

Sovereign Exceptions and Sexual Autonomy in Heinrich von Kleist's *Betrothal in San Domingo*

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Abstract

This article investigates how the concept of a state of exception and its dialectic relationship with the norm are negotiated in the German author Heinrich von Kleist's *Betrothal in San Domingo* (1811), the story of two doomed lovers – a Swiss visitor named Gustav and a “mestiza” woman named Toni – set against the backdrop of the Haitian revolution. Drawing primarily upon Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben's political thoughts as well as Alexander Weheliye's critique of Agamben which, the former claims, has little “to say about racism, colonialism, and the world beyond fortress Europe” (64), I argue that the novella critically engages with the concept of exception and calls attention to its limitations but simultaneously offers an alternative conception to what political action may look like during a moment of intense conflict. The novella scrutinizes bio(necro)political theory's placement of death at the center of our political thought, emphasizing instead the inadequacy of the universalization of the concept of “life,” particularly outside its Eurowestern perimeters. Through Weheliye, my analysis further suggests that *Betrothal in San Domingo* establishes Toni as an active, sovereign subject who, through actions of friendship and love, poses a significant challenge to the systems of exception and its underlying violent potentialities.

Keywords: State of exception, sovereignty, race, gender, subjectivity

In his *Political Theology*, Carl Schmitt contends, “The exception is more interesting than the regular case. The latter proves nothing, the exception proves everything” (35). For Giorgio Agamben, states of exception – such as concentration camps during World War II – lie at the heart of the functioning of modern states. In *State of Exception*, Agamben writes about human life, in particular, the Western concept of human life and its essence as well as limits. The exception for him is marked primarily by the temporary collapse or suspension of rule of law which creates the conditions of possibility for establishing the site of exception, and secondarily by the sovereign leader's suspension of rule of law (11). This article examines how Schmitt and Agamben's concepts of exception and its becoming the norm are presented and negotiated in Heinrich von Kleist's *Betrothal in San Domingo* (1811), a novella of love, racial conflict, and passion set against the backdrop of a successful slave rebellion in San Domingo. The novella critically engages with the concept of a state of exception and calls attention to its fundamental limitations, especially the question of what right does the individual, racialized subject have over oneself during a state of exception. *Betrothal* also suggests a reconceptualization of racialized and gendered political



action based on human solidarity, and thereby critiques Agamben's disengagement with either subject. In fact, the novella conforms to Weheliye's critique of biopolitics where Nazi racism is both considered the apex of racializing assemblages and does not take into account the "historical relationality and conceptual contiguity between Nazi racism and other forms of biopolitics ... like colonialism, indigenous genocide, racialized indentured servitude, and racial slavery" (59).

In my analysis, based on both Achille Mbembe and Weheliye's revision, I will focus on the limitations of the Agambenian framework of states of exception, especially in the plantation and after the reversal of its prior political order. My contention is that Kleist presents quieter, subdued moments marked by a recognition of shared humanity that weaken the fixity of that rigid political code of a state of exception. The article argues that Kleist's treatment of such moments reveals the limitations of Agamben's usage of the concept and further proves that the thinker's conceptualization of the state of exception is not an adequate framework to understand enslavement or even its immediate aftermath. In addition, I will establish that the gendered female subject under conditions of extreme precarity can still exercise certain autonomy and thereby, raise complex questions about race, kinship, and loyalty. Finally, I discuss how, despite the Kleistian reaffirmation of binaries – friend/enemy, master/slave, white/nonwhite – which is established through the reversal of the exception, the temporal nature of the exception *continues* in the novella in smaller yet profoundly significant ways.

Love, Racial Passing, and the Friend/Enemy Distinction

Betrothal in San Domingo begins with the farcically named revolutionary figure Congo Hoango, an "old negro, a terrifying man" who burns his master's plantation to the ground, murders everyone in the household, and dedicates himself to the capture and murder of every white person he can lay his hands on (324). The novella is set in the years between 1803-1804 when General Dessalines, the leader of the Haitian Revolution, had ordered the massacre of French settlers on the island. Hoango's white master, M. Guillaume de Villeneuve, gave him a pension, leisure, and a "legacy in his will" but Kleist observes how "all these proofs of M. Villeneuve's gratitude did not save him from the fury of this fearsome man" (324). His partner in crime is his mulatto common-law wife Babekan, Toni's mother. A fifteen-year-old Toni is used as sexual bait in their mission, that is until Gustav von der Ried arrives. On the run and in search of provisions for this family, Gustav is portrayed as noble and kind, and quickly, Toni and he fall in love. To protect her beloved from her mother's plan to murder him, Toni pretends to betray him. Believing her to be a traitor, Gustav shoots her before she can explain her deception and consequently, a distraught Gustav kills himself. The novella ends with the Swiss soldier's family's safe return to Europe where they construct a monument in the lovers' memory.

