Race and Colonialism around 1800: Herder, Fischer, Kleist

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Abstract: Herder's 'Neger-Idyllen', Kleist's *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo*, and Caroline Auguste Fischer's *William der Neger* offer an exploration of the intersection between race and colonialism in the Atlantic World and in Europe around 1800. Teaching students to read depictions of race, violence, and struggles for emancipation does not only engage with the fraught legacies of the Enlightenment, but, practically speaking, is also an exercise in suspicious reading. Herder's anti-imperialist and anti-slavery poems end with an uneasy negotiation of paternalism. Kleist's novella provides a racially biased narrator, who limits access to the thought processes of non-white characters. Fischer's short story moves towards upholding an ideal of emancipation, but recoils from its corollary of revolutionary violence, and crafts two images of its protagonist that cannot be reconciled: one of internalized self-hatred, based on racial identity, the other, one of a Christ-like saviour for oppressed peoples.

Keywords: Race, Colonialism, Emancipation, Revolution, German Literature, Eighteenth Century

Whilst public and political interest in questions of European colonial history and racial hierarchies and discrimination has become a consistent feature of media commentary and debate over the past two years, these political and moral concerns stirred by Black Lives Matter have become visible in debates around decolonizing the curriculum, and questions of institutional funding and patronage in the case of Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford. It is the heat of these debates that presents both pedagogical opportunities and challenges when thinking through the legacies of colonialism and racial hierarchies in German literature around 1800.

The opportunity stemmed from timeliness. Yet, as much as timeliness is an appealing impulse, it runs the risk of applying normative and contemporary values and concerns to historical texts. That is to say: the political urgency and moral sensitivity of questions of social and racial justice could lead students to finding the authors and texts I teach – Johann

Gottfried Herder, Caroline Auguste Fischer and Heinrich von Kleist – lacking in their depiction of paternalism and racially motivated violence. What is at stake here is the question of how to combine an examination of literature – itself an aesthetic category – with ethical concerns, including ethical problems that might arise in the texts.[1] Locally to German Studies, there have been a variety of initiatives that have responded to the ethical and aesthetic questions of teaching literature, such as 'EGS – Towards an Equitable German Studies', and the Oxford-based project, 'Decolonial Discourses & German Studies' (2020–2021).[2]

The legacies of canonical thinkers of the eighteenth century have come under recent and sustained criticism, where ethical problems, such as racist remarks, cannot be contained by historical qualification (and indeed were not always typical for the period).[3] Kant's philosophical anthropology, for example, generates inconsistent ideas of race and appears at odds with the universalism of his moral theory.[4] Equally, David Hume's prejudiced statement in the essay 'Of National Characters' (1753–1754) on the superiority of the white 'species' to all others led to the removal of his name from a building at the University of Edinburgh in September 2020. These are informative instances of how received images of the Enlightenment and its protagonists contribute to the self-understanding of the present. These images are themselves conflicted. This is broadly to do with the question of the Enlightenment, its authority, and what the Enlightenment is considered to be in intellectual and literary historiography: both as the origin point of modern conceptions of universal human rights as well as the basis for narratives of human diversity that went hand-in-hand

[1] Sarah Colvin, 'Doing Drag in Blackface. Hermeneutical Challenges and Infelicitous Subjectivity in *Courasche*, or: Is Grimmelshausen Still Worth Reading?', *Daphnis*, 50 (2022), 1–27 (p. 2).
[2] https://egs-uk.org/; https://decolonialdiscourses.mml.ox.ac.uk/ [both accessed 22 January 2022]
[3] Ritchie Robertson, *The Enlightenment: The Pursuit of Happiness, 1680-1790* (London: Allen Lane, 2020), pp. 314–15.
[4] Lucy Allais, 'Kant's Racism', *Philosophical Papers*, 45.1–2 (2016), 1–36; Pauline Kleingeld, 'On Dealing with Kant's Sexism and Racism', *SGIR Review*, 2.2 (2019), 3–22.

with scientific racism of the nineteenth century.[5] How the Enlightenment interacted with colonialism was equally fraught, where its alleged complicity in colonial practices stands alongside the importance of critical and anti-imperialist thought in the period.[6]

Whilst these juxtapositions necessarily reduce the complexity of the Enlightenment, it is an analogous juxtaposition that informs my teaching of race and colonialism. That is: how texts in the period from 1790 to 1820 waver between negative and positive visions of anthropology and experiences of ethnic and racial alterity, between upholding and urging for ideals of emancipation, individual liberty, and autonomy, and pessimism about the capacity of individual and collective for violence and for moral action. In seeing present-day concerns refracted through poems and short stories that address the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution and slavery and colonialism in the Atlantic World, my aim as a tutor is to prompt students to examine their own presuppositions – whether moral or political –, as well as encouraging sensitive readings of the texts in context, without slipping into unhistorical assumptions. To work against a perception of the texts as lacking, I encourage students to consider how these texts can be productively understood through suspicious reading, following Rita Felski's critique of hermeneutical practices.[7] This is in a positive sense: how, through sustained close reading, the social orders constructed in the texts are also problematized. In addition, I ask students in advance of tutorial discussion to consider the complexity of anthropological and philosophical constructs of race, which were diverse and contested throughout the period, with a view to diminishing implicit teleological thinking that would cast the eighteenth and nineteenth century as less enlightened than the present.[8] The pedagogical aim is to help

[5] Devin Vartija, 'Revisiting Enlightenment racial classification: time and the question of human diversity', *Intellectual History Review*, 31.4 (2021), 603–25.
[6] Russel A. Berman, *Enlightenment or Empire: Colonial Discourse in German Culture* (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), pp. 7–10; Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).
[7] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 17–23.
[8] *The German Invention of Race*, ed. by Sara Eigen and Mark Larrimore (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006).

students' close reading skills develop – on a *textimmanent* level – but also to give them critical tools about how to employ historical context(s) as a means of approaching literary texts. Whilst it is not expected that students have digested, for example, the entirety of C. L. R. James' still seminal account of the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938), they should develop some awareness of a broader historical context, if indirectly through sustained engagement with the primary texts.

