptress. Daut acknowledges the importance of this figure in the early literature about Haiti but asks whether later Haitian historiography has been "focusing too much" on this trope of the dangerous temptress with the "highly developed sexual skills" (Daut 2015, 204). Daut's own analysis primarily tackles a different material with the aim of getting beyond the narrative of the tropical temptress and of finding different histories of female Haitian revolutionaries. Her warning not to jump too quickly to conclusions *vis-à-vis* the seductress might be timely in the case of Kleist too, however, because Gustav's narrative is concluded by a passage which contains the hallmarks of Kleist's ironic style:

And as the old woman [Babekan] loudly proclaimed her abhorrence of such a deed, the officer asked Toni: 'Could you ever do a thing like that?' 'No!' said Toni, casting her eyes down in confusion. The stranger, laying his napkin on the table, declared that it was his deep inner conviction that no tyranny the whites had ever practiced could justify a treachery of such abominable vileness. 'Heaven's vengeance is disarmed by it,' he exclaimed, rising passionately from his seat, 'and the angels themselves, filled with revulsion by this overturning of all human and divine order, will take sides with those who are in the wrong and will support their cause!' So saying, he walked across for a moment to the window and stared out at the night sky, where stormy clouds were drifting past the moon and the stars [...]. (242)²⁵

With his direct question to Toni, the linkage between the story and the story within the story is made explicit but what interests me in the passage is the function of the narrator. Hitherto Gustav's narrative was told using direct speech but here it shifts between direct speech ("heaven's vengeance is..."), narrated monologue ("The stranger [...] declared that it was his deep inner conviction..."), author comments ("he exclaimed, rising passionately"), and symbolically laden weather descriptions ("night sky [...] stormy clouds").²⁶ The effect of this blend of narrative styles is the production of a multi-layered text that greatly complicates the usage of the one-dimensional image of the dangerous seductress. The focus of the passage shifts from her scandalous behavior to Gustav's preacherly response and dubious logics. Is Gustav's response, the passage seems to ask, not as scandalous as the woman's actions? And in a final twist, Gustav looks out on the night sky and the symbolic value of the passing clouds, I think, is so thick that it functions to not only prefigure the story's final shoot-out but also, and more strongly, to call attention to the text as a work of self-referential literature. In other words, Kleist uses the trope of the tropical temptress but his interest is not to build upon this figure but rather to use it to create an ironic and ambiguous textual effect.

What consequences can be drawn from such an interpretation regarding the meaning of the phrase "general frenzy of vindictive rage"? On the one hand, the text clearly produces an image of an avenging ex-slave ready to use all means imaginable to revenge her mistreatment. Seen in this light, the text builds upon the trope of the murderous temptress and downplays the wrongs of the former masters in order to focus on the bloodthirst of the revolutionaries. On the other hand, the narrative style of the text complicates the image of the evil seductress by exposing the presumptuousness of Gustav and by drawing attention to the literarity of the text. The story thus becomes a text where the victim-perpetrator schism is ambiguous and also where the self-referentiality of the text produces a response in the reader very different from any simple accept of the demonization of one group of characters. "Die Verlobung" is an atypical text among the fictions of the Haitian revolution because it invites a different and more reflective response from the reader than does some of the more melodramatic fictions of the Haitian revolution, Charles Pigault-Lebrun's play *Le blanc et*

²⁴ "sie sich plötzlich mit dem Ausdruck wilder und kalter Wut, darin erhob und sprach: eine Pestkranke, die den Tod in der Brust trägt, hast du geküßt: geh un gib das gelbe Fieber allen denen, die dir gleichen!" (170).

²⁵ "Der Offizier, während die Alte mit lauten Worten ihren Abscheu hierüber zu erkennen gab, fragte Toni: ob sie wohl einer solcher Tat fähig wäre? Nein! sagte Toni, indem sie verwirrt vor sich niedersah. Der Fremde, indem er das Tuch auf dem Tische legte, versetzte: daß, nach dem Gefühl seiner Seele, keine Tyrannei, die die Weißen je verübt, einen Verrat, so niederträchtig und abscheulich, rechtfertigen könnte. Die Rache des Himmels, meinte er, indem er sich mit einem leidenschaftlichen Ausdruck erhob, würde dadurch entwaffnet: die Engel selbst, dadurch empört, stellten sich auf Seiten derer, die Unrecht hätten, und nähmen, zur Aufrechthaltung menschlicher und göttlicher Ordnung, ihre Sache! Er trat bei diesen Worten auf einen Augenblick an das Fenster, und sah in die Nacht hinaus, die mit stürmischen Wolken über den Mond und die Sterne vorüber zog [...]" (170–171).

