

THE
**BLACK
AVENGER**
IN
**ATLANTIC
CULTURE**

GRÉGORY
PIERROT

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CHAPTER 3

A TALE OF TWO AVENGERS

*The Haitian Revolution and the
Racial Politics of Novelty*

RACE AND LITERACY

National sentiment in ancien régime France developed in part around a pantheon of Frenchmen beholden to the heroes and model republican citizens of antiquity as well as to Renaissance courtly literature and its engagement with the place of personal virtue and honor within aristocratic society. While it “helped teach French elites to see their nation as a single, homogenous country,” the virtual pantheon instrumentalized by the ancien régime also provided material for a critique of the fundamental logic of that régime’s existence: throughout its development, the body of national heroes encompassed people of *all* social stations, a variety that reflected badly on the feudal system, where birth mattered more than deeds. During the revolution, works began to circulate that criticized “the current monarch’s failure to live up to the standards of greatness” set by national models of heroism.¹ In turn, the leaders rising in the French West Indian colony of Saint-Domingue challenged many of the assumptions built into France’s growing heroic nationalist iconography.

In 1791 the enslaved population of Saint-Domingue rose up in arms for its own sake, setting the colony on course for a revolution that would push France to abolish slavery, see Spain and Great Britain attempt and fail to subdue republican and enslaved armies, and eventually witness the insurgent army defeat a formidable expedition sent by Napoleon Bonaparte to reestablish slavery. Haitian independence was officially proclaimed on January 1, 1804, in a document signed by the commander in chief of the indigenous army, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and Haiti’s main officers. It first appeared in Europe two months later, at about the time when Dessalines, now Haiti’s governor general, ordered French civilians rounded up and killed. The mas-

sacres paled by comparison to the atrocities perpetrated by the French in Saint-Domingue mere months before. More crucially, they also paled by contrast: Dessalines's victims were exclusively white. News of the killings appeared in American newspapers a few weeks after they began and were soon confirmed by the Haitian government in a proclamation that circulated first on the island and then around the Atlantic world. Though he nominally addressed it to "the inhabitants of Haiti," Dessalines undoubtedly had a much broader intended audience when he unapologetically declared, "Yes, I have saved my country; I have avenged America."² With this phrase, Dessalines took on the double mantle of redeemer of his nation and founder of its country. This black avenger had succeeded and founded a black nation in America, and he now crowned himself the nation's original hero, in a transparent effort at replacing his immediate predecessor at the head of the island: the late governor and general Toussaint Louverture.

Dessalines's effort was not exactly successful. To this day it generally is not the victorious Jean-Jacques Dessalines but instead the defeated Toussaint Louverture whom writers and commentators designate as the revolution's hero. Born a slave in the mid-1740s, Louverture was emancipated when the revolution began in 1791 and joined the movement early on, rising quickly through the ranks of the rebel army. By 1800 he had authored the island's first constitution, and he ruled the colony alone, in virtual autonomy from France. This was too much for the quintessential Romantic great man of history, Consul for Life Napoleon Bonaparte, who late in 1801 sent a massive expedition headed by Gen. Charles Leclerc to subdue the revolutionaries and reestablish slavery on the island. The French captured Louverture and shipped him to France, but they could not conquer the island. In November 1803 the majority of French troops surrendered, some crossing the land border into Spanish San Domingo. Louverture never saw its triumph: he died in the French Alps in April 1803.

Many so-called great men of history did not achieve their goals, and even Napoleon Bonaparte died defeated, "a nameless thing," exiled on a speck of an island in the South Atlantic.³ Yet in his tragic death in defeat and captivity, Louverture paradoxically achieved exactly the destiny the West at large and France in particular had in mind for him when he was dubbed the "black Spartacus," after a popular figure of the French Enlightenment. Abbé Raynal's *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*—a lengthy study of European colonization written by a small army of writers under Raynal's name—was first published in 1770 and regularly republished in the following decades. From the first edition, the treatise contained a passage critical of slavery.⁴ The passage was

drastically expanded in the 1774 second edition, the first to be translated into English as *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies* (1776)—notably with this famous paragraph strongly reminiscent of Thomas Day and John Bicknell’s *The Dying Negro*: “Where is this great man to be found, whom nature, perhaps, owes to the honour of the human species? Where is this new Spartacus, who will not find a Crassus? Then will the *black code* be no more; and the *white code* will be a dreadful one, if the conqueror only regards the right of reprisals.”⁵

The last French edition of the text (1780) featured an even longer discussion of the wrongs of slavery that eschewed evocations of Spartacus for references to a passage from another best seller, a fantasy novel by Louis-Sébastien Mercier titled *L’An 2440, rêve s’il en fût jamais* (1770). What French Enlightenment thought it owed to English political thought could not be portrayed more symbolically than in the novel’s opening. Its Parisian protagonist, after an earnest conversation about political freedom with an “old Englishman,” falls asleep only to wake up to a vision of future, free France in the year 2440. Strolling through a hall of statues portraying the atrocities wrought on humanity by the nations, the protagonist happens on a statue of “the Avenger of the New World,” who led slaves into a massive uprising against “all their tyrants; French, Spanish, English, Dutch, and Portuguese” and wiped out European power across the Americas. The man of 2440 goes on to explain that since the revolution, the unnamed avenger has become the new world’s “titular deity . . . the exterminating angel to whom God resigned his sword of justice.”⁶

Denis Diderot borrowed freely from Mercier, and Mercier in turn borrowed back: a second edition of his novel published in 1786 hints at *Histoire philosophique* with its mention of “a Spartacus on the banks of the Gambia.”⁷ Raynal’s and Mercier’s black Spartacus was an informed abstraction; applied to the events of the Haitian Revolution after 1791, it forced them into a profoundly racist frame of interpretation. Scholars have highlighted the general connection between Raynal, Mercier, and this characterization of Louverture on many occasions, especially in the past two decades. Yet the minutiae of the process by which Louverture’s contemporaries came to attach him to one of the most famous texts of their generation have been ignored for the better part of two centuries. This, I contend, is very much a function of the dynamic that reshaped Louverture into a literary figure. The phrase “black Spartacus” connects by way of the French Enlightenment the Americas and a line of racial representation that constantly rewrites and rediscovers canonical texts. This chapter follows the chain of documents in which the phrase

appeared and circulated and replaces it within its political context. The mythologization of Louverture was a painstaking, deliberate process meant to translate and reduce the complex politics of Saint-Domingue into simplified, convenient, and profoundly inadequate racialized language for an Atlantic readership.

THE POLITICS OF LITERACY

Literacy in colonial Saint-Domingue society was an ostentatious sign of socio-racial belonging and status in the slaveholding world—quite literally one of the master’s tools. Those among the formerly enslaved who mastered it used it warily, in full awareness that their words—like themselves—might be turned against them, overwhelmed, kidnapped again.⁸ In the complex context of a Creole, slaveholding colony, in the aftermath of the United States’ successful bid for independence from the English metropole and in the throes of the French Revolution, racism and nationalism were inseparable. To an extent difficult to accurately measure, they were also a function of one’s access to literacy and its technologies—an access eminently dependent on race and class. The colony rested on a socio-racial hierarchy that posited an absolute divide between whites and blacks even as it necessarily took into account the unavoidable reality of interracial mixing. Martinican-born lawyer and writer Médéric Louis Elie Moreau de Saint-Méry infamously produced a taxonomy meant to account for all color- and blood-part combinations produced by interracial mixing.⁹ Among these categories the term *mulâtres* (mulattoes) designated those with equal mathematical degrees of whiteness and blackness; by the end of the eighteenth century the term was used interchangeably with *gens de couleur*, a broad class term designating free people of African descent.¹⁰ At the heart of this linguistic instability, French writing framed and organized the material existence of Caribbean bodies, and literacy defined the very meaning of one’s own skin. These racial categories, the policing required to maintain them, and the literature they inspired circulated to the metropole and influenced understandings of Frenchness.¹¹

Beginning in the late 1760s and riding on the “new focus on French whiteness” in continental France, administrators introduced increasingly strict racial laws meant to separate locals into supposedly hermetic racial categories.¹² The reflection on the meaning of the French nation that animated the last years of the ancien régime thus led to a flurry of legal decisions concerning the status on metropolitan soil of slaves in particular and people of African descent in general. French authorities inaugurated a “new classification system that they hoped would regulate the boundaries between France

and its colonies: the policing of race.” West Indian planters were concerned with the possibility that, upon being brought to France, their enslaved servants would gain freedom, and administrators worried about the threat of miscegenation embodied by black presence in France. The creation of the *Police des Noirs* in 1777, whose language “prescrib[ed] actions based on skin color alone, rather than slave status,” was the culmination of this trend.¹³ The new institution suggested a fundamental opposition between blackness and Frenchness and turned into law a binary separation inspired by colonial prejudice rather than colonial reality. This, in turn, exacerbated white supremacy in the West Indies.