The following sets out details of an undergraduate literature option taught at the University of Oxford as part of the modern literature paper, for which students prepare and submit essays in advance of hour-long tutorial discussion on the topic. Traditionally, the modern literature paper is concerned with the narrative of the development of (canonical) German literature – for the *Sattelzeit*, it tracks genres and authors from Lessing to Büchner. Within this, there is considerable scope for flexibility. In the conception of this topic, I am indebted to scholars such as Todd Kontje, Susanne Kord, and in particular to Susanne Zantop's monograph, *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770-1870* (1997).[9] Alongside the influence of US-based German studies, with its focus on non-canonical authors of the period from a cultural studies perspective, I have also drawn on the recent attention in UK German Studies given to transnationalism.[10] The website 'Black Central Europe', managed by Jeff Bowersox, is also an invaluable online resource, providing texts, translations in English, and interactive maps on black history in the German-speaking

[9] Todd Kontje, 'Passing for German: Politics and Patriarchy in Kleist, Körner, and Fischer', *German Studies Review*, 22.1 (February 1999), 67–84; Susanne Kord, 'The Pre-Colonial Imagination: Race and Revolution in Literature of the Napoleonic Period', in *Un-Civilizing Processes? Excess and Transgression in German Society and Culture*, ed. by Mary Fulbrook, German Monitor, 66 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 85–115.
[10] *Transnational German Studies*, ed. by Rebecca Braun and Benedict Schofield (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020).

lands from the medieval period to the present, and reflects the increased interest and visibility of historical interactions between the black diaspora and central Europe.[11]

Looking at German-language responses to race and colonialism moves away from reading literature through the canon to facilitate instead a view on literary culture as embedded in complex global networks of exchange – of information from and about the Atlantic World, but also of literary texts, tropes, and translations.[12] The set primary texts for study are: Johann Gottfried Herder, 'Neger-Idyllen' (1797), a cycle of five poems from the tenth collection of *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität* (1793–1797), Heinrich von Kleist, *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo* (1811) and Caroline Auguste Fischer, *William der Neger* (1817). Before looking at the texts in question, and how they interact, a word on the n-word. This is both an ethical and historical problem. Alongside 'Mohr', it functions, relatively speaking, as a neutral marker of race in the period, and its meaning is best determined by looking at the internal logic of its use across the texts. I open discussion prior to the tutorial with the students to allow them to choose how to handle its use, since the word cannot be extricated from its later and present function as a racial slur. Most students tend to star out the word in prose and pronounce the initial letter only in discussion. There is also a pragmatic function to foregrounding the use of slurs: to give students the space to make up their own minds on the issue prior to the tutorial, so that they do not defer to a tutor's authority.

These texts are chosen for several reasons. Most importantly, they present differing responses to notions of *Humanität* and alterity. They also work through tropes associated with the literature of the Haitian Revolution. Whilst Herder is the immediate outlier here, his poems nonetheless offer a thematic parallel to both Kleist and Fischer by examining colonialism and

[11] https://blackcentraleurope.com/ [accessed 22 January 2022]
[12] See, for example: *World America: A Transnational Anthology of Short Narratives Before 1800*, ed. by Oliver Scheiding and Martin Seidl (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

slavery across North America and the Caribbean. In her study of the literature of the Haitian Revolution, Marlene Daut has outlined these tropes as comprising, among others, the 'mulatto' revenge narrative and the tragic black woman (Toni in *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo*), but has also noted how the revenge narrative stands tension with the logic of liberation associated with the Haitian Revolution.[13] It represented an ideal of universal emancipation that promised to take on the inheritance of the impulses behind the French Revolution.[14] Combining Herder, Kleist, and Fischer also sets up a dialogue between canonical and non-canonical authors and texts, although students do not necessarily have pre-conceived ideas of a German national canon or, given their status as language learners, aesthetic value-judgments about what constitutes 'good' prose writing or poetry. Supplementary reading is also encouraged, should students wish to develop the topic further during their studies, for which they can range from Theodor Körner's dramatic adaptation of Kleist's novella, *Toni* (1812), to August von Kotzebue's *Die Negersklaven: Ein historisch-dramatisches Gemählde* (1796).

Overall, what students should gain from the topic is an awareness of how the topic of race is negotiated in German-language writing of the period, and how these questions of race and racial hierarchies are primarily treated through the depiction of non-white characters. The tutorial format requires students to have studied and synthesized both primary and secondary material prior to discussion in essays submitted in advance. This, alongside the small group teaching (no more than one or two students in a given session), has the advantage of allowing student's individual conceptual and comprehension difficulties to be discussed in detail. Whilst there are specific topics that students should discuss in their essays – such as whether

[13] Marlene Daut, *Tropics of Haiti: Race and the Literary History of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1789-1865* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), pp. 4–10.
[14] See, for example: Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation: the Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008).

revolutionary ideals and emancipatory violence are mutually exclusive, or the moral value of pity in the texts when it is used as a means of German or European identification with non-white characters – the tutorial format allows for a spontaneous exploration of the texts and the issues that emerge from them.