In terms of both form and content, the intimate, private betrothal between the Swiss soldier fighting for the French army and the white-passing seductress Toni performs as a site of respite from the violence of the real politic of slave rebellion, racism, and imperialism in San Domingo. The exceptional, ambiguous intensity of the moment where colonial, racial,

and nationalist lines blur, albeit temporarily, makes room for a momentary blossoming of interracial love. In his essay on race and the difference it makes, Ray Fleming points out how “love, infatuation or passion can triumph over racial or cultural solidarity” in Kleist’s *Betrothal in San Domingo* (310). And yet, the quasi-idyllic first night is later contrasted ferociously in the novella with a spectacular reversal of trust and love between enemies turned lovers, indicating a reconstitution of the social order the relationship previously attempted to undo. This aggressive reaffirmation of the social order which comes right on the heels of its momentary collapse is significant for it conveys an expression of and fundamental critique of the political order. A similar suspension of an idyllic union between another set of doomed lovers is visible in Kleist’s “The Chilean Earthquake” (1807). That temporary respite too is similarly disrupted by a very public reversal of the new order through the reassertion of the older social and theological order.

Imagining the political order in San Domingo as a state of exception in a fashion proffered by Schmitt and Agamben faces some significant challenges in Kleist’s work – particularly through the way which is the reversal of the original political order is staged by a slave rebellion. The rebellion replaces the white masters as ultimate sovereigns and consequently, the racialized others turn on their former masters in an act of vengeance, completely reversing the status quo and bringing to life the white fear of a black insurgency.¹ More so, the formerly enslaved become the arbiters of the laws of exception. Both outcomes are absent in the accounts of Schmitt and Agamben as the theorists never consider the plantation as a state of exception and consider the camp as the primary and paradigmatic moment of exception that defines the domain of the political itself. Yet, there are significant ways in which Schmitt’s original idea of the state of exception and Agamben’s later expansion of the concept to theorize Nazism and the concentration camps in Europe *do* apply to the aftermath of a slave rebellion in *Betrothal*. As a political event, the aftermath bears the hallmarks of many of the core norms of the exception – sheer lawlessness, sovereign’s own incapacity to rule, questions about the domain of sovereignty itself, indiscriminate killings, lootings, and sexual violence, and a complete collapse of the social and domestic order of the state.

The novella thus is not only critical of conceptions of exception, it also proposes an alternative form of political action that is based on racialized and gendered acts of individuals – exemplified by the character Toni. In the two decades since Michel Foucault’s original lectures on biopolitics, a lot has been said about Foucault’s failure to appropriately engage with the race question in his theory of biopower and sovereignty. Importantly, theorists of necropolitical interventions – chief among them Achille Mbembe who defines necropower as the “subjugation of life to the power of death – reverse the original Foucauldian dictum of biopower as “making live and letting die” (Mbembe 91; Foucault *SMD*, 241) For Foucault, the mobilization of sovereign power with the aim to build social

¹ In the comparable context of the American Civil War, Agamben offers that the “place—both logical and pragmatic—of a theory of the state of exception in the American constitution is in the dialectic between the powers of the president and those of Congress” (*SE*, 19). Agamben further offers that President Lincoln’s emancipation proclamation was proffered “on his authority alone” and that at this point “the president of the United States was the holder of the sovereign decision on the state of exception” (21).