²⁶ In a precise description of Kleist's ironic style, Bernd Fischer writes: "[Kleist's sentences] include often a kind of hidden 'double-talk' – literary and biblical allusions and quotations, grotesque exaggerations and borrowings from contemporary trivial literature, sexual and political innuendo, and so on – that can implicitly question much of what the narrative voice is at pains to establish. It seems that these techniques of laconic irony escaped many of Kleist's contemporary readers, and they still offer quite a challenge today." (Fischer 2003, 11–12). For the classic interpretation of Kleist's narrator, see Kayser 1980, 230–243. Bernd Fischer has also.

le noir (1795) being a case in point.²⁷ But before drawing any conclusions, we should take Gustav's other story, the one about his former fiancée, Marianne, into consideration.

Marianne

Being alone in the bedroom of the house, Gustav tells Toni that she has an "extraordinary resemblance" with his former fiancée Marianne Congreve from Strasbourg (245).²⁸ This resemblance, which is further underscored as Gustav gives Marianne's necklace to Toni, is an example of Kleist's usage of the *doppelgänger*-motif used most famously in the ending of "Michael Kohlhaas." But it also serves to develop the themes of the unstable family and "the frenzy of vindictive rage." Immediately after "the terrible Revolutionary Tribunal" (246) was set up in France – that is, in late 1793 –, Gustav was reckless enough to utter a critical remark about it in public.²⁹ Unable to catch him, "the bloodthirsty band of [...] pursuers" instead captured his fiancée (246).³⁰ She was taken to the scaffold at which point Gustav showed up and shouted: "Here I am, you inhuman monsters!" (246).³¹ But, self-sacrificing as she was, Marianne replied: "I have no idea who that man is!" and the "impatient butchers" let the iron blade drop and her head was severed from her body (246).³²

Despite its formal complexities, Kleist's sub-story of Marianne actually parallels Pigault-Lebrun's play. In *Le blanc et le noir* the central question is how to stop a legitimate revolution from evolving into a robespierrian Reign of Terror. Pigault-Lebrun's answer, a timely one a year after the fall of Robespierre, was work and moderation (Kjærgård 2018). Kleist is not interested in proposing solutions to this dilemma but rather in exploring its dynamics. The name Marianne invokes the hopes and aspirations of the early French revolution but the guillotine exemplifies the just political movement gone astray.³³ The condemnation of the French revolutionary excess is just as uncompromising as that of the Haitian violence. Thus, the French revolutionaries are described as "bloodthirsty," "inhuman monsters," and "butchers;" all descriptions that resemble those of the Haitian revolutionaries who are characterized by an "inhuman thirst for revenge" (232) and by their "inhuman deeds" (249).³⁴ By means of these adjectives, the perpetrators of revolutionary excess, European or Caribbean, are excluded from the community of human beings. They are not, to borrow a phrase from human rights philosophy, "*judged* human" by their interlocutors (Sliwinski 2009, 32). Once men fall into the "general frenzy of vindictive rage," their actions attain a nonhuman character. It is thus fitting that Herr Strömli and his two sons shout: "Why, you monster!" when Gustav kills Toni (266).³⁵ When under the influence of the vindictive frenzy, men act in monstrous ways that render them inhuman and unlike Pigault-Lebrun's protagonist, Kleist's vindictive characters act out and remain relentless in their violence.

In his interpretation, Steven Howe uses the similarities between French and Haitian revolutionary excess to argue against readings that stress the inherent racism of the depicted scenes of black barbarism.³⁶ Howe writes:

For in striking such a homology to the Terror, Kleist demonstrates that the current violence on Haiti is not explicable in terms of a 'black' barbarism – the point being, rather, that any popular revolution driven by social resentment and a thirst for retributive justice, whether on a Caribbean island or in the center of civilized Europe, is likely to yield a new cycle of tyranny and brutality. [...] Kleist thus presents a Janus-faced profile of revolution, on the one hand giving full weight to the ideals of liberty and emancipation from oppression, yet on the other demonstrating how popular violence tends to be self-perpetuating, leading not to genuine moral change or progress but rather to new forms of tyranny and brutality. (Howe 2012, 115–116).