Racial and narrative distrust: *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo*

Kleist's novella is the only text to be set in revolutionary Saint-Domingue, and although Kleist was notoriously sloppy with his use of historical detail, the recognizable setting allows for an exploration of the taboo of interracial love alongside racial distrust and hatred.[15] The opening paragraph of the novella presents the challenge of how to read the 'Wüterich' Congo Hoango. It is a proleptic opening: the spectral image of Congo Hoango adds intensity to Gustav von der Ried's desperate search for safe passage from the island with his family. For students who have no prior knowledge of Kleist, the opening description is an exercise in suspicious reading. What is encouraged is sustained attention to Kleist's overextended clauses, tending towards hypotaxis, and how the suggestions made by the narrator are not to be taken at face value:

Zu Port au Prince, auf dem französischen Anteil der Insel St. Domingo, lebte, zu Anfange dieses Jahrhunderts, als die Schwarzen die Weißen ermordeten, auf der Pflanzung des Hrn. Guillaume von Villeneuve, ein fürchterlicher alter Neger, namens Congo Hoango. Dieser von der Goldküste von Afrika herstammende Mensch, der in seiner Jugend von treuer und rechtschaffener Gemütsart schien, war von seinem Herrn, weil er ihm einst auf einer Überfahrt nach Cuba das Leben gerettet hatte, mit unendlichen Wohltaten überhäuft worden. Nicht nur, daß Hr. Guillaume ihm auf der Stelle seine Freiheit schenkte, und ihm, bei seiner Rückkehr nach St. Domingo, Haus und Hof anwies; er machte ihn sogar, einige Jahre darauf, gegen die Gewohnheit des Landes, zum Aufseher seiner beträchtlichen Besitzung, und legte ihm, weil er nicht wieder heiraten wollte, an Weibes Statt eine alte Mulattin, namens Babekan, aus seiner Pflanzung bei, mit welcher er durch seine erste verstorbene Frau weitläuftig verwandt war. Ja, als der Neger sein sechzigstes Jahr erreicht hatte, setzte er ihn mit einem ansehnlichen Gehalt in den Ruhestand und krönte seine Wohltaten noch damit, daß er ihm in seinem Vermächtnis sogar ein Legat auswarf; und doch konnten alle diese Beweise von Dankbarkeit Hrn. Villeneuve vor der Wut dieses grimmigen Menschen nicht schützen.

[15] Michael Perraudin, 'Babekan's "Brille", and the Rejuvenation of Congo Hoango. A reinterpretation of Kleist's story of the Haitian Revolution', *Oxford German Studies*, 20.1 (1991), 85–103 (pp. 88–89).

Congo Hoango war, bei dem allgemeinen Taumel der Rache, der auf die unbesonnenen Schritte des National-Konvents in diesen Pflanzungen aufloderte, einer der ersten, der die Büchse ergriff, und, eingedenk der Tyrannei, die ihn seinem Vaterlande entrissen hatte, seinem Herrn die Kugel durch den Kopf jagte.[16]

On a surface-level reading, the narrator provides an *apologia* for white colonialism and paternalism and casts moral judgment at the eradication of the remaining white colonists on the island in 1803 and 1804. Such value-judgments, however, should encourage students to distinguish between authorial voice and narrative voice to probe the subtext at work. To be sure, *Die Verlobung* is neither polemically anti-white or indeed anti-black. Instead, one of the core tensions of the text is how race exists on the spectrum, in keeping with the social dynamics of the historical Saint-Domingue, with 'mulatto' and 'mestiza' characters such as Toni and Babekan, but characters only read and understand each other in a fixed binary, epitomised most famously by Toni's climatic declaration of her shifting allegiance in 'Ich bin eine Weiße'.[17]

Congo Hoango is presented as both the object of fear and as an exalted and once exemplary slave. The character then adheres to the trope of the ungrateful slave who rejects the legal and financial rewards – most notably, his freedom – offered by his master Guillaume Villeneuve. The narrator, then, is writing from an implicitly white perspective, which means that the opening paragraph can be elucidated through suspicious reading, one that prompts students to be alert to the inconsistencies and ambiguities generated by the narration.[18] For example, the complex politics in revolutionary Saint-Domingue, referred only disapproving to as 'die unbesonnenen Schritte des National-Konvents', are distilled instead in individual and collective rage ('der Wut dieses grimmigen Menschen'; 'bei dem allgemeinen Taumel der

[16] Heinrich von Kleist, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe in vier Bänden*, ed. by Ilse-Marie Barth and others, 4 vols. (Frankfurt/Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1987-1997), III: *Erzählungen, Anekdoten, Gedichte, Schriften*, ed. by Klaus Müller-Salget (1990), p. 222.
[17] Ibid., p. 256. Benjamin Bennett, *The Dark Side of Literacy: Literature and Learning Not to Read* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 281.
[18] Steven Howe, *Heinrich von Kleist and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Violence, Identity, Nation* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2013), p. 97.

Rache'). This frames the novella as one concerned with psychological and emotional states rather than high politics, but also poses the ethical question of how acts of vengeance, born of oppression, can be justified as a legally codified system of anticolonial resistance and violence that supplants the system of violence that preceded it. Whilst Coango Hoango's impulse for rebellion is ideologically grounded in the inequities of the slave trade, the revolutionary appeal of freedom or emancipation is equally not invoked – and indeed it is only invoked negatively in the text.[19] There are moments where the narrative voice wavers, such as where hyperbole threatens to tip into irony in the depiction of Villeneuve's paternalistic kindliness ('krönte seine Wohltaten noch damit'). The narrator's reductive bias in the sketch of Congo Hoango reveals even at the novella's opening the problem of the contingency of knowledge, and how knowledge is fundamentally insecure. As Roswitha Burwick has rightly noted: 'Kleist's story becomes an intricate and complex texture of narrative structures packed with semantic duplicity, inaccuracies in description, and ambiguity of […] narrator, and characters.'[20] Indeed, the paternalism of Villeneuve is qualified by the subsequent account of the 'grausame Strafe' meted out on Babekan that leaves her suffering from consumption.[21]