Literature and law developed together to stigmatize *gens de couleur* and blame them for interracial relations increasingly considered immoral—and therefore titillating—while simultaneously exonerating the free white men involved in these unions.¹⁴ If the color line was meant to be seen as an absolute divide, finding oneself riding this line was eminently problematic. The pseudoscience of the day saw the “problem” of race mixing as one for which nature had a solution: polygenists such as Edward Long thought that unions between mulattoes were increasingly infertile, a theory shared notably by Moreau de Saint-Méry.¹⁵ This calculus resonated with romantic, Herderian *Volkgeist*, implying as it did that nations could reach their most natural and productive state by avoiding admixture. The division between white and nonwhite widened further in the eighteenth century, fueling among island whites the idea that they constituted a “unified French colonial community.” Enforced racial division extended to the Americas the reflections on national spirit and essence that agitated the metropole. Racism and nationalism mingled in French and colonial legal texts, helping create the circumstances in which the Haitian Revolution occurred. John Garrigus finds a direct correlation between increased legal restrictions against *gens de couleur* of the late eighteenth century and the first revolutionary stirrings among the wealthy *gens de couleur* of the southern region, beginning with the writings of *gens de couleur* activist Julien Raimond and first culminating in Vincent Ogé’s rebellion on his return from revolutionary Paris in 1790.¹⁶ The racialization of French and colonial legislation developed alongside increasingly racist notions expressed in, and influenced by, the literature that helped form Saint-Domingue’s racialized audience in the first place.

What Marlene Daut calls the “Enlightenment literacy narrative” of the Haitian Revolution—the notion that Saint-Domingue revolutionaries in general and Louverture in particular “could have been inspired to revolt by reading Raynal or other works of philosophy”—stems from a historical outlook beholden to notions of nation and race issued from European pseudo-

scientific writings and historiography discussed in the previous chapter.¹⁷ The great man theory of history—the notion notably popularized by Thomas Carlyle in the nineteenth century, that “the History of the world is but the Biography of great men”—crossed with the increasingly popular fiction of race yielded narrative frames specific to Saint-Domingue.¹⁸ The literacy narrative focuses on West Indian agents accessing European writing, but, simultaneously, it is also the product of Europeans writing these agents into literate being. As it appeared to connect Louverture to antiquity, the phrase “black Spartacus” also retroactively colored Rome and all that touched it. Plutarch tried to recuperate the Thracian gladiator for Western civilization; by adding the qualifier “black,” this new phrase defined him as white *by default* and *in contrast* with his black contemporary peers. Under the pretense of praise, the phrase suggests and supports racial divide.¹⁹ Mercier’s and Raynal’s warnings contained an abstract curse against the mysterious figure they described. New Rome should be wary that a new Spartacus should rise, but the original Spartacus, however bold, honorable, and justified, disappeared in defeat. Mercier may have depicted and supported—initially, at least—the victory of his fictional Spartacus, but the figure still carried the name of a leader vanquished in battle, and Mercier’s entire novel was as much prediction as warning.²⁰ With the Enlightenment narrative, and with two centuries’ hindsight, the curse seemed like it was extended to Louverture, whose death in captivity months before the victory of his peers has struck many as quasi-theatrical.²¹

Such semantic weight makes it is easy to overlook that the phrase was applied to the general when he was a living, active political figure. Doris Garraway proposes that in producing letters, pamphlets, and other written material, “revolutionary leaders such as Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines sought to disprove the thesis of black barbarity and to emulate the trappings of state needed to claim both sovereignty and civilizational equality with other nations.”²² The tale of the black Spartacus shows how the principal figures in one among the innumerable instances of political intrigue that make up what we call the Haitian Revolution often used raced language *precisely* for its power to obfuscate politics. Both because they were virtually unable to avoid using the terminology of race and because that terminology could serve their immediate political goals, people of color living in colonial society channeled the literary tradition of black avenger figures, in the process giving it renewed life and meaning. Deborah Jenson dubs Louverture a “spin doctor” who used the rhetoric of the French Revolution to “sell” the Haitian Revolution. She places him “in the ranks of the French or franco-phone pre-Romantics . . . who graft subjectivity and *citoyenneté* together” and shows how his famously illiterate successor Dessalines followed in his

footsteps.²³ Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines made drastically different use of the black avenger figure at the heart of the Enlightenment narrative of the revolution. Toussaint Louverture was the black Spartacus, but it would fall to his former subordinate Jean-Jacques Dessalines to become the avenger of the Americas, a role he would take in earnest, for better and for worse. But first, behold a man transformed into a trope.

BUILDING THE BLACK SPARTACUS

Toussaint was born around 1745 on the Bréda plantation in Saint-Domingue, where he was enslaved before he began living as a free man of color sometime in the 1770s.²⁴ That same decade in continental France, Etienne Magneaud Bizefranc de Laveaux, second son of an old aristocratic family, entered into a military career in the royal French army, rising quickly through the ranks in the early years of the revolution. Even as a new member of Saint-Domingue's free-colored population, Toussaint continued to work for wages on the Bréda plantation, and for a short time (1779–1781) managed a small coffee plantation, complete with a dozen enslaved laborers he rented from his son-in-law. Among them was a young man by the name of Jean-Jacques, whom the world would soon know by the name of his last owner, Dessalines.²⁵ While the future emperor toiled in the fields, the rich planter of color Vincent Ogé was in Paris, witnessing firsthand the early stages of the French Revolution. There he met with members of the *Société des Amis des Noirs*, a group founded the year before by the Anglophile lawyer Jacques Pierre Brissot on the model of the English Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, founded in 1787. The *société's* debt to the English organization was obvious in its principal activity: the translation of English abolitionist publications. The social elitism of the *société* and the efficient work of the Club Massiac—a lobbying group founded by the planter lobby in August 1789 expressly to oppose the *société's* influence among members of the newly constituted legislative body of the *Assemblée Nationale*—made this English connection a public liability. But much about the *société* was uniquely French: its avowed goal of obtaining the immediate abolition of slavery, for example, was more radical than the ameliorist aims of its English counterpart. Its stance was also much more radical than that of Julien Raimond's, a wealthy planter of color from Saint-Domingue who, since his arrival in the metropole in 1784, had been attempting to convince French authorities and absentee planters of the necessity to grant gens de couleur civil rights. They owned slaves like their white fellow planters and logically sought their support, both Ogé and Raimond notably meeting with representatives of

Club Massiac. Their arguments fell on deaf ears: white planters “saw no reason to chip away at racial categories.”²⁶