Howe strengthens his argument by introducing Kleist's journalistic writings on Prussian politics. Being disillusioned with the French revolutionary attempts to put Enlightenment politics into practice, Kleist in 1810 insisted that societal

²⁷ My comment about the reader's reflexive response to Kleist's story is inspired by Holm who, in a reading of "Das Erdbeben," writes: "In Kleist's earthquake story, the relation between aesthetic experience and human rights is a matter of reflection, rather than education. The story elicits affective disengagement, not affective engagement. The multitude of fictional characters that judge one another as either human or non-human, either Christian *Bürger* or *gottlosen Menschen*, forces the reader to step back from judging someone human or non-human, and instead to question the presuppositions underlying our capacity to determine the 'who' question of justice" (Holm 2017, 179–180).

²⁸ "wunderbare Ähnlichkeit" (173).

²⁹ "furchtbare Revolutionstribunal" (174).

³⁰ "meiner rasenden Verfolger, die ein Opfer haben mußte" (174).

³¹ "Hier, ihr Unmenschlichen, hier bin ich!" (174).

³² "diesen Menschen kenne ich nicht!" (174); "ungeduldigen Blutmenschen" (174).

³³ For an analysis of Marianne as a symbol of the French republic and French revolutionary liberty, see Hunt 2004, 62, 229–232.

³⁴ "unmenschlichen Rachsucht" (161); "die Unmenschlichkeiten" (177).

³⁵ "Du ungeheurer Mensch!" (192).

³⁶ Race and racism are crucial themes in the literature on "The Betrothal." For a long (yet incomplete) list of articles on this topic see Niekerk 2013, 232n2.

change should not be introduced “suddenly and all at once” but rather gradually and cautiously (Kleist 2000, II: 404).³⁷ Kleist’s political views became increasingly nationalistic after 1806 but he kept favoring reform over revolution. By juxtaposing Kleist’s political opinions with the examination of revolutionary excess in “Die Verlobung,” Howe makes the compelling argument that Kleist was more concerned with revolutionary or politically motivated violence in the abstract than with an alleged “black” barbarism.

I only partly agree with Howe. He is right to argue that Kleist greatly complicates ideological standard narratives (such as those of black barbarism and tropical temptresses) by introducing countercurrents to them in his *Erzählung*. In Kleist, acts of inhumanity and barbarous scheming are not exclusive to Caribbean rebels but a recurring characteristic of all kinds of revolutionary excess. But that leaves two political problems of representation unanswered, the first of which is the one that discursive interpretations such as Daut’s point to: The observation that Kleist’s story *also* does something else and more does not alter the fact that he reproduces stock images of black barbarism and tropical seductresses. Even though Kleist complicates them, these tropes are crucial to his narrative and when they are set in the larger framework of the transatlantic print culture of the Haitian revolution they add to the pseudoscientific theories of race that evolve in this material. That leads to my second objection against Howe’s interpretation: Kleist’s wish to interrogate the revolution in the abstract entails a reification of the specificity of the Haitian revolution. Kleist demonstrates that inhumanity is not restricted to the formerly enslaved insurgents but he makes no attempt to explain the rebels’ desire for liberty. In “Die Verlobung,” the rebellion starts out not from a desire to be free but from “the reckless actions of the National Convention” (231), by which Kleist refers to the temporary abolishment of slavery in France in 1794.³⁸ As historians of the event have argued, the French emancipation of the enslaved was an intricate affair that attained its strength and direction not just from French abolitionists but also, and most importantly, from the enslaved population’s increasing insistence upon freedom (Dobie 2010, 253; Popkin 2010, 1–22). By disregarding this political agency of the Haitian revolutionaries, Kleist reproduces an image of a bloodthirsty rabble while pursuing his own quite different political and aesthetic ambitions. As such his story inadvertently helps to establish Haiti as an imaginary place of brutality and black barbarism. This aspect of his story becomes more visible when the differences in family structure between the Strömli and the Hoango family are taken into account.