defense (exemplified by Nazism in his work) is a form of racism.² Yet, in his reading of the shift from sovereign power to biopower, he overlooks two conceptual conflicts with regard to race: the role colonialism plays in the production of Western modernity and the fundamental role played by the black “other” in the Western ontology of man. In other words, Foucauldian racism is racism without colonialism and blackness. Consequently, the fields of black feminist studies, black studies, and decolonial thoughts have widely challenged Foucault’s “primitive” take on racism and colonialism (Weheliye 59). Sylvia Wynter argues that what Foucault identifies as the “invention of Man” led to “the ‘rise of Europe’ and its construction of the ‘world civilization’ on one hand, and, on the other, African enslavement, Latin American Conquest, and Asian subjugation” (263). Affirming Wynter, Denise S. Da Silva contends that “Wynter recuperates what remains illegible in Foucault’s critique of Man: ‘the idea of race’” (91). While analyzing “Foucault’s description of the classical order and the discourse on race, despite the brief reference to ‘European colonialism,’” he locates “a double dismissal of the colonial context” (97). Ann Stoler similarly argues against Foucault by tracing the making of the “imperial body politic to the making of sexualized and racialized selves” (832). In other words, a race-centric understanding of political order and individual sovereign political action commensurate with Weheliye, Wynter, and Mbembe’s understandings of the subject is absent in Foucault and Agamben’s work.

Crucially, race remains at the core of *Betrothal* and Kleist’s novella abounds with references to the reversal of conventional race-centric codes. There are several, interlocking struggles at stake at the intimate space of the betrothal in *Betrothal in San Domingo*. On its face, the relations of power between the white, imperialist Gustav and the teenaged, mestiza Toni is uneven, with Gustav’s uncomplicated racial and imperial superiority eclipsing Toni’s racial and gendered inferiority. That the encounter between the lovers is taking place in San Domingo in the immediate aftermath of the slave insurrection leads further instability to the dynamic the two lovers share. Nevertheless, Gustav’s arrival is part of a process set in motion by slave leader Congo Hoango, not a departure from the norm as the light-skinned Toni has lured men like him before. In other words, Gustav is not the exceptional protagonist, the special white suitor/savior; rather he is a rude, unwanted “stranger” who is merely a participant in Hoango and Babekan’s systematic revolt against whites (325). Nonetheless, unlike other instances where the trio – Hoango, Babekan, and Toni – have entrapped white men, this one unfolds differently. Toni and Gustav have several remarkably unusual interactions, chief among which is Gustav’s initial shock of discovering her race and being drawn to her regardless. After she welcomes him into the home and he “recovers from the shock he had outside,” he, with his arms around her waist, admits to how “willingly, even were everything else about [Toni] black, [he] would have drunk from a poisoned chalice with [her]” (330). Sander Gilman argues that Gustav has several misperceptions about race relations and blackness and that, for him, “blackness was

² Racism is “bound up with the workings of a State that is obliged to use race, the elimination of races and the purification of the race, to exercise its sovereign power. The juxtaposition of—or the way biopower functions through—the old sovereign power of life and death implies the workings, the introduction and activation, of racism. And it is, I think here that we find the actual roots of racism” (SMD, 258).

the source of fear and terror, while whiteness, light, served as the sign of succor" (671). By and large, the novella confirms Gilman's binarized take on Gustav's perspective on race and the exceptions Gustav makes in the broad generalizations are minimal at best. As an "uneasiness settled like a vulture on his heart and he wished himself back, hungry and thirsty as he had come, among *his people* in the forest," Gustav certainly picks a side (333; emphasis mine). It can be argued that he is sympathetic towards the motive behind the slave revolt but is critical of its indiscriminatory nature towards all whites, as he feels not all of them deserve the ire of the rebels. He here confirms the "bad apple thesis" which is often used to justify systemic violence such as enslavement and colonialism (Heath, 5). Gustav offers that the "madness of liberation which has seized all the plantations drove the blacks and the creoles to break the chains by which they were oppressed and to be revenged upon the whites for many wrongs done them by a few reprehensible members of that race" (331). Gustav demonstrates the fascinatingly ambivalent ways in which racial conflict shows up in Kleist's work. The white fear of a black insurrection, the murderous rage of the enslaved, the hybrid ambiguity of "passing," racial trauma as well as racial desire are all vividly discernible in his work.