Société member and prominent revolutionary Abbé Grégoire published *Mémoire en faveur des gens de couleur ou sang-mêlés de St.-Domingue* (1789) in support of the bid for full citizenship put forth by Vincent Ogé and Julien Raimond to the Assemblée Nationale. After providing a detailed list of the humiliations and injustices faced by gens de couleur in Saint-Domingue, Grégoire defends their valor and potential as full-fledged French citizens, arguing that “they are a sure support in the struggle against slave insurrection”:

A secret fire smolders in all of Europe and forebodes a coming revolution, that Potentates could and should make calm and soft. Yes, the cry of liberty resounds in both Worlds, and there is need only of an Othello, a Padréjean, to awaken in the souls of Negroes the sentiment of their inalienable rights. Seeing then that the mixed bloods cannot protect them against their despots, they may turn their irons against all, a sudden explosion will drop their chains; and who among us will dare condemn them, if he imagined himself in their place?²⁷

Grégoire’s take on Raynal’s motif was certainly informed by the knowledge and experience of Raimond, who provided the evidence of the abuse gens de couleur had to suffer in Saint-Domingue cited by Grégoire throughout the pamphlet. Although Grégoire’s disquisitions on the coming slave insurrection went much further than Raimond would have liked, his point was seemingly only to bolster Raimond’s claim.²⁸ Granting citizenship to gens de couleur would ensure their service in preventing a slave insurrection.²⁹ We can see that the literary and more specifically theatrical roots of the black avenger trope remained crucial, even in a pamphlet with political ramifications. Grégoire makes the fictional Moor of Venice and the real-life leader of an unsuccessful West Indian slave revolt equal in the promise of black military leadership. Neither Othello nor Padréjean delivered on the goods of a lasting black polity, and therefore they are considered brothers in a theatrical tradition of black avengers. Wittingly or not, in perpetuating this tradition Grégoire was also performing an exorcism of sorts that allowed for a preemptive framing of slave revolt, were it to ever succeed. Prophesied by a French author in a French publication, the coming revolution—or, in any case, its narrative—might well be controlled the same way.

Within this literature-inflected frame, the coming black nation was primed to take on the same characteristics as a stage production, teasing the audience with this most uncommon, most terrifying of theatrical thrills: a successful theatrical villain. It would enact the feverish dreams expressed by

generations of vindictive stage Moors. Following their imprecations, slaves would revolt and take back what was stolen from them and then go even further. One should imagine that prospect was terrifying enough: if, like their stage predecessors, Raynal's and Mercier's black avengers find their basis in historical precedent, the future they announce does not go very far beyond the abstract notion of an America controlled by blacks. The force of these visions is all in their potentiality, in the nagging suggestion that, contrary to all their predecessors, these black avengers might pull it off and execute all their threats. Stepping in where the allegedly unsophisticated, uncivilized African could not deliver, French authors imagined a black nation from the outside, for white readers. Now with revolution brewing in the Caribbean, the European-designed figure of the black avenger was about to meet actual black Americans.

Ogé returned from France in October thinking that the new laws of the republic made propertied gens de couleur full-fledged citizens, but he misjudged the depth of colonial racism. Incensed at Saint-Domingue governor Philippe François Rouxel de Blanchelande's refusal to grant civil rights to his peers, he led a few hundred gens de couleur in rebellion against the government. The uprising was crushed, and Ogé was captured and gruesomely executed in Cap Français in February 1791. He had promised he would not "rouse the plantations," but after his execution, as violent conflict between the white and free-colored factions spread throughout the colony, both sides took to drafting the enslaved to fight for them, promising freedom as a recompense. Simultaneously, increasingly numerous groups of slaves rose up in arms around the island, claiming to fight for king and freedom.³⁰ On August 14, 1791, the mythical beginning of the slave revolution took place, with the voodoo ceremony at Bwa Kayiman followed by a campaign of systematic destruction of the sugar plantations in the Plaine du Cap a week later.³¹

In September 1792 Laveaux first arrived on the island at the head of a regiment sent to support republican commissioners—Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, Etienne Polverel, and Jean-Antoine Ailhaud—in enforcing the decree of April 4, 1792, specifically granting equal civil rights to gens de couleur. Sonthonax and the newly arrived troops faced the hostility of local white inhabitants and colonial authorities, and Sonthonax owed his life to the protection of gens de couleur troops during an assault led by white militias in December 1792.³² By then the colony was torn by widespread civil war between whites and gens de couleur and slave uprisings unofficially supported by the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo.³³ Toussaint and Dessalines were among those who joined Spanish forces, under the leadership of Jean-François and Biassou. Having to face slave armies, the Spanish, and soon British troops

in 1793, Sonthonax took the radical decision to abolish slavery outright in the colony on August 24, 1793. Toussaint Louverture joined French forces in May 1794, after news arrived from the metropole that the French Republic had in turn voted to abolish slavery. New terms entered local vocabulary: gens de couleur were now also *anciens libres*, those who had been free before the decree, and they were now joined in freedom by *nouveaux libres*, the formerly enslaved formally freed by the new law of the republic. Commander in chief of republican forces on the island and governor general since October 1793, Laveaux finally met Louverture face to face in August 1794, the two of them now officers of the same army. They showed each other respect and admiration and developed a close relationship that proved central notably in the Affair of 30 Ventôse Year IV (March 20, 1796).³⁴

Sonthonax's often brash behavior and taste for intrigue gradually alienated him from gens de couleur; Laveaux continued in his footsteps. During his tenure as governor, Laveaux, a white, metropolitan officer at the head of republican regiments increasingly reliant on gens de couleur and *nouveaux libres* soldiers successful in the field, made enemies of many of his former supporters, and his authority waned significantly after 1794. Historians have portrayed his rule alternatively as naive or downright tyrannical; in any case, by early 1796 he was being challenged by local officers who enjoyed a level of support from their troops and from the population that the metropolitan Laveaux never did entertain. Along with Louverture, André Rigaud, and Louis-Jacques Bauvais, Jean-Louis Villatte was the highest ranking native officer on the island. He was popular with the inhabitants of Le Cap, whose heroic defense against the Spanish and English he had organized. It was in part to express frustration at Laveaux's mismanagement that, on 30 Ventôse, Villatte led a group of officers that captured, beat, and threw in jail the governor, his civil administrator Henry Perroud, and others, with the approval of the municipality.³⁵ In the chaos that ensued, Laveaux and his companions likely owed their lives to the intervention of Toussaint Louverture.

THE MAN OF RAYNAL'S PROPHECY

On April 1, 1796, General Laveaux named Toussaint Louverture his lieutenant governor as a reward for saving his life. No person of African descent had ever risen to such a position in a colony that, a mere five years earlier, still had not allowed gens de couleur to participate in administration and politics. Legend has it that on this occasion Laveaux first dubbed Toussaint Louverture "black Spartacus, the man of Raynal's prophecy." If, as Srimi-

vas Aravamudan asserts, in the Age of Revolution “readers are heroes, and writers are gods,” this moment represents Louverture’s baptism into French Enlightenment.³⁶