The Nuclear Family and its Opposite

In a recent study, Susan E. Gustafson has shown that the family of the *Goethezeit* was less conservative and paternalistic than traditional notions of *biedermeyer* idylls will have us believe. German literature, she writes, “abounds with images of, and reflections upon, failed families” and in his juxtaposition of the Hoango and the Strömli family, Kleist’s narrative can be said to intervene in these ongoing reflections (Gustafson 2013, 3). Even though it, like *Gustav*, is definitively out of place, the Strömli family is a traditionalist nuclear family with a strongly emphasized ability to keep organized and walk in procession:³⁹

The procession consisted of Herr Strömli and his wife, the latter riding on a mule; his five children, two of whom, Adelbert and Gottfried, young men of eighteen and seventeen, were walking beside the mule, three servants and two maids, one of whom was riding the other mule with an infant at her breast; twelve persons in all. (260–261)⁴⁰

If their ability to keep organized was insufficient proof of their orderliness, the names of the two eldest Strömli sons signal the nobility and even divinity of the family. Thus, Adelbert in German (from *adal*: noble and *bereht*: shining) means *noble shining* while Gottfried (from *Gott*: God and *Fried*: peace) means *godly peace*. After the ending’s shoot-out, the holy Strömli family continues their march and it again happens in a minutely described procession:

[T]he party with muskets reloaded set out in sorrowful procession towards the seagull pond. Herr Strömli, carrying the boy Seppy, walked first; next came the two strongest servants bearing the dead bodies on their shoulders; behind them the wounded man limped along with the help of a stick; and Adelbert and Gottfried escorted the slowly advancing cortège, one at each side, with their guns cocked. (268)⁴¹

³⁷ “plötzlich und mit *einem* Schlage.” See also Howe 2012, 103.

³⁸ “die unbesonnenen Schritte des National-Konvents” (160).

³⁹ Following Sigrid Weigel, Niekerk notices that *Gustav* is usually referred to as “der Fremde” in the story, which is a way of “emphasizing his being-out-of-place in the most direct way possible” (Niekerk 2013, 238).

⁴⁰ “Der Zug bestand aus Herrn Strömli und seiner Gemahlin, welche letztere auf einem Maulesel ritt; fünf Kindern desselben deren zwei, Adelbert und Gottfried, Jünglinge von 18 und 17 Jahren, neben dem Maulesel hergingen; drei Dienern und zwei Mägden, wovon die eine, einem Säugling an der Brust, auf dem andern Maulesel ritt; in allem aus zwölf Personen.” (187–188).

⁴¹ “nachdem die Büchsen von neuem geladen waren, brach der traurige Zug nach dem Möwenweiher auf. Herr Strömli, den Knaben Seppy auf dem Arm, ging voran; ihm folgten die beiden stärksten Diener, welche auf ihren Schultern die Leichen trugen; der Verwundete schwankte an einem Stabe hinterher; und Adelbert und Gottfried gingen mit gespannten Büchsen dem langsam fortschreitenden Leichenzuge zur Seite.” (194).

The repeated emphasis upon the order of the Strömli family stands in sharp contrast to the hybrid house of Hoango. After his first wife died, Hoango's former master generously (and paternalistically) offered him a new wife but since Hoango "did not want to re-marry," he instead lived with "an old mulatto woman called Babekan [...] to whom through his first wife Congo Hoango was distantly related" (231).⁴² In his refusal to re-marry as well as in his insinuated if distant incestuous relation to Babekan there is an implicit denial of the nuclear family structure which is strengthened by the fact that Babekan is described as a mulatto who has had a mestiza daughter, Toni, with an unknown European man. The idea of the nuclear family is further destabilized by the "bastard negro boy" (252), Nanky, who is elsewhere described as "an illegitimate son of Hoango's by a negress, who slept in the outhouses with his brother Seppy (234).⁴³ The house of Hoango, or the "den of murders" as Toni terms it, is characterized by the different racial hybridizations of its members and by the random liaisons of its parental figures.