Despite its critique of conventional race-centric codes, Kleist's work is curiously disinterested in the complex narrative of the Haitian revolution, the successful revolution by the enslaved against their white French colonial masters in Saint-Domingue, now the sovereign nation of Haiti. The ideological effects of the revolution were far reaching – from Napoleon's dashed dream of a French empire to the Louisiana Purchase, the Haitian Revolution marks a turning point in the history of New World Slavery. Yet, Kleist sets the novella in the private domain and leaves the public commentary on the significance of the revolution to a minimum. Part of that reluctance may stem from the implausibility of the revolution itself in the Western ontological order. So committed the ontology was to the dehumanized, nonhuman status of their black other, that the resistance itself is unthinkable within that framework. Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that "The Haitian Revolution did challenge the ontological and political assumptions of the most radical writers of the Enlightenment. *The events that shook up Saint Domingue from 1791 to 1804 constituted a sequence for which not even the extreme political left in France or in England had a conceptual frame of reference.* They were 'unthinkable' facts in the framework of Western thought" (82; emphasis original). Thus, the slave revolt is incomprehensible to Gustav for comprehension requires him to think of his nonwhite other as fully human. More so, he comprehends slave violence against their former masters and white violence against black enslaved in comparable terms. When he indignantly narrates the act of one black girl who actively contaminates an entire white population with yellow fever, the Swiss soldier's sympathy lies with the white abuser of the woman as he feels there could be "no justification, however tyrannous the whites have been, for an act of such base and abominable deceit" (332). Gustav's sympathy for the "unfortunate man" who was the center of this sexual revenge plan by a formerly enslaved he had attempted to sexually manipulate evidences his failure to comprehend (332). Gustav not only fails to see how the enslaved had been victimized by her master, but is also unable to understand the scope of power a libidinal economic system sustains that structure the

relations between white man and enslaved woman. Further, he draws a parallel between this event and Toni's original plan to manipulate him (like she had done others) for sex and cannot conceive of the predicaments that led to the women making such choices. That violent threats, ownership, control of female bodies and a perverse paternalistic claim of submission and surrender is on par with the gendered and racial relations between white masters and enslaved women is incomprehensible to Gustav. Though Gustav, these scenes thus consolidate violent dehumanization with blackness, reifying the animalization and bestialization of black people commonly associated with the logic of enslavement.³

Toni, in comparison, cuts a more ambivalent figure in terms of her approach to race in the novella. Toni passes for white, a crucial narrative element that cannot be overemphasized in our attempt to understand the Kleistian project of critiquing the social and political order. Todd Kontje argues that “the same racial mix that allows Toni to pass for almost white prevents her from becoming ‘really’ white. She is biologically condemned to theatricality” (72). The theater Kontje refers to is the performance of race, and Toni's particular performance of it throughout the novella is a porous, fluid one. In fact, Kleist uses Toni's ambivalent racial status to destabilize Gustav's steadier understanding of the classificatory categorization of racial belonging. As Gilman offers, both Babekan and Toni are “neither white nor black, falling into a category not encompassed by Gustav's historically determined dichotomy in which white=good and black=evil” (669). In many ways, Toni's racialized body “appears as the ... dominating factor that regulates [her] flow of life (Tabassum 109). Yet, the dichotomous reading of race in the novella faces certain opposition during the night of the betrothal, filled with small moments that compel a rethinking of such an order. Although Gustav is the one who “seized her” and “drew her down on to his lap,” making him the one who crosses that physical boundary, Toni complies with his machinations (333). As both share tales of their former lovers, with “downcast eyes,” Toni speaks of another man whose hand she refused “without moving from his [Gustav's] lap” (333). When he teases her and asks, “whether perhaps only a white man would ever win her favour,” she “press[es] herself against him,” allowing Gustav to shed his inhibitions, go against his instinct, and even draw a parallel between her and his former betrothed, Mariane (333). Significantly, his former betrothed is another female figure who had sacrificed herself to save Gustav, an exact narrative trope Toni will eventually mimic, setting them both up as characters who are loyal and selfless whereas Gustav thinks of his self-interest first and the women's wellbeing later.