The population of color of Saint-Domingue, free or enslaved, could well have been familiar with Raynal’s text, firsthand or secondhand: according to Thomas Prosper Gragnon-Lacoste, “European negrophiles smuggled [Raynal’s book] into America.”³⁷ A play performed in Le Cap in 1787 apparently borrowed material from Raynal.³⁸ Yet it bears noting that hints of affinities between Raynal’s figure and Louverture’s textual persona appeared as soon as Louverture wrote himself into the record. Thus, in a letter written on the day Sonthonax abolished slavery on the island on August 29, 1793, Louverture had declared in terms reminiscent of Raynal, “Brothers and friends. I am Toussaint Louverture; my name is perhaps known to you. I have undertaken vengeance for my race.”³⁹ By 1799 this precocious connection could be accounted for: an anonymous “citizen recently arrived from Saint Domingue” asserted in *Le Moniteur Universel*, the official organ of the French government, that Louverture had been aware of Raynal even before the revolution. He had procured, the author claimed, a copy of his book, “returning incessantly” to “that page where Raynal appears to announce the liberator meant to tear off the shackles of much of humanity.”⁴⁰ The article further claims that Louverture later sent money to a “European philanthropist” to subscribe to French newspapers and keep abreast of developments on the continent. That Louverture saw himself in Raynal’s so-called prophecy is only part of what is at stake here. If reading Raynal opened Louverture’s eyes to the word of the French, his subsequent transatlantic engagement with the continental public sphere was but the practice of the secular faith, culminating in the moment when, through Laveaux’s ministrations, Louverture accepted Raynal—and beyond him the French Enlightenment project—as his personal savior. In subsequent years, authors as hostile as the French publicist Louis Dubroca or as sympathetic as the British writer Marcus Rainsford would repeat the claim that Louverture had read Raynal, until, by the 1820s, it had become a staple of Haitian historiography.⁴¹ It has been repeatedly used ever since as a colorful and usually unquestioned image, a convenient link between the French and the Haitian Revolutions. Aravamudan voiced reasonable doubts about the veracity of the tale but also asserted, “Haitian national memory and historiography has persistently relied on Toussaint’s apocryphal self-recognition. . . . If Toussaint never really read the black Spartacus passage, Haitian historiography would have needed to invent an equivalent incident.” No Haitian historian was referenced in the making of

this claim, but Louverture's act of reading certainly served Aravamudan's need for an example for his theory of colonial "cultural and political deformation" of European discourse through counterreading.⁴²

The circuit Aravamudan describes, even as it acknowledges that the empire can strike back, remains desperately Eurocentric. It follows Benedict Anderson's ideas regarding the importance of print in building the modern nation, a community of readers partaking in the national text formed where "fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community and anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations."⁴³ Aravamudan, following a line of argument described by David Scott, marvels at the way "the rebel slaves appropriated the modern concepts and institutions they found around them and creatively turned them to their own purposes." But in presenting Louverture's *reading* of Raynal as a heroic act of resistance, Aravamudan fails to consider Louverture's stance. The general was not just a reader. He was also a writer himself—the author of memoirs, hundreds of letters, and of Saint-Domingue's first constitution: a statesman in the Western mold, not simply by a romantic feat of self-making, but also, as David Scott argues, because Haitian revolutionaries' appropriation of European modernity "was not a prior choice they made as preconstituted subjects waking up in the middle of a world they found objectionable and in need of change; it was a choice partly constructed through its conceptual and ideological apparatuses."⁴⁴ To read and write in an eighteenth-century colonial context was necessary to do, and participate in, Western politics, the only option viable in these circumstances.

Deborah Jenson sees Louverture's influence on the 1799 *Moniteur* article and evidence of his effort at "counter-balanc[ing] the subversive aspects of his pursuit of political autonomy . . . by 'spinning' the Haitian Revolution for an Enlightenment audience."⁴⁵ This analysis provides a welcome alternative to the usual assumption that Louverture was a passive receptacle for Raynal's wisdom. But, contrary to Jenson's claim, *Le Moniteur* was not the first French print source to evoke Louverture's alleged reading of Raynal: the honor goes to a polemic pamphlet by a certain "Mandar-Argeaut" (an "enigmatic signature" with which the author meant to protect himself against the potential retaliation of republican commissioner Léger-Félicité Sonthonax) written in 1797 in the wake of the Affair of 30 Ventôse.⁴⁶ That the claim that Louverture had read Raynal was originally made in commentary about Laveaux's April 1 speech is all the more important here for demonstrating that it in fact constituted an eminently political appeal to revolutionary cultural references, made with a keen sense of what it would evoke for the metropolitan French audiences it was addressing.

The ceremony on April 1, 1796, marked a turning point in the balance of power on the island soon recognized as such by observers. For Louis Dubroca, an early French chronicler of the Haitian Revolution hostile to Louverture, writing in 1802, it made Toussaint Louverture the “arbiter of the fate of the colony.”⁴⁷ Pamphile de Lacroix, a white Saint-Domingue planter who served as an officer in the English army during the occupation, wrote in 1819 that this declaration had been “the coup de grace that killed the authority of the metropole in Saint-Domingue. One can date to this day the end of the credit granted to whites and the birth of power among blacks.”⁴⁸ This event became part of a narrative frame for the Haitian Revolution that Daut calls the “mulatto/a vengeance narrative.” Its similarity with the black vengeance plot should come as no surprise, as both are products of racial pseudoscience. The “mulatto/a vengeance narrative” evokes “ideas of savagery precisely because they suggest that people of color, regardless of any genealogical connection to ‘whiteness,’ would never be able to rid themselves of the ‘original stain of their barbarity.’”⁴⁹ The model spread in late eighteenth-century culture explains the Haitian Revolution as the parricidal revenge of mixed-race children; Daut’s examples show the early development of characters that would yield the tragic mulatto, in plots that put front and center the plight of people who can neither be fully white nor black.

Tales of Vincent Ogé’s failed uprising bear much resemblance to the Oroonoko plot: incensed at the injustice dealt his socioracial class in the colonial order, the unfortunate Ogé led a failed revolt against the colonial order only to be captured, broken on the wheel, and dismembered in public. Ogé’s tragic end soon became fodder for antislavery activists in France and beyond.⁵⁰ Of course, differences here are significant—or so we have grown to think: Ogé refused to involve the enslaved in a citizenship struggle he fought for gens de couleur alone. His effort came about at a time when socio-racial definitions were quickly congealing and in a system whose wealth was predicated on slave labor. Though fully aware of his own African lineage, Ogé considered himself and his fellow gens de couleur a community separate from both Europeans and Africans. As free people of color, they were quintessentially Americans, close to the northern neighbors who a decade earlier had gained their civil rights from Great Britain without parting with slavery. Later gens de couleur leaders such as André Rigaud, though they did not abandon his color prejudice, would show more pragmatism in allying with free and formerly enslaved blacks. Ogé, however, wanted nothing to do with them. Revolutionary pragmatism made gens de couleur and the enslaved al-

lies, but the original rift between the two groups was used efficiently and early by white planters.

Thus white planters routinely claimed that black slaves themselves scorned mulattoes. In November 1789, an anonymous text—likely produced by white planters in an effort to discredit Ogé’s and Raimond’s efforts in Paris—was published in *Le Moniteur*, titled “Réclamation des nègres libres, colons américains [Complaint of the free Negroes, American colonists].”⁵¹ It argued that “the negro comes from a pure blood; the mulatto instead comes from mixed blood; he is composed of black and white, a bastard species. From this truth, it is as evident that the negro is above the mulatto as pure gold is above mixed gold.”⁵² Grégoire ridiculed the notion in his *Mémoire*, to which in turn an anonymous “inhabitant of the colonies” responded:

This color prejudice, it has to be said, is not even white men’s alone. The free negro is scorned by the enslaved quarteron. Lower than him by law, but closer to his master by skin color, he feels superior to him. . . . Thus a kind of pride, increasing as hue recedes, tends to invigorate this prejudice that is the hidden spring in the colonial machine. It can be *softened* but not *annihilated*; time, with its blunt file, can destroy its most vulgar aspects, but if the spring is cut, the entire machine will noisily come down.⁵³

In this light, mixed-race people are exclusively characterized by their difference from “pure” black and “pure” whites and alternatively criticized for their proximity to either hermetic group. Ogé’s fate was undoubtedly as horrible as Toussaint Louverture’s, but in a world of representation increasingly keen on tracing uncrossable racial lines, Ogé lacked the “racial purity” necessary to see his story mythicized as that of a black avenger. By the time Saint-Domingue gens de couleur rallied the French Republic en masse, even accepting, however reluctantly, complete emancipation, there was a new candidate for the position of black avenger and reasons for all parties involved to minimize what the two gens de couleur—for such was indeed Louverture’s status when the revolution began—had in common.