The dichotomy established by the two families is a moralized one. While the entirety of the Strömli family is noble and godlike, Herr Strömli stands out as he receives the paternalistic epithet "elderly head of the family" and is addressed by Toni with a "Noble Sir!" (261).⁴⁴ Hoango, in comparison, is termed "a terrible old negro" (231).⁴⁵ Just as the two stories, about the yellow-fever seductress and Marianne, served to prepare the troublesome relation between Gustav and Toni, the two different families similarly mark the choice Toni has to make. Which side does she belong to? That question is answered during the final siege of the Hoango house:

Herr Strömli had the boy Seppy's hands tied up in front of Hoango and told the latter that his intention was simply and solely to free the officer, his cousin, from his imprisonment on the plantation, and that if no obstacles were put in the way of their escape to Port-au-Prince, then neither his, Hoango's, life nor those of his children would be in any danger and the two boys would be returned to him. Toni approached Babekan and, full of an emotion which she could not suppress, tried to give her her hand in farewell, but the old woman vehemently repulsed her. She called her a contemptible traitress and, bound as she was to the legs of the table, twisted herself round and predicted that God's vengeance would strike her even before she could enjoy the fruits of her vile deed. Toni replied: 'I have not betrayed you; I am a white girl and betrothed to this young man whom you are holding prisoner; I belong to the race of those with whom you are openly at war and I will be answerable before God for having taken their side.' (264)⁴⁶

Here, the inherent morals of the two families are sharply drawn up. Whereas the twin stories told by Gustav suggested that whites and blacks were equally prone to violence at times of revolution, this passage indicates an absolute difference between the two families.⁴⁷ Not only is the one a nuclear family and the other the opposite, Herr Strömli is also morally fair (he will let Seppy go once his family is safe) while Babekan is incapable of demonstrating compassion even confronted with her possibly pregnant biological daughter. In opposition to the Strömli son who incarnates God's peace (Gottfried), Babekan invokes God's vengeance [die Rache Gottes] and thus becomes aligned with the "general frenzy of vindictive rage" [allgemeinen Taumel der Rache]. Pigault-Lebrun's melodrama ended on a happy note as the estranged family was reunited but despite Toni's spontaneous act of affection towards Babekan, such a reconciliation of opposites is impossible in Kleist. Whereas *Le blanc et le noir* searched for ways to avoid outright war, there is a tragic impulse in Kleist's narrative as disaster is prefigured in the night skies and seems to happen per necessity. His interest is not in the healing of but in the investigation of the general frenzy of vindictive rage. The betrothed can never pass the threshold of engagement and become a stable family. The only place for any co-existence of Toni and Gustav is on their memorial monument in Switzerland.

⁴² "nicht wieder heiraten wollte" (160); "eine alte Mulattin, namens Babekan [...] mit welcher er durch seine erste verstorbene Frau weitläufig verwandt war." (160).

⁴³ "Bastardknabe" (180); "Nanky, den Hoango auf unehelichem Wege mit einer Negerin erzeugt hatte, und der mit seinem Bruder Seppy in den Nebengebäuden schlief" (162).

⁴⁴ "Edler Herr!" (188).

⁴⁵ "ein fürchterlicher alter Neger" (160).

⁴⁶ "Herr Strömli, indem er dem Knaben Seppy vor den Augen Hoangos die Hände binden ließ, sagte diesem: 'daß seine Absicht keine andere sei, als den Offizier, seinen Vetter aus der in der Pflanzung über ihn verhängten Haft zu befreien, und daß, wenn seiner Flucht nach Port au Prince keine Hindernisse in den Weg gelegt würden, weder für sein, Hoangos, noch für seiner Kinder Leben, die er ihm wiedergeben würde, etwas zu befürchten sein würde. Babekan, welcher Toni sich näherte und zum Abschied in einer Rührung, die sie nicht unterdrücken konnte, die Hand geben wollte, stieß diese heftig von sich. Sie nannte sie eine Niederträchtige und Verräterin, und meinte, indem sie sich am Gestell des Tisches, an dem sie lag, umkehrte: die Rache Gottes würde sie, noch ehe sie ihrer Schandtät froh geworden, ereilen. Toni antwortete: 'ich habe euch nicht verraten; ich bin eine Weiße, und dem Jüngling, den ihr gefangen haltet, verlobt; ich gehöre zu dem Geschlecht derer, mit denen ihr im offenen Kriege liegt, und werde vor Gott, daß ich mich auf ihre Seite stellte, zu verantworten wissen.'" (190–191).