The night of the betrothal is a truly exceptional moment both in the literal and the Agambenian sense. In *State of Exception* Agamben argues that “the ancient dwelling of law is fragile” and is always struggling to maintain its own order (22). The state of exception is “the device that must ultimately articulate and hold together the two aspects of the juridico-political machine by instituting a threshold of undecidability between ... life and law” but when “the state of exception ... becomes the rule, then the juridico-political system transforms into a killing machine” (86). As the Hoango-led resistance movement completely suspends the old order of white supremacy and black subordination, the site of

³ For more, see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) and David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage* (2006).

this ultimately tragic betrothal can be marked as a tightly controlled moment of exception where individual actions are not dictated by rule of law or the regular order of things. The resistance movement brewing outside of the bedroom imitates Agamben's theorization of the sanctioned and naturalized disregard of the limits of the state's juridical and political power through times of state crisis. While a state of exception is used to justify the extreme measures of the state, as Schmitt argues, the exceptional moment has an "especially decisive meaning which exposes the core of the matter" (35). In this case the core is, of course, the binaries that bind us and the ways in which human emotions like love and loyalty can either destabilize or reinforce that which separates us from one another. Schmitt further argues that the "phenomenon of the political can be understood only in the context of the ever present possibility of the friend-and-enemy groupings, regardless of the aspects which this possibility implies for morality, aesthetics, and economics" (35). Thus, in that moment when Gustav allows Toni to ascend to his system of aesthetics by allowing her to become the image of his dead, white beloved, Toni "abandons her own system of aesthetics for Gustav's" and subjugates herself "to yet another rigid and therefore, potentially destructive way of viewing the world" (Gilman 671). In that moment, Toni shifts from the enemy camp to the friend through a resemblance to an old lover of Gustav's, or to put it differently, by becoming white in his eyes. The fusing together of the sexual and racial therefore, further muddies the conceptual binaries in the text.

Earlier in the novella, while talking about the rebellion, Babekan speaks of the "shadow of kinship visible" in their faces, echoing the Conradian fear of kinship among barbaric black and enlightened white (328). With clarity and precision, Babekan alludes to the naturally antagonistic, precariously balanced nature of the relationship between masters and slaves, whites and blacks, oppressor and oppressed. In contrast, when Toni discovers the whole truth of Mariane's sacrifice and observes Gustav's agony: "when she saw him deeply moved bowing his face into a handkerchief a *human* feeling, various in its origin, took hold of her," reversing the structure of imbalance laid out by Babekan (335; emphasis mine). Gustav too, sees her weeping after they consummate their union and gives her the little golden cross, a present from "faithful Mariane" and "hung it for a betrothal gift," the bond of their affection transcending the tyranny of enmity that shackled their races (335). For Schmitt,

the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy. Insofar as it is not derived from other criteria, the antithesis of friend and enemy corresponds to the relatively independent criteria of other antitheses: good and evil in moral sphere, beautiful and ugly in aesthetic sphere, and so on. (26)

This Schmittian argument is made unambiguous in the moment of the betrothal where the stranger and the seductress dissociate themselves from those very distinctions. In theory, the distinction is still visible but, in practice, when Toni reaches for Gustav and Gustav promises her a future with him, the aesthetic tension of race and the moral quandary of a forbidden life falls away, making way for an extreme, unique condition where the

participants do away with the lines between good and evil. The enmity subsequently, is reproduced later only in public and not in private, offering up the potential that such reversal of racial and political codes is indeed possible.

Sexual Autonomy and Female Subjectivity

Eventually in the novella when Toni realizes danger is at the door and binds Gustav to protect him, she rightly predicts that his trust in her will be at stake and that mistrust will have everything to do with her race. Despite her own claim that she is now white, Toni herself does not believe her ascension to whiteness is permanent because of the ways in which perceptions of loyalty inform perceptions of racial belonging, especially in that heightened moment in history. While passing for white gives her access to whiteness as property, by betraying her black family and embracing the white lover who ultimately betrays her for her blackness, Toni remains suspended in the middle, in a vestibular zone of indistinction where she is neither white nor black. The inclusive-exclusive status of Toni's racial (non)belonging is crucial for it destabilizes the easy binary between black and white. While Toni never quite manages to entirely bridge the gap between the warring racial groups, she is the only raced subject who carries forward the ethos of their exceptional night of betrothal. On one hand, that Toni believes Gustav to be her betrothed demonstrates her faith in the exceptional act of the betrothal; Toni is the sovereign subject who attempts to allow the exception of the betrothal to become permanent. Toni believes that "through her sexual union with Gustav she has become his wife before God, she literally offers her life to save his" (Wittkowski 192). On the other, only under a state of exception such as the aftermath of a rebellion can such a union even be possible. That she attempts to uphold the reunion outside the cocooned intimacy of the bedroom marks her as an agentic, sovereign subject who attempts to transcend the rigidly constructed boundaries of racial codes in San Domingo. While Kontje argues that though "passing for white begins as a strategy of power for Toni in the struggle against white slave holders and French imperialists; it ends with her suspended between the black family she rejects and the white lover who rejects her," I argue that she demonstrates an active, sovereign ability to disrupt that very logic of racial divide (72). Toni's ambivalent racial status, thus, is a site that pushes against racial hierarchy as evidenced by her love and loyalty and her desire to die for Gustav in order to save him. More so, the twin deaths of Toni and Mariane further complicate Gustav's perception of Toni as he views only "one side of her self, her blackness" and "as a traitor whom he has to kill" (Fleming 324). Gustav's saviors—both women, one white and one black—exhibit the ways in which "life" is stratified into inconstant metrics of humanness, where the racialized and/or gendered bodies have historically been subjected to death with impunity.