Of course, contrary to Ogé, Louverture had been enslaved for thirty years of his life, and he could summon this experience to sway those revolutionaries with a similar background. This appears to be the rationale that pushed Laveaux to name him lieutenant governor: “I understood that I would succeed in asserting the trust given me by the blacks only by choosing as collaborator a man of a different color. . . . I chose to reward the brave, the faithful *Toussaint Louverture*.”⁵⁴ There is no doubt that Laveaux rewarded Louverture: whether or not he also called him “that Negro, that Spartacus foretold by Raynal, whose destiny is to avenge the wrongs committed on his

race” on this occasion is much less clear.⁵⁵ Exploring the documentary trail of this generally unquestioned claim exposes its cultural and political stakes and reveals it as a deliberate, calculated rhetorical move meant to frame the colony’s political feuds in simplified, convenient, and profoundly inadequate racialized discourse. In subsequent communications on the affair, Laveaux, Perroud, and Louverture deceptively portrayed Villatte’s action as a bid to install so-called mulatto power by striking at white republican representatives and ultimately to undermine the freedom of black laborers. Reality, as often, was much more complex: most of Villatte’s troops were dark-skinned *nouveaux libres*, and the gens de couleur officers Laveaux and Louverture accused more or less overtly to be behind Villatte’s coup—Rigaud foremost among them—never attempted to support his action.⁵⁶ Portraying the Affair of 30 Ventôse as a mulatto coup attempt would nevertheless prove crucial in Louverture’s own bid to power.

THE ARCHIVAL TRAIL

Laveaux’s speech dubbing Louverture the “black Spartacus” is regularly “quoted” in history books, yet no copy of the alleged speech exists. In his own report to the French Conseil des Cinq-Cents published on 1 Floreal year V (April 20, 1797), Laveaux makes no mention of even having delivered a speech on the occasion.⁵⁷ Yet by then the phrase had already begun to circulate: the earliest instance of a text comparing Louverture to Raynal’s black Spartacus in relation to the coup attempt of 30 Ventôse was most likely Henry Perroud’s letter to the plenipotentiary minister and the French consul in the United States, dated 10 Germinal year IV (March 30, 1796), one day prior to Laveaux’s speech. In it, Perroud declares somewhat cryptically about 30 Ventôse: “As a well-prepared carnage was about to take place, the valorous Toussaint Louverture demonstrated such character, such prudence and activity, that one is forced to recognize in him this great Man, announced by a sublime political author, to be born one day for the happiness of his Brethren and the salvation of his country.”⁵⁸ Whatever doubts there might be that the “great Man” and “sublime political author” are the black Spartacus and Raynal are cleared up by Perroud’s report to the Ministry of the Navy and the Colonies, dated 26 Germinal year IV (April 15, 1796), in which he elaborates in similar fashion:

The most pernicious seduction was used to deceive the credulity of some Africans in the garrison; they were primed for murder, being told that chains were being unloaded from ships in order to return them to slavery! . . . Fright-

ened by this, these men rise; weapons in hand, they run; threaten; forcibly enter the Republic's stores; open the dressers; break barrels of flour and salted meat; take over our positions; aim their weapons at the Governor, myself, and the other whites; and would have given the signal of death, if the valorous Toussaint Louverture, this African genius designated by a great Philosopher as the savior of his country, had not rushed over, saber in hand, to repress these ferocious satellites, unworthy of the name of soldiers.⁵⁹

Laveaux and Perroud reserved references to Raynal for a revolutionary French audience they knew to be familiar with, and generally admiring of, Raynal's text.⁶⁰ The way Perroud evokes Raynal without naming him hints at a reference so familiar no name is necessary, a discreet nod to people in the know. These documents also strongly suggest that it was Perroud, rather than Laveaux, who first dubbed Louverture "the man of Raynal's prophecy," prior to Laveaux's speech.

Perroud's text was designed to sway those potentially hostile French readers in diverse positions of power in the republican apparel of state to whom he and Laveaux had to answer. Perroud's and Laveaux's way out of trouble was predicated on exacerbating and naturalizing their woes. By the time the two French officials published a letter to reassure "the merchants and captains of the continent of America, and the Danish islands," their narrative described abuse at the hands of a "horde of factious people and intriguers," and praised "Toussaint Louverture, this man, without his equal." Racial dog whistles are subtle here: the letter never nominally mentions mulattoes or gens de couleur but instead announces that "a horrible proscription extending to all the white people was already pronounced in all the quarters of the colony. . . . When on a sudden, the true people . . . , the true Republicans, the African cultivators, were struck with the horror of that outrage and hastened to join in mass, in arms, in order to take off our fetters."⁶¹ Laveaux's and Perroud's coalescing narrative would rest on an exclusively racial reading of the conflict. In this and the coming communications by the two men, the *Affair of 30 Ventôse* is a demonstration of mulatto deviousness in a plan to destroy whites and fool blacks to assert mulatto supremacy on the island.

In official communications sent to republican authorities in the hopes of counteracting Laveaux's and Perroud's narratives, their opponents on the island argued that Laveaux had in fact been planning the extermination of gens de couleur. Notably, Villatte and his co-conspirators, writing from the jail in Bayonne, where they were deported after 30 Ventôse, repeatedly mention a little-known, chilling episode, when Sonthonax apparently commissioned Laveaux to draft "proscriptive plans . . . to exterminate every man of

color until the last.”⁶² François-Frédéric Cotterel, who discusses this same plan in another publication, argues that it was the fruit of a Machiavellian maneuver by which Sonthonax hoped to consolidate the support of gens de couleur by pretending he had in fact thwarted Laveaux’s plan.⁶³ Daut marvels at how routinely the idea of “exterminating the entire population of ‘mulattoes,’ free people of color, and eventually all ‘negroes’ is alluded to in the literary history of the Haitian Revolution,” notably pointing to Rigaud’s mention of “a faction that tends to want the destruction of all the citizens of color in Saint Domingue.”⁶⁴ Rigaud is referring to none other than Commissioner Sonthonax, once the friend of people of color, but by then “declaring [against them] a war as cruel as it is unjust.”⁶⁵ In this war he apparently hoped to recruit *nouveaux libres* to his side. Sonthonax was rumored to have told formerly enslaved leader Dieudonné as he designated him commander in the Western region in 1794, “Do not forget that as long as you will see men of color among your troops, you will not be free.”⁶⁶ Republican agents Sonthonax, Laveaux, and Perroud expressed hostility against allies challenging their authority and against political enemies in very much the same naturalizing rhetoric of “monstrous hybridity” invented and employed by slavery apologists and planters, which presented mulattoes’ alleged hatred of whites and scorn for blacks as a natural consequence of their being racially mixed.⁶⁷ In letters and publications in the mid- to late-1790s, they increasingly fail to distinguish between the generally concrete reasons behind their feuds and the blatantly erroneous but convenient notion that these feuds opposed them exclusively to gens de couleur, often naturalized as mulattoes.