These inconsistencies encourage a degree of reading against and between the narrator's suggestions, although Kleist does not allow the reader insights into further justifications for the rebellion (both personal and political). Nor is there textual evidence of the intricacies of the mental states of non-white characters, in particular Congo Hoango and Babekan.[22] In fact,

[19] Wolfgang Wittkowski, 'Gerechtigkeit und Loyalität, Ethik und Politik', *Kleist-Jahrbuch* (1992), 152–71 (p. 158).
[20] Roswitha Burwick, 'Issues of Language and Communication: Kleist's "Die Verlobung in St. Domingo"', *The German Quarterly*, 65.3–4 (Summer – Autumn 1992), 318–27 (p. 320).
[21] Kleist, p. 223.
[22] Elystan Griffiths, *Political Change and Human Emancipation in the Works of Heinrich von Kleist* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005), pp. 65-66.

it is Gustav who is given the opportunity to interpret the events on Saint-Domingue, and provides an evasive and euphemistic account of colonialism and slavery:

> – Toni fragte: wodurch sich denn die Weißen daselbst so verhaßt gemacht hätten? – Der Fremde erwiderte betroffen: durch das allgemeine Verhältnis, das sie, als Herren der Insel, zu den Schwarzen hatten, und das ich, die Wahrheit zu gestehen, mich nicht unterfangen will, in Schutz zu nehmen; das aber schon seit vielen Jahrhunderten auf diese Weise bestand! Der Wahnsinn der Freiheit, der alle diese Pflanzungen ergriffen hat, trieb die Negern und Kreolen, die Ketten, die sie drückten, zu brechen, und an den Weißen wegen vielfacher und tadelnswürdiger Mißhandlungen, die sie von einigen schlechten Mitgliedern derselben erlitten, Rache zu nehmen.[23]

Whether Toni's question reveals her to be naïve or disingenuous remains an open question. Gustav's statement Gustav refrains from naming the system of slavery and makes recourse to a generalizing 'Verhältnis'; his claim not to defend the system – itself expressed through syntactically strained *topoi* of politeness – is then undermined by the justification from tradition. 'Mißhandlungen' negatively suggests the possibility of proper treatment of slaves, whilst also displacing the endemic problems of colonial violence and slavery onto exceptional individuals.[24] In short, Gustav does not provide an analytical account that might offer moral or political justification for the black rebellion. Kleist's consistent restriction of access to mental states and justifications for action and critically probes the question of which characters are permitted to speak in an environment divided by race and gender. It also makes the novella a springboard for discussing how narrative bias and prejudice encourages sustained critical attention to how the arguments are constructed, and how textual blind spots or lacunae can be reasonably accounted for.

Full humanity and the dynamics of pity

As in any case in teaching practices where texts are put alongside one another, there are productive points of contact between Kleist's novella and Caroline Auguste Fischer's

[23] Kleist, p. 233.
[24] Ray Fleming, 'Race and the Difference It Makes in Kleist's "Die Verlobung in St. Domingo"', *The German Quarterly*, 65.3–4 (Summer – Autumn 1992), 306–17 (p. 312).

William der Neger. Both depict social contexts where gender and race are enmeshed in a plot concerning interracial love, and they are also probe the concept (and limits) of humanity. A central motif of *Die Verlobung* is the recourse to 'Menschlichkeit', whether in the negative of Congo Hoango's 'unmenschliche Rachsucht', or Toni's righteous horror at her complicity in the entrapment and killing of white men: 'Unmenschlichkeiten […] empörten schon längst mein innerstes Gefühl'.[25] Central to the narrative is the 'menschliches Gefühl' triggered in Toni by Gustav's tale of his doomed fiancée Mariane Congreve.[26] Whilst the semantic weight of these repetitions appears to point towards some moral or ethical system of what constitutes humanity, what 'Menschlichkeit' might signify is not fully articulated in Kleist's novella. The density of Fischer's writing, in its narrative rather than stylistic complexity, as well as the extremes of emotions depicted, also presents parallels with Kleist's prose style.[27] But what brings *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo* and *William der Neger* most closely together is the onus that is placed on the reader to adopt a sceptical position towards both the narrative voice and the actions of the characters. In the context of *William der Neger*, this leads to a critical engagement with the universal ideals of political emancipation, but also to an exploration of the racial dynamics of pity.

But first, a few words of introduction. Caroline Auguste Fischer (1764–1842) is still relatively little known in scholarship relative to other women writers of the period, even following the facsimile publications of her works in the 1980s and translations of her work into English.[28] She is perhaps best known for the ironically titled epistolary novel *Die Honigmonathe* (1802), which is an excoriating take on the institution of marriage. Her writing

[25] Kleist, p. 223; p. 241.
[26] Ibid., p. 238.
[27] Judith Purver, 'Passion, Possession, Patriarchy: Images of Men in the Novels and Short Stories of Caroline Auguste Fischer (1764-1842)', *Neophilologus*, 79.4 (October 1995), 619–28 (pp. 619–20).
[28] Specifically, *William der Neger*: 'William the Negro', in *Bitter Healing: German Women Writers from 1700 to 1830. An Anthology*, ed. by Jeannine Blackwell and Susanne Zantop (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), pp. 349–67.

makes consistent recourse to tropes inherited from eighteenth-century epistolary fiction and *Empfindsamkeit*. *William der Neger* is no exception: Molly, the girl with whom William falls in love, is introduced as a Rousseauian child of nature, with remarkable musical capabilities – although she is not receptive to a formal education –, and she is ridiculed and ostracized by her birth family. On one level, Fischer draws an equivalence between the social Other in Molly and the cultural and racial Other in William.[29]

Fischer's short story is concerned with the education – more precisely: the social and cultural assimilation of Molly and the eponymous William, who was kidnapped and sold into slavery from his native Africa. He is then bought by the English abolitionist Sir Robert. The irony in Sir Robert's financial engagement with the slave trade whilst maintaining moral condemnation of slavery as an institution has not gone without comment in scholarship.[30] Indeed, this detail itself opens up the primary concern of the text with the instrumentalizing reach of patriarchy and paternalism, embodied by Sir Robert. Sir Robert's motives for buying William are, in essence, a form of ideological colonialism. He plans to craft William into an ideal revolutionary leader, who will then successfully continue the Haitian Revolution and spread the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity to other lands in the Caribbean and the Americas.