⁴⁷ For an alternative reading of this passage and of the racial black/white theme, see Theisen 2014, esp. 86–92.

Conclusion: Prussian Haiti, Haitian Prussia

In *Silencing the Past*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot claimed that early nineteenth century observers silenced the Haitian revolution. Trouillot writes:

Official debates and publications of the times, including the long list of pamphlets on Saint-Domingue published in France from 1790 to 1804, reveal the incapacity of most contemporaries to understand the ongoing revolution on its own terms. They could read the news only with their ready-made categories, and these categories were incompatible with the idea of a slave revolution. (Trouillot, 2015: 73).

The problem, he claims, was not that Europeans silenced the Haitian revolution by keeping quiet about it. As Buck-Morss and, especially, Marlene Daut have shown, they did nothing of the sort. Their writings about Haiti, however, were flawed by an inability of theirs to understand the revolution on its own terms. Early nineteenth century authors and politicians were thinking and writing within ready-made discursive patterns that did not allow for the “possibility of a revolutionary uprising in the slave plantations” (Trouillot 2015: 73). If Trouillot is right, there is every reason to repeat the question: What was Kleist writing about when he wrote about the Haitian revolution?

Being an author of fiction, Kleist of course never claimed to present a truthful rendition of the Haitian revolution but his short story does draw upon widely circulating historical knowledge about Haiti. His vision of Haiti, however, blends not only with his understanding of French and Prussian politics but also with his ongoing epistemological reflections and aesthetic experiments. With Gustav’s catastrophic misunderstanding of Toni, “Die Verlobung” problematizes the degree to which anyone can ever really know what his or her fellow beings think or feel. Kleist thereby invokes a recurring epistemological problem of his; a problem, which in Blänkner’s phrase has to do with the “conditions of possibility of worldly knowledge” (Blänkner 2013, 10)⁴⁸ and which is sometimes referred to as an offshoot of Kleist’s “Kant-crisis” (Anderson 1966, 115–117; Fischer 2003, 4; Schmidt 2003, 12–17). In this case, the limits of worldly knowledge sets limitations on interpersonal trust and thereby negatively affects the possibility of human community. While this problem is epistemological and has political implications, it attains its literary specificity from Kleist’s stylistic preference for combining narrative modes and juxtaposing the perspectives of different fictional minds. These stylistic choices leave the reader in a reflective mode, struggling to locate a stable textual position from which to understand the narrative as an utterance about a specific *Sachverhalt*. To further complicate matters, Kleist chooses to blend Saint-Domingue with critical reflections on France and numerous references to Switzerland where he spent parts of his life (Büttner 2013, 107–139). But where do these blended interests leave Haiti?

There is a sense in which Jochen Schmidt is right to argue that the colonial and racial problems of “Die Verlobung” are a mere medium for a wholly different kind of literary examination. In fact, the interest Kleist, according to Schmidt, shows in the philosophy of history might be said to corroborate and specify Trouillot’s critical observation that European writers were incapable of understanding the Haitian revolution on its own terms. Being more interested in epistemology and the philosophy of history, no wonder Kleist got the Haitian revolution wrong. Such a reading, however, fails to explain the kind of work Haiti as a real and imaginary space did in the imagination of European and U.S. writers and it fails to appreciate the constitutive intertwinement of politics, aesthetics, and epistemology, which Frederick Beiser finds characteristic of this period’s German thought. The Haiti of Kleist is a dramatic imaginary space filled with vindictive rage and it allows Kleist to combine different political and philosophical interests of his. It is a scare example of the inherent dangers of revolution, a reminder of the fundamental inability of human beings to ever fully understand one another, and it showcases just how vulnerable ideals of love, family, and justice truly are. In the process of exploring the interrelation of such dynamics, Kleist ambivalently recycles tropes of black barbarism and tropical temptresses but he also seems to suggest that the only effective defense against vindictive rage is Herr Strömli’s orderly procession and gentlemanly insistence to play by the rules. This, maybe, is a way of establishing order in Prussia and, following Zantop, a way of organizing a potential future German colonial enterprise.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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⁴⁸ “Möglichkeitsbedingungen des Wissen der Welt.”

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