Pierre-François Barbault-Royer’s 1797 letter to denounce the actions of Sonthonax, Laveaux, and Perroud to the Directoire further discusses the Raynal reference. As a former Jacobin and aide-de-camp to Julien Raimond, Barbault-Royer might have shared much of his opponents’ politics. Yet he also meant to defend his socioracial class as well the economic interests of planters, white or colored, against the threat represented by Sonthonax and other “white levellers.” Whereas in their descriptions of the situation in the colony Sonthonax and his supporters portrayed an alliance of black laborers with white revolutionaries against traitorous white planters and devious gens de couleur, Barbault-Royer presents Saint-Domingue’s poor whites as Sonthonax’s foot soldiers, responsible for tricking gullible blacks into fighting gens de couleur. He further writes that in “his proclamations distributed around the island and transported beyond the continent, Laveaux calls Toussaint Louverture *the man predicted by abbé Raynal*.”⁶⁸ French author François-Frédéric Cotterel soon after published several texts to challenge the legality of Laveaux and Sonthonax’s 1796 election as representatives for

Saint-Domingue and attack their handling of affairs in the colony.⁶⁹ The letter notably meant to contradict portrayals of the Affair of 30 Ventôse as a racialized, *gens de couleur* coup attempt, a notion created by Sonthonax, Laveaux, and Perroud in “their relentlessness in hunting down men of color.”⁷⁰

In another publication, a paragraph-by-paragraph, acerbic riposte to Perroud’s memoir, Cotterel returned to his antagonist’s use of Raynal:

When the illustrious Raynal predicted a savior for Africa, he was far from believing that you would prevail on him to advocate a brigand who, after being degraded by a long time in slavery in America, supposedly became its scourge, by way of assassination, devastation, and arson, to which he has incessantly resorted while fighting against the homeland of Breda, his former master, until the time when, as recompense for his important services, Governor Laveaux put him at the head of Republican troops and associated him to his government.⁷¹

Laveaux’s and Perroud’s intent in using a passage known by whites for its dreary foreboding could appear somewhat puzzling, as nineteenth-century Haitian historian Beaubrun Ardouin once noted.⁷² Indeed, Raynal promised merciless race vengeance and utter doom for white planters in the Americas, an apocalyptic vision that ill-matched the events at hand and offered little positive prospect for whites, including the revolutionary agents. But the reference itself apparently mattered more than its contents: Perroud clearly does not include himself or French revolutionaries in the ranks of white enemies of a figure that remained aloof and quasi-fictional for the metropolitan audience he addressed but laden with political and moral righteousness of the kind endorsed by the French Republic.

Perroud superimposes Raynal’s black avenger as it was seen by sympathetic European radicals—an avenging angel with whose radical righteousness they aligned, if only theoretically—on a local situation much too complex to match the original image’s absolute division between white planters and black slaves. Quoting Raynal, Perroud presents Laveaux—and encourages like-minded people to see themselves too—as savvy readers and spectators, capable of recognizing in Toussaint Louverture’s the performance of the role popularized by Raynal. As the 1799 *Moniteur* article about Louverture later would, Perroud retroactively makes Laveaux’s speech into a performative act by which the representative of the French Republic designates in Toussaint Louverture the fulfillment of a well-known prophecy of the republican canon.⁷³ This act rests on confirming rather than contradicting the increasingly racialized—and increasingly white—vision of Frenchness that had begun to develop in the preceding decades. The textual apparatus

around Laveaux's alleged speech makes racial division part of the official language of the republic and proposes the idea that blacks and whites have more in common together than either have with *mulattoes*. Simplifying the complex socioracial reality of Saint-Domingue's politics allows Perroud to mobilize Raynal's threatening prophecy to serve the officials' goals and reclaim *cultural* agency over political events that had in effect escaped their control.

This is not to say that Louverture's political enemies were devoid of racial prejudice: Cottarel evokes time and again Louverture's slave past and his blackness in the same breath as he reminisces about Louverture fighting on the Spanish side against France, the significant material gains he obtained in the revolution, and other unpalatable, but undeniable, aspects of the general's life.⁷⁴ André Rigaud declared on several occasions that he was not "made to obey a Negro, and it was a monstrosity to see whites and gens de couleur under the authority of a formerly enslaved negro."⁷⁵ Louverture does not fit the part of Raynal's avenger, because Raynal's avenger is the abstraction of the righteous struggle for freedom that one any true lover of liberty can identify with. Louverture, a man of flesh and blood, a political man—for good or bad—cannot possibly be his incarnation. The importance of the comparison is here revealed in its utter literariness: reproduced and circulated as it was around the Atlantic world, it became the center of a discussion over the revolution in general and Toussaint in particular as Western productions, in all the theatrical sense of the word.

CLASS STRUGGLE

In the rhetoric of the French Revolution, virtue and patriotism are one and the same. The parties involved in the Affair of 30 Ventôse and the related strife that would eventually lead to the War of Knives in 1799 all wielded the same rhetoric, each presenting himself as more virtuous and patriotic than the opponent. The black avenger image became crucial to the political polemic surrounding the affair because it was an incredibly efficient means to take control of the narrative. All parties involved resorted to racialized simplifications to defend their interests. It bears noting that Louverture's plans were virtually indistinguishable from those of fellow gens de couleur, however lighter their skin tone or whiter their background: though he criticized Rigaud's autocratic behavior in the south, in the north Louverture implemented similar rules to reorganize the plantation system with free but coerced labor and to profit from it. They disagreed on what treatment white planters should receive: early motives for his feud with Rigaud thus concerned Louverture's leniency toward those white planters who had collabo-

rated with the English invader. Whereas Rigaud had forcibly exiled them from the south or worse, Louverture forgave them and maintained them in their possessions, against the Directoire's orders.⁷⁶ When Louverture set out to take control of the colony on his own, his self-identification with Raynal extended Perroud's and Laveaux's schemes. His personal interests were those of his class—*anciens libres*—and depended on the manual labor of *nouveaux libres*, whom he addressed as equals in print but treated much differently in fact.

There is no clearer evidence of this discrepancy than the brutal repression of the laborers' revolt in 1801: having reduced all opposition thanks to the indefectible support of *nouveaux libres* troops, Louverture was, by 1800, sole ruler on the entire island and bent on jumpstarting sugar production. To that effect, he organized his state to enforce drastic work rules in line with those designed by Sonthonax that were meant to force laborers back on plantations. Article 17 of his 1801 constitution called for "the introduction of cultivators," a euphemistic hint that Louverture intended to buy more African slaves to replenish the island's workforce. The strictures of Louverture's agrarian militarism led to revolts in the large northern plantations, where laborers massacred hundreds of white planters in October 1801. In the aftermath Louverture arrested and executed a group of officers designated as co-conspirators, foremost among them his own nephew and radical republican general Moïse. The black Spartacus had become a black Brutus beholden to the reason of state.⁷⁷

Scholars disagree on the extent to which Louverture prepared to cut ties with France with his constitution or gain an extensive degree of autonomy. Either way, Napoleon's outrage and his reaction were imbued with racial prejudice and blinded him to the political pragmatism that would make him realize a decade too late that other arrangements might have been possible.⁷⁸ Louverture himself had likely underestimated how racial rhetoric could trump realpolitik. He had found readier ears in the no less racist Anglophone Atlantic.

The identification of Louverture and the black Spartacus circulated around the Atlantic world, and its reception varied depending on audience and circumstances. Thus, the third English translation of Mercier's novel departs in one important detail from previous renditions of the black avenger passage: "It was the figure of an AMERICAN raised upon a pedestal; his head was bare, his eyes expressed a haughty courage, his attitude was noble and commanding. . . . He has dissolved the chains of his countrymen. Unnumbered slaves, oppressed under the most odious slavery, seemed only to wait his signal to become so many heroes."⁷⁹ Formerly translated directly from

the French as “the figure of a negro,” the statue of the black avenger was now turned into a metaphor for America. This altered translation, published in 1797 at the height of England’s involvement in Saint-Domingue, provides a striking illustration of the ways in which British anxiety regarding slave emancipation literally translated into the erasure of the slaves’ political agency, even in fiction.