As it transpires, William proves to be a model student, far outstripping the achievements of his white peers. Yet the revolutionary logic of liberty stands in tension with how William's autonomy is compromised by his unquestioning absorption of Sir Robert's norms. William's intellectual achievements also are juxtaposed with his labile emotional states, and the disparity between William as a political liberator and William as emotionally volatile is never

[29] Sigrid Weigel, 'Die nahe Fremde – das Territorium des "Weiblichen" Zum Verhältnis von "Wilden" und "Frauen" im Diskurs der Aufklärung', in *Die andere Welt: Studien zum Exotismus*, ed. by Thomas Koebner and Gerhardt Pickerodt (Athenäum: Frankfurt/Main, 1987), pp. 171–99.
[30] Kontje, p. 38.

resolved. By focusing on William's fulfilment of Sir Robert's plan, the short story fulfils the trope that the historian Olivette Otele has identified of accounts that focus on exceptional individuals in tracing the history of black encounters with Europeans, such as the abolitionist Olaudah Equiano, or, in the German-speaking context, the philosopher Anton Wilhelm Amo: 'the notion of exceptionalism is used as a plausible reason for their fame. Some of their stories are believed to have survived because of the extraordinary nature of their contributions to European societies. Little, however, has been published about further aspects of their lives'.[31] This exceptionalism intersects with Fischer's sharp characterization of William as beset with racialized self-hatred and self-abasement. This is immediate upon Fischer's introduction of William, who is enraptured by Molly's singing:

> Wie gern, wie oft wär' er ihr zu Füßen gefallen, hätte er nicht immer sein schwarzes Gesicht in dem Bache, der die Wiese hinter dem Garten durchschlängelte, erblickt. […] Wenn sie den Garten verließ, verbarg er sein schwarzes Gesicht in den Händen und eilte mit klopfendem Herzen zu seinen Büchern.[32]

What is significant is the moral aesthetics of race to which William subscribes. William has internalized a fixed binary of blackness being associated with the barbaric, subhuman, and (self-)disgust, whereas whiteness is valorized and becomes rarefied in William's idealized references to Molly as 'du himmlische Weiße'.[33] Where Kleist presents the shifting and unstable gradations of racial identity, Fischer instead adopts a curiously stable antithesis or reflexive antagonism between whiteness and blackness, but equally plays with the tension of whether moments of visual recognition can give rise to reliable knowledge. This comes to the fore in a turning point in the narrative. Sir Robert reluctantly agrees to allow William to ask

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[31] Olivette Otele, *African Europeans. An Untold History* (London: Hurst & Company, 2020), p. 2.
[32] Caroline Auguste Fischer, 'William der Neger', in Caroline Auguste Fischer, *Kleine Erzählungen und romantische Skizzen: Erster Theil* (Posen, Leipzig: Kühn, 1818), pp. 29–73 (p. 33).
[33] Fischer, p. 35; p. 41. The intersection of aesthetic and racial categories is common in the eighteenth century, although it does not always manifest in absolute categories: see Sander L. Gilman, 'The Aesthetics of Blackness in Heinrich von Kleist's "Die Verlobung in St. Domingo', *Modern Language Notes*, 90.5 (October 1975), 661–72 (pp. 665–66); also: Sander Gilman, *On Blackness without Blacks: Essays on the Image of the Black in Germany* (Boston: G. K. Hall and Company, 1982), pp. 27–29.

for Molly's hand, as he believes the engagement will spur William on in his revolutionary mission. What is staged is a second moment of aesthetic recognition and self-abasement for William:

> Aber Sir Robert hatte geirrt. Auch William war nicht glücklich, oder nur auf sehr kurze Zeit. Am Tage der Verlobung, als Sir Robert Molly's Hand in Williams Hand legte, fiel des Negers Blick von Molly, die er gern doppelt sehen wollte, auf einen großen Spiegel, der die Gruppe nur zu getreu in sein trunkenes Auge warf. Ach, seine Gestalt erschien ihm wie die eines aufgerichteten Thieres, neben der des herrlichen weißen Mannes und der des himmlischen Mädchens. Sein Arm sank und Molly's Hand fiel aus der seinigen. Aber es wurde weder von Sir Robert noch von Molly bemerkt, und William hatte kurz darauf vollkommen Zeit, sich im Garten niederzuwerfen, und das, was er noch nicht zu nennen vermochte, mit dem Gesichte und dem Herzen an die mütterliche Erde gedrückt, in unaufhaltsamen Strömen auszuweinen.[34]

Molly and Sir Robert's myopia can be explained internally through the preceding (and quite literal) *coup de foudre*: the spark of erotic and romantic recognition as their gazes meet for the first time. Thus, one planned patriarchal, if interracial, exchange is threatened with, to eventually become supplanted by, its conventional other. Whilst there is no direct invocation of race as a construct in the text, Fischer suggests a typology of human behaviour which is determined by both cultural, climatic, and innate factors, in keeping with debates in philosophical and cultural anthropology of the Enlightenment, such as Kant's and Herder's anthropology.[35] William hails from 'aus Afrika's heißesten Gefilden', which maps onto his personality traits as a 'veredelter Schwarzer' of being given over to passion and affect.[36] As much as William's behaviour might be explained through this anthropological shorthand, his emotional volatility also makes manifest the impossibility of assimilation, the colonial

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[34] Fischer, pp. 52–53.