A second, supplementary way to interpret the moment of the betrothal as an exception, and Toni's role as a figure of subversion is made possible through a reading of Toni's body and its use in the mission to destroy the whites. If Toni's body is part of Hoango's sovereignty, if her body is the site where Hoango's sovereignty exercises itself, then her first autonomous act is accepting Gustav as her betrothed and husband. The patriarchal family, the model of social order headed by Hoango depends upon duty and submission, not equality or

freedom from its members. The leaders of the movement weaponize Toni's body and her sexuality, a weaponization she consents to at first, a practice she participates in as willful agent. Much like the way in which the general population surrenders to sovereign authority for inclusion into the national or political community, Toni submits to the narrative of revolution and allows her body to be a part of its manipulatory process. Yet after the night of the betrothal, Toni withdraws her consent from the regulated weaponization of her body and delegitimizes Babekan's demand to further use her body. When her mother reminds her that other men have suffered perilous fates thanks to her sexual manipulation, Toni argues how unfavorably she views such "bestial" deeds and how "outraged" she is to have been forced to take part in such "inhuman" acts (337). Initially, she was encouraged to "allow their visitors every intimacy, except the last, which was forbidden her on pain of death" (325). Indeed, Toni gives Gustav permission for that final intimacy. Toni thus makes a series of sovereign decisions: subverting the sexual role assigned to her by authority figures at the night of betrothal, departing from the patriarchal home to protect a sexual partner she desires, and verbalizing her discontentment with the previous weaponization of her body. The precise point where Toni's autonomous decision-making process first begins to assert itself is the moment of the betrothal, thus permitting us to read the moment as unambiguously exceptional. In that moment of exception, Toni usurps the previous sovereign power of the state, Hoango, and orchestrates a subtle collapse of the structure of the political process. Neither Hoango nor Babekan is prepared for the aftermath; they are unable to handle her claim to her sexual and political agency. When Toni delegitimizes the role of seductress assigned to her and uses her cunning and devotion to reverse the domain of Hoango's rebel mission, she destabilizes the sovereign power of the exception, all made possible because of the feeling, intimacy, and reciprocity shared between her and Gustav. Despite Gustav's eventual failure to uphold the ethics of the betrothal, Toni not only transcends the limits of enmity during the scene of betrothal but is committed to carrying that collapse of the former order forward.

As several critics have pointed out, Gustav and Toni's response to their eventual changed circumstances further explores the fraught binaries between race and enmity. As the exceptional idyll of the night of the betrothal comes of its end, Gustav swears "that the love he felt for her would never go from his heart and that only in a delirious strange confusion of his senses, by the mixture of desire and fear she aroused in him, had he been led to do such a thing" (335). Kleist's use of "desire and fear" marks Toni as the ultimate racial 'other' and Gustav the European 'self' and lets the narrative oscillate between twin moments of acceptance and rejection, making explicit the temporary nature of the exception. In other words, despite the love, despite the shared humanity, despite the transcendence of racial hatred and loyalty, those precious moments of unreal, exceptional love is constantly undercut by reality. Kontje argues that "Gustav's instinct of self-preservation takes precedence over any concern for Toni's well-being. It is only between these moments of crisis that Gustav indulges in the sentimental fantasy of bringing Toni to an idyllic home in Switzerland" (71). The first time he is fearful of life, he expresses suspicion of her intentions and the second time, he fatally shoots her before asking the weighty, pointless, "why". In contrast,