Discussing Dessalines's letters brings us back to the issue of literacy: contrary to Louverture, by all accounts Dessalines was illiterate and able only to sign his own name. This fact has led some scholars to conclude that Dessalines's letters, his proclamations, his Constitution of 1805, all signed in his name and in the name of his secretaries, were therefore never fully *his*. We assume that these amanuenses—for the most part sons of older free stock and educated in France, cognizant in the ways of Western writing—necessarily refined the raw material provided by the emperor and his successor, Gen. Henry Christophe, whose illiteracy is equally proverbial. Thus, Chris Bongie, as he focuses on the stylistic idiosyncrasies of Dessalines's secretary, Juste Chanlatte, traces his contribution from more literary and individual endeavors of his own to official communications he helped produce on behalf of Dessalines and later Christophe.¹⁰⁶ It goes without saying that literacy matters in letter writing. But by too definitely equating literacy with textual production, we run the risk of diminishing the role of formerly enslaved heads of state in crafting texts produced in their name. While with Jean Fouchard we can recognize how “along with *marronage*,” literacy constituted for many of the enslaved “their first flight from the colonial night, their first escape into paths of Liberty,” we must also keep in mind that the discourse of literacy is tied to understandings of knowledge and education profoundly influenced by race prejudice and predicated on downplaying contributions beyond the scribal.¹⁰⁷ As a military commander, Dessalines routinely devised strategy, gave orders, formed queries, many of which were eventually transcribed and circulated in letter form. His authorship in such cases can hardly be questioned, even as we know for a fact he did not inscribe the words themselves. As Jenson has argued about longer, more sophisticated texts signed in Dessalines's name, “Formal education in Western alphabetic literacy and putting pen to paper were not the conditions for Dessalines's authorial role, but rather the shared characteristics and ambitions of a corpus of work pro-

duced under his direction by secretaries and military colleagues and issued in his name.”¹⁰⁸ What sound did Dessalines make when he dictated words to Chanlatte? Can we still hear this sound on the page?

The matter of literacy plays a central role in scholarly assessments of the figures of the Haitian Revolution, in part—though not simply—because said assessments develop around the written and print record. This may seem self-evident, but the doubts that come with matters of literacy are enhanced in singular ways in discussions of the Haitian Revolution. Literacy, then and now, is social and racial. Some of the enslaved were literate—even though every effort was made by colonial authorities to keep them away from “the primer”—and among revolutionaries the literate were mostly *anciens libres*. The risk is to reproduce in analysis the racist systems that pervade the intellectual and material record by essentializing literacy as a character trait rather than a mere tool. Studying the rhetoric of Dessalines’s official documents, Deborah Jenson attempts to balance out Chanlatte’s European-inflected flair with Dessalines’s unlettered, “African character”: not only are those texts replete with metaphors, but Dessalines himself could well have been their actual author. Jenson concludes her piece with a puzzling epiphany: “Recent neuroscience on right hemispheric poetic activation tells us that *poetry is absolutely not the prerogative of the educated*.” Is it necessary to underline that culture exists outside of the text that is not, that cannot, be fully accounted for and registered in the print records of the Western world? Earlier in her article, Jenson notes that “in modern Western history, poetry has been the provenance of the literate, the poet with quill or pen, connected to literary salons and schools and manifestoes.”¹⁰⁹ Those working-class writers whom Robert Southey called the “uneducated poets,” the unlettered poets of oral tradition of the world, the griots forced into the Americas in the Atlantic slave trade, to mention but a few, might beg to differ.¹¹⁰ Or they might underline in these lines evidence of a struggle to part with the very assumption one affects to debunk: namely, that some prior, formal Western education was necessary for Dessalines to engage in the highest levels of diplomacy, international politics, and state making.

We must keep in mind that formal, Western education and politics are not intrinsically related and that our belief—conscious or not—to the contrary is in many ways a product of this and many other Enlightenment narratives of historical events. Literacy is a tool one may or may not have access to; it is also a tool one may or may not decide to use. In certain circumstances avoiding the traditional record is a strategy. As Jessica A. Krug provocatively proposes in her discussion of stateless Maroons around the Atlantic world,

it may well be that such communities “chose to eschew writing and forms of oral history and tradition that reinforce hierarchy,” in full awareness of the ways in which writing and the print archive could act as tools of hegemony.¹¹¹ Avoiding the record, Maroons could address their peers in fugitive terms and modes beneath the awareness of the literate world, “on the lower frequencies,” as it were.¹¹² By the same token it is obviously to engage the West outside and in terms Westerners might understand that Dessalines chose to use the written record, but we would do well not to think the medium more sophisticated than the man. Fully aware of the strictures in which Western cultural frames kept them, yet engaged in a state project necessarily contingent to those frames, Haiti’s early leaders maintained the nation in print. Haiti’s founders had to make sure that, having won the military war, they might also gain advantage in—if not win—the cultural peace. Such peace at the dawn of the nineteenth century was always going to involve the same print culture and conventions of writing and rhetoric against which they had to struggle, so they put their “hostage” to work. In state matters there certainly was “no outside-text”: to try and make the *unthinkable* independent state of Haiti thinkable in the concert of nations, it had to become *literally* thinkable, that is, thinkable as text.¹¹³

In 1805 the independent state of Haiti was in newspapers the world around, but it did not exist in those papers that mattered most: official statements by governments that would have recognized its existence. In such circumstances Haiti had few alternatives: it could speak to itself and its citizens in a variety of modes, but to engage foreign authorities it obviously had to speak in the language of diplomacy, collaboration, trade, exchange, threat, danger—registers inflected not by fact and action so much as literature and culture. A man like Dessalines, grown in the heart of the Western slave factory before becoming an officer in the French Army, would have known Western conventions of expression and representation, whether he liked them or not. The issue facing him as the head of Haiti was how to convey information convincingly.

The atrocities of slavery exist only to those who suffer them. For the rest there is representation, the game of sensibility and empathy, the pornography of pain.¹¹⁴ No wonder that in such circumstances one might prefer the concrete business of state making to the spectacle of moral values, real and affected. This spectacle was the domain of Great Britain, the nation that, a mere decade prior to abolishing the slave trade, had fought to maintain slavery on the same Haitian officers now lavishing praise on their European ally. While with Chris Bongie we can wonder whether it is possible to ever

recover “more imaginative and emotionally honest uses of language” under the artifice of utilitarian, diplomatic writing, we can also consider closely the strictures within which the writers of independent Haiti worked.¹¹⁵ Dessalines, of course, had been enslaved, made into an object. But in 1805 he now spoke and wrote as one who had made himself into a sovereign, and he made the West register the process, willy-nilly, as it was reported, performed, and circulated through the expected channels. Jenson has studied closely what she calls Dessalines’s “poetics/politics of violence,” reading his communications in the context of later postcolonial theory and in the context of his “determined outreach to an American media sphere.”¹¹⁶ Of course, Dessalines’s texts must also be read in the context of his British diplomacy, as a defiant and playful engagement with a tradition of representation of black agency—or lack thereof—notably expressed in early British abolitionist poetry. Dessalines and his secretaries for diplomatic leverage channeled the fear of a black nation coursing through the very language of their international interlocutors: this language also provided the material of his international infamy.

In the early months of Haiti’s independence, Great Britain tried to secure advantageous terms for a trade and military agreement without giving Haiti official recognition. As Haiti’s privileged interlocutor and military ally, Great Britain already had a strong commercial foothold on the island, and British traders were present in all of the country’s main ports. The U.S. government, fearing Great Britain might obtain a trade monopoly with Haiti, pondered official trade agreements of its own. Great Britain had no immediate plans to recognize Haiti as an independent nation. Rather than an envoy or ambassador of the British government, it was Gen. George Nugent, governor of Jamaica, who led discussions with Dessalines.

Dessalines could not afford losing the support of Great Britain, but he also needed to assert Haiti’s autonomy. The tenuousness of his position appears in the language he uses in correspondence with Nugent, concerning the “renewal of the convention between the island of Jamaica and Haiti such as it existed under the government of general Toussaint”: “General Toussaint treated with the British Government as a subject or delegate of the French government. . . . I, sole leader of my country, treat on behalf of all my fellow citizens and need account for my actions to no power, nor do I wait for the permission of any government in order to subscribe to accommodations or treaties.”¹¹⁷ Haiti was under the immediate threat of French troops that remained on the Spanish side of Hispaniola, and he had no navy to speak of. But he also knew he could not give an inch of Haiti’s autonomy to Great Britain. Dessalines had plans of his own.