[35] Wendy Sutherland, *Staging Blackness and Performing Whiteness in Eighteenth-Century German Drama* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 12–31.

[36] Fischer, p. 42; p. 34. There are passing similarities with Kant's philosophical anthropology here: Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, 'The Color of Reason: The Idea of "Race" in Kant's Anthropology', in *Anthropology and the German Enlightenment: Perspectives on Humanity*, ed. by Katherine M. Faull (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1995), pp. 200–41 (pp. 214–15). Herder's *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschen* (1784–91) makes use of climate theory to explain human diversity – of temperament and of skin colour: see Chunjie Zhang, *Transculturality and German Discourse in the Age of European Colonialism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017), pp. 135–39.

condition which Homi Bhabha has characterized – in a nod to Freud – as the 'the unhomely'.[37]

William is not admitted to full humanity in Fischer's short story, which is encapsulated by his own statement: 'Ja, ich bin schwarz! Aber bin ich kein Mann? Hab' ich kein Herz?'.[38] Where William's racial identity is beyond doubt, the latter part of the statement is a willed affirmation that contains and risks its own negation in the rhetorical question – and the possibility of negation is strengthened by the insistent repetition of 'bin ich nichts werth? Bin ich dann nichts werth?'.[39] Equally, that is a sentimental re-configuration of the famous abolitionist motto of 'Am I Not a Man and a Brother' of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in Great Britain, and made famous in late eighteenth-century visual culture by Josiah Wedgwood's medallion of a supplicant and chained black slave.[40] Much as William may technically be a freed man, this intertextual prompt marks out slavery and subjection as a prolonged psychological condition, one that runs against the logic of emancipation.

Whilst racialized tropes justify why the interracial union cannot succeed, they combine with the conflation of love and pity in Molly's feelings towards William. Students studying this option will have prior experience with the importance of pity for Lessing's reinterpretation of Aristotle's *Poetics*. For Lessing, there is a humanist quality to pity, most notably in the 'vierzehntes Stück' of the *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1767-68), but put most pithily in a letter to Nicolai in November 1756: 'Der mitleidigste Mensch ist der beste Mensch'.[41] Pity, then, in Lessing's dramatic theory, should morally improve the individual.[42] *William der*

[37] Homi K. Bhaba, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 13–27.
[38] Fischer, p. 41.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Roger Little, *Between Totem and Taboo: Black Man, White Woman in Francographic Literature* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001), p. 46.
[41] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke und Briefe in zwölf Bänden*, ed. by Wilfried Barner and others, 12 vols (Frankfurt/Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985–2003), III: *Werke 1754–1757*, ed. by Conrad Wiedemann (1985), p. 671.
[42] Thomas Martinec, 'Lessing's Dramatic Theory', in *Lessing and the German Enlightenment*, ed. by Ritchie Robertson (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2013), pp. 119–37 (p. 131).

Neger instead presents a critical re-examination of the moral value of pity, especially when viewed through the lens of white identification with non-white characters. Students are asked to respond to this question as part of the essay exercise, for which they are provided with a prompt from Christian Daniel Schubart, who notes his response to a print by Daniel Chodowiecki in January 1776: '[mir entlocken] Thränen des zürnenden Mitleids über den armen Neger'.[43] Whilst this effusive rhetoric goes hand-in-hand with Schubart's criticism of abuses of colonial power and authority, it also opens up the question of how adopting a stance of pity implies a hierarchy between the pitying subject and the object of pity.[44] The act of pitying can therefore re-affirm Otherness – quite unlike Herder's notion of *Einfühlung*, which allows for sympathetic identification across cultures and peoples.[45]

In Fischer's text, the invocation of pity is also the point at which gender and racial dynamics intersect. Upon learning of William's love for Molly, Sir Robert finds himself conflicted about how best to proceed:

> Sir Robert wurde davon unterrichtet. Sein Herz triumphirte darüber; aber seine Vernunft sagte ihm, daß es traurige Folgen haben können. Zwar war der Jüngling zum einzigen Erben seines großen Vermögens bestimmt, und demnach für Molly's Vater, den armen Kaufmann, nicht zu verachten; zwar hatte sich William allgemeine Liebe erworben, und ließ keinen Zweifel darüber, was er einst für sein Volk, für die Wissenschaft sein werde: aber Molly war fünfzehn Jahr alt, und aus allem ließ sich schließen, daß ihr weiches Herz von Mitleiden irre geführt werde.[46]

Sir Robert's diagnosis is later proven to be correct – 'Jetzt kannte sie [Molly] ihre Empfindung gegen William und mußte sie Mitleiden nennen.'[47] Such a repetition of a character coming to emotional knowledge and affirmation of Sir Robert should prompt

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[43] Christian Daniel Schubart, *Teutsche Chronik*, Drittes Stück, 8 January 1776, p. 21. The print in question is likely Chodowiecki's *Hafenszene mit zwei Männern, die sich über den Verkauf eines Sklaven handelseinig werden* (1776).
[44] Friederike Baer, 'Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart's *Deutsche Chronik* and the War of American Independence, 1774-1777', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 38.3 (2015), 443–58 (pp. 446–47).
[45] It is for this reason that Herder's pluralist historicism in *Ideen* was marked out for praise by Edward Said: Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 118.
[46] Fischer, pp. 43–44.
[47] Ibid., p. 62.

suspicion on the part of the reader about Sir Robert's apparent omniscience. This is because Molly becomes emptied of agency by the narrative focalization through Sir Robert. The reasons for Sir Robert's decision are also not elaborated upon ('aus allem ließ sich schließen'). Not only does the invocation of pity involve a racialized – indeed, racist – reduction of William, but it also leads to Molly being subsumed into patriarchal order – one that the narrative structure and perspective tacitly support. As with Kleist, it is worth reading against the apparently neutral affirmation of Sir Robert's actions provided by the narrative perspective. Fischer's text outlines how William, too, adopts means of patriarchal control: by sending fake news of his death in the Caribbean so that Molly is legally freed from her engagement, and so she goes on to marry Sir Robert. Molly's loss of narrative and personal agency acts as an implicit critique of gender dynamics.