Toni's defense of him to her mother – “Does not rather everything indicate that he is the best and noblest of men and surely not a party to whatever wrongs the blacks may accuse his race of – indicate not just individual passion but selflessness and devotion (Kleist 340). In other words, Toni views this man “as her betrothed and as her husband” unquestioningly (340). In the original German, Toni makes “three futile attempts at explaining her actions to Gustav, one marked by a single dash, two of them by double dashes – familiar semantic means in Kleist’s narrative technique to signify inner processes that cannot be rationalized” (Burwick 319). Burwick claims, “the black heroine is more humane, and therefore superior in character and virtue to male white protagonist” (321). It is Toni who takes steps to save him and hopes to be his loyal wife in Europe compared to Gustav’s promises that were unkept, marking her again as subject with autonomy.

Lastly, the mestiza woman’s love for the white man could potentially stand for an attempt to legitimize colonial rule and it can be argued that Gustav’s seduction and subsequent murder of Toni is an attempt to reiterate the colonizer/native binary where the dualism of possession and misappropriation of the native woman’s body is legitimized thanks to Eurocentric ideologies of racial supremacy. However, the implicit critique and “condemnation of European racism and imperialism” by Kleist cannot be entirely overlooked, especially if we consider how Toni is not the only woman whose death binds Gustav (Kontje 71). Through Toni, Kleist demonstrates exactly that – a critique of the existing social order even as Gustav fails on that score. Thus, when with his “mouth twisting with rage,” Gustav kills Toni, the narrative moment does not come as a surprise (348). Neither does Babekan’s unflinching support of the cause and her sense of betrayal by Toni’s autonomous decision to save and protect Gustav. “She assured the negro [Hoango] that the girl was a traitor and that the whole attempt to capture him was in danger of failing,” writes Kleist (342). In the final moment of his life, even as his family tries to explain to him that she was their rescuer, in his arrogance Gustav still demands an explanation for being bound – the ultimate betrayal in his book. As the dying Toni struggles to answer and as the truth exposes itself, Toni utters her dying words “you should not have mistrusted me” to which Gustav echoes “I should not have mistrusted you” (349). Gustav’s suicide, Winkowski suggests, indicates what “all the Whites in Haiti might do as well, or so Kleist seems to imply” (193). Ultimately thus, while Toni’s union with Gustav and her subsequent acts of treachery and cunning is deliberate and calculated, Gustav’s entitlement is irrevocable and indeed irredeemable. In other words, through the lovers’ polarized actions, Kleist’s critique of the imperial, racial, and social order is explicit – Gustav’s actions are condemned while Toni’s offer the potentiality to brave the existing system.

In the end, while it may be tempting to suggest that love and friendship fail to transcend the complexity of the public tension in the story, in my view, Kleist’s treatment of the exceptional idyll of the betrothal as well as Toni’s exercise of her autonomy through disregarding the control and regulation of her sexuality make plain Kleist’s critique of imperialist, racial, and sexuality politics of its time. Even as much of the spectacularized violence in the story takes form at the expense of violence against Toni’s body, after the complete reversal of the racial and sexual reconciliation, Kleist still ends the novella with a memorial of their love

erected in a Swiss garden, signifying a utopian appeal for reconciliation. That ending stands as a critique of those racial values, values that needed thorough rejection and rethinking. Despite the fact that she succumbs to the devastation of racial enmity, that her loyalty was unwavering till the end and Gustav's was not, prove that Kleist prioritizes the exceptionally liberatory potential of the betrothal and her willful agency to dictate her sexuality and emotions among all else, allowing it to stand as a critique of the existing order.

Ultimately, my analysis of the novella shows that Kleist explores terror and violence under the rubric of stately, social, and gendered order in an attempt to counterbalance dominant ideas of racial hierarchy, patriarchy, and imperialist ideologies. The exploration of those invocations of shock and terror is juxtaposed against Kleist's recognition of human emotions, through notions of love, loyalty, and friendship. Eventually, *Betrothal* opens up the possibility of a new social order, one where previous ideology, orthodox and distorted as they are, do not matter. In line with Weheliye and Mbembe's claims, there exists enormous emancipatory potential in thinking through the representation of states of exceptions beyond fortress Europe as signified by the social, racial, and gendered relations in the story.

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