ACTING THE VILLAIN

If Louverture's identification with Raynal's black Spartacus was in part an effort at placating European audiences familiar with Raynal, after independence Dessalines's evocation of the figure was meant strictly to terrify. He systematically put vengeance at the heart of his political decisions. Thus, in an early declaration presenting his resolve in dealing with "every man who has dishonored human nature, by prostituting himself with enthusiasm to the vile offices of informers and executioners," Dessalines vows that "nothing shall ever turn our vengeance from those murderers who have delighted to bathe themselves in the blood of the innocent children of Hayti."¹¹⁸ In document after document Dessalines made sure to define Haiti as the black nation of Europe's nightmares. The process that he channeled and exacerbated was the language of righteous public vengeance that "had been the foundation of the juridical legitimacy of the revolutionary movement" in France under Jacobin rule but that by 1805 had become "intolerable" around Europe and even in France. Sophie Wahnich argues that the much maligned Terror was a profoundly political effort on the part of France's representatives at appropriating the expression of the people's vengeance. Taking charge of "public vengeance"—that is, common rather than personal politics, in short—also demonstrated the democratic legitimacy of a new form of government confronted to enemies abroad and in its midst. The Terror was "a process welded to a regime of popular sovereignty in which the object was to conquer tyranny or die for liberty."¹¹⁹ The same can arguably be said of the massacre of the whites in the opening months of Dessalines's tenure, a time when the spectacle of popular vengeance served to perform the unbreakable bond between a formerly enslaved people and its newly formed state, by way of the drama-inflected black avenger tradition.

Dessalines's self-identification with the avenger of the Americas in his official proclamations proves a willful, self-aware, and eminently sarcastic intertextual gesture. The April 28, 1804, proclamation following the massacre of the whites at times reads like a pastiche of Raynal's and Mercier's texts.¹²⁰ Here Dessalines reverses Raynal's famous question: "Where is that vile Haitian, so unworthy of his regeneration, who thinks he has not accomplished the decrees of the Eternal, by exterminating these blood-thirsty tigers?" The inversion is a striking performance of the rhetoric of righteous revolutionary vengeance described by Wahnich. What individual scruples might prevent a singular Haitian from participating in acts of public vengeance instantly expels him from the collective entity that is the nation. But the nation is immediately subsumed in the person of its leader. Further in the text Des-

salines riffs on other abolitionist motifs, summoning a gigantic spirit of the country:

Let that nation come who may be mad and daring enough to attack me. Already at its approach the irritated genius of Hayti, rising out of the bosom of the ocean appears; his menacing aspect throws the waves into commotion, excites tempests, and with his mighty hand disperses ships; or dashes them in pieces; to his formidable voice the laws of nature pay obedience; diseases, plagues, famine, conflagration, poison, are his constant attendants. But why calculate on the assistance of the climate and the elements? Have I forgotten that I command a people of no common cast, brought up in adversity, whose audacious daring frowns at obstacles and increases by dangers?

Dessalines echoes the elemental trope so familiar to abolitionist poets only to dismiss it. An army general has no need to call on the heavens; it is the elements that must be compared to his troops, rather than the reverse. He takes over the characteristics of the avenger as villain, leaving to his predecessor, Toussaint Louverture, the role of the tragic, and unsuccessful, hero. Dessalines admits so much when in the same document he declares, “Somewhat unlike him who has preceded me, the Ex-general Toussaint Louverture, I have been faithful to the promise I made to you, when I took up arms against tyranny, and whilst the last spark of life remains in me I will keep my oath. ‘Never again shall a colonist, or an European, set his foot upon this territory with the title of master or proprietor.’ This resolution shall henceforward form the fundamental basis of our constitution.”¹²¹ The black avenger of Western literary tradition was either unsuccessful or an abstract warning. By winning the war Dessalines had effectively turned Raynal’s and Mercier’s abstract warnings to planters into their walking nightmare, putting aside the tragic avenger in the Oroonoko vein and reconnecting with the ruthlessness of the black villains of revenge tragedy. He could write with obvious pride, “My name has become a horror to all friends of slavery, or despots; and tyrants only pronounce it, cursing the day that gave me birth” and dub himself “avenger and deliverer of his fellow citizens” in the Constitution of 1805.

Taking on the characteristics of the stage villain had some benefits: following victory over the French, who had the strongest army in the Western world, Dessalines and his troops appeared decidedly fearsome, the reservations of some notwithstanding.¹²² Although French troops remained in the Spanish half of the island in Santo Domingo until they were expelled by the local population allied with the British in 1809, Napoleon never attempted to retake Saint-Domingue. The dictator would later admit that he had been wrong not to leave the administration of the island to Louverture, calling

it “the greatest error that in all my government I ever committed.”¹²³ With the circulation of Dessalines’s texts came the circulation of planters’ fear, as well as slave action, real and imagined: uprisings around the Caribbean basin were blamed on Saint-Domingue throughout the 1790s and continued to be well into the nineteenth century. Haitian influence on those uprisings was generally indirect at best; bent on striking economic agreements with England and the United States, Louverture had shown his good will by helping sabotage a French republican plot aimed at starting a slave revolt in Jamaica. Later Dessalines and his successors, when they overtly supported revolutionary movements in the Americas, kept to those led by Creole planters rather than their servants.¹²⁴ Yet official action, or lack thereof, counted for only part of the threat the revolution represented to the slaveholding world.

The violence of the French Revolution already had a deep impact on American politics, and “Jacobins” became a common insult used against Thomas Jefferson and his followers. The Haitian Revolution hit much closer and literally spilled onto American shores, with Saint-Domingue exiles settling in cities all along the eastern seaboard. Rumors that the Jacobins had plans to foster slave rebellions in the United States came to a head with the slave revolt scare in Charleston, North Carolina, in 1793.¹²⁵ In 1795 and 1796 several revolts were thwarted in Spanish Louisiana that were, rightly or wrongly, similarly blamed on the dangerous example of Saint-Domingue.¹²⁶ Finally, Jacobin and Saint Dominguan influences were very much at the center of discussions that followed the aborted 1800 Richmond uprising known as Gabriel’s Rebellion.¹²⁷ The alleged involvement of two Frenchmen in the revolt was enough evidence to suggest that the French were behind an effort very similar to the plan thwarted by Louverture in Jamaica. Mentioning early rumors of an organized slave uprising to Vice President Thomas Jefferson, Virginia governor James Monroe wrote, “The scenes which are acted at St. Domingo must produce an effect on all the people of colour in this and the States south of us, especially our slaves, and it is our duty to be on guard to prevent any mischief resulting from it.”¹²⁸ That planters around the Americas trembled at the possibility of another Saint-Domingue is undeniable; news of the revolution circulated through print but also by word of mouth, coming from the Saint-Domingue enslaved, free-colored, and white exiles that spread throughout the Americas. Michael Drexler and Ed White make the argument that “following its dissemination throughout the U.S. in the fall of 1801, Toussaint’s Constitution became the most widely read piece of literature authored by an African American.”¹²⁹ Worse than a successful slave revolution, Haiti offered the entire slaveholding world the terrifying prospect of a black nation in the Americas.

Dessalines's proclamations circulated around the Americas and were deemed instrumental in starting several slave uprisings, in particular in the United States. They were notably reproduced freely in southern newspapers, and it is indeed unlikely that they failed to reach the black eyes and ears they contributed to conceptualize.¹³⁰ Indeed, article 14 of his constitution made Haiti the global