Where Kleist's novella foregrounds the ferocious instability of Saint-Domingue in 1803 and 1804, Fischer's short story recoils from exploring the disconnect between emancipatory values and their corollary in revolutionary violence. After William's journey to the Caribbean and the Americas, Fischer generates an uneasy juxtaposition between the image of William as a heroic saviour and the eradication of white colonists on Saint-Domingue:

> Drei Monate waren indessen verflossen und jede Hoffnung war verschwunden, als sich Nachrichten aus Domingo auf der Insel verbreiteten. Das schwarze Volk hatte wiederhohlt gesiegt, und besonders ein junger, vor kurzem aus Europa angekommener Neger sich durch Wunder der Tapferkeit ausgezeichnet. […] „Gleichviel! Wann segeln Sie zurück?" – „Wohin?" – „Nach Domingo." – „Davor wolle mich der Himmel bewahren! Ich bin durch ein Wunder entkommen. Das Leben eines jeden Europäers ist dort verwirkt." – „So schlimm wird es nicht sein!" – „Viel schlimmer als Sie glauben. Das werden Sie bestätigt finden, wofern es noch möglich ist, schriftliche Nachrichten zu erhalten."[48]

This is the only gesture in the short story towards revolutionary violence. By contrast with Kleist, it speaks to an effort to recover a universal ideal of emancipation as a regulative and proleptic idea, and one that acquires dubious legitimacy only through William's exposure to a

[48] Ibid., pp. 60–61.

(civilizing) English education.[49] William's return at the end encapsulates this tension. On one level, it enacts another patriarchal exchange, albeit patrilineal: William leaves his first-born son to be educated by Sir Robert, whilst in return Sir Robert's son will work to free non-white peoples in the Americas. On another, William is presented as an idealized, if not ironic, Christ-like figure:

> Keiner von beiden konnte ein Wort vorbringen; aber als Molly erschien, rief William, sich losreißend: „Zurück, Molly! Ich habe ein schwarzes Weib genommen! Die Nachricht meines Todes war vergeblich! So mußt' ich dich zwingen. Aber vergessen sollst du mich nicht! Ich lasse euch meinen Sohn! Er heißt William! Ein Freigeborner! Lebt wohl! Ich darf nicht verweilen! – Zurück! Haltet mich nicht! Wenn das Werk ganz vollendet ist, sehn wir uns wieder!"[50]

William's renunciation of his ties to English society is both racially grounded and complicated by the endorsement of its civilizing influence. Additionally, William's closing words have a Biblical resonance, with William as the disciple of Sir Robert but one who acquires Christ-like qualities (as in the epithet 'William der Retter').[51] The utopian promise of revolution and universal emancipation remains but a distant hope, and one only possible through continued racial separation.

Anti-imperialism and *Humanität*: Herder's 'Neger-Idyllen'

Herder, too, addresses questions of pity, paternalism, and exploitation. His ironically titled 'Neger-Idyllen' are shot through with the moral outrage familiar from Christian Daniel Schubart's condemnation of colonial violence and exploitation from the mid-1770s.[52] Herder's anti-imperialist stance is well-known, and his moral and political commitments make the poems polemical in tone.[53] The moral tenor of the five poems is based on the

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[49] See Kord, p. 103.
[50] Fischer, pp. 72–73.
[51] See John 17.4.
[52] For an account of Herder's re-conceptualisation of the idyll, see York-Gothart Mix, '›Der Neger malt den Teufel weiß.‹ J. G. Herders "Neger-Idyllen" im Kontext antiker Traditionsgebundenheit und zeitgenössischer Kolonialismuskritik', in *Das Europa der Aufklärung und die außereuropäische koloniale Welt*, ed. by Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006), pp. 193–207.
[53] The most recent and extensive account of Herder's anti-imperialism is John K. Noyes, *Herder: Aesthetics Against Imperialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

outrage at the lengths to which black slaves – liberated or not – must go to protect their dignity when faced with the cruelty of the white slave-owners. It is unsurprising, then, that the poems are prefaced with an account that decries European domination in the Atlantic World:

> Nicht der weise, sondern der *anmaßende, zudringliche, übervorteilende* Teil der Erde muß unser Weltteil heißen; er hat nicht kultiviert, sondern die Keime eigner Kultur der Völker, wo und wir er nur konnte, zerstöret. […] Ein Mensch, sagt das Sprichwort, ist dem andern ein Wolf, ein Gott, ein Engel, ein Teufel; was sind die auf einander wirkende Menschenvölker einander? Der Neger malt den Teufel weiß; und der Lette will nicht in den Himmel, sobald Deutsche da sind.[54]

The allusion to the Hobbesian proverb of *homo homini lupus* acts as a negation of Herder's own *Humanitätsideal*, which, although not a consistent doctrine in his moral philosophy, proceeds from premises of cosmopolitanism – respect granted to all human beings – and moral respect towards others, grounded in the notion of the unity of humankind.[55] What the poems therefore offer are an interrogation of this ideal, and how it might be realized in spite of the horror of colonial practices. The innate morality of the slaves functions as a sharp criticism of these practices. In 'Die rechte Hand', Fetu refuses to carry out the command of executing a fellow slave, and instead cuts off his right hand and dies from the wound – although the poem ends on the note that another slave will submit to carrying out the original punishment –; in 'Die Brüder', Quassi is raised with a white brother, who becomes a cruel master, and when attacked by his master, Quassi turns his knife on himself: he takes his own life rather than reducing himself to the animalistic barbarity of his former brother.[56]

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[54] Johann Gottfried Herder, *Werke in zehn Bänden*, ed. Jürgen Brammack and Martin Bollacher, 10 vols (Frankfurt/Main: Deutscher Klassikerverlag, 1985–2000), VII: *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität*, ed. by Hans Dietrich Irmscher (1991), pp. 672–74.
[55] Michael N. Forster, *Herder's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 224–31.
[56] Britta Hermann, 'Der Fremde und das Mädchen. Heinrich von Kleists *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo* im literarischen Kontext', *Zeitschrift für interkulturelle Germanistik*, 5.1 (2014), 29–50 (p. 39).

What remains an open question throughout these poems is how humankind might be bettered.[57] In 'Zimeo', the titular character criticizes the violence of the slave revolts in Jamaica in the 1730s as well as that of slave-owners. The binary between the innate morality of the black slaves and the immorality of white slave-owners is qualified in the fifth and final poem, which offers a depiction of benign paternalism. In 'Der Geburtstag', the liberated slave Jakob chooses to remain in the employ of his former owner, a Delaware Quaker called Walter Miflin – likely a misspelling for Warner Mifflin, who himself was a staunch abolitionist Quaker and did employ freed slaves on his farms. Mifflin became a prototypical Quaker and the image of principled pacificism for both French- and German-speaking readers at the end of the eighteenth century.[58] Jakob's wilful submission is an endorsement of the benign paternalism, embodied in the poem by Miflin:

> Frei
> Bist Du und mußt es sein. Die Freiheit ist
> Das höchste Gut. Gott ist der Menschen, nicht
> Allein der Weißen Vater. Gäb' er doch
> In aller meiner Brüder Sinn und Herz,
> Nach Afrika zu handeln, nicht daraus
> Euch zu entwenden, euch zu kaufen und
> Zu quälen!« –
> »Guter Herr, ich kann Euch nicht
> Verlassen; denn nie war ich Euer Sklav'.
> Ihr fodertet nicht mehr von mir, als andre
> Für sich arbeiten. Ich war glücklicher
> Und reicher als so viele Weiße. Laßt
> Mich bei Euch, lieber Herr.«
> »So bleibe dann
> In meinem Dienst, Du guter *Jakob*, doch
> Als freier Mann. Du feierst diese Woche
> Dein Freiheitfest, und dann arbeitest Du,
> So lange Dirs gefällt, um guten Lohn
> Bei mir, bis ich Dich treu versorge. Sei
> Mein Freund! Jakob.«
> Der Schwarze drückt' die Hand

[57] Ingeborg H. Solbrig, 'American Slavery in Eighteenth-Century German Literature: The Case of Herder's "Neger-Idyllen"', *Monatshefte*, 82.1 (Spring 1990), 38–49 (p. 47).
[58] Angela Kuhk, *Vielstimmige Welt: die Werke St. John de Crèvecœurs in deutscher* Sprache, Hallenser Studien zur Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 8 (Münster: LIT, 2001), pp. 119–20; see also: Angela Sanmann, '"The Exercise of a Just Love of Humanity": Sophie von La Roche as Female Cosmopolitan', *Women's Writing*, 27.1 (2020), 11–28.

Des guten *Walter Miflins* an sein Herz:
»So lange dieses schläget, schlägts für Euch!
Nur heute feiren wir, und morgen frisch
Zur Arbeit! Freud' und Fleiß ist unser Fest.«[59]

Students have rightly found this poem almost painfully naïve in its closing sentiment, and it hardly seems in keeping with ideas of absolute equality when a hierarchy is upheld – through consent of both parties, by the establishment of friendship, and by a shared work ethic – between Miflin and Jakob. This paradox stems from the fact that Miflin's benevolence masks Jakob's lack of autonomy, who owes Miflin gratitude in exchange for the gift of his freedom.[60] The optimistic tenor can be productively read as an ironic response to the preceding four poems in the cycle: Herder stages a consciously idealized identification between a former master and slave, and one that exposes the fragility of freedom and emancipation as an ideal by reinscribing a colonial hierarchy. As with Kleist and Fischer, Herder's poems, in spite of their polemical tone, equally reward suspicious reading: the logic of liberation and equality receives here a sunny denial – and the question of whether human improvement is possible is answered in a muted negative.

Reading the combination of Kleist, Fischer, and Herder as part of tutorial discussion not only involves exploring nuanced images of colonial, revolutionary, and interracial encounters both in the Atlantic World and in Europe, but it also exposes the implicit – and even unarticulated – moral commitments of present-day readers. In this way, ethical concerns combine with an examination of literature as an aesthetic category. That is to say: it is tempting for students to be uncertain about to critically interpret depictions of violence and suffering, and also to tend to read Kleist's novella as endorsing the narrator's racial bias. Yet exposing such

[59] Herder, VII, pp. 684–85.
[60] Christian Moser, 'Aneignung, Verpflanzung, Zirkulation: Johann Gottfried Herders Konzeption des interkulturellen Austauschs', *Edinburgh German Yearbook*, 1 (2007), 89–108 (pp. 104–105).

commitments allows for productive discussion about otherwise unvoiced assumptions not only about historical texts, but also about what ethical or moral roles literature and the reader should occupy. Teaching is therefore as much about offering a reflexive lens on one's own critical and moral position as it is about coming to a complex understanding of literary texts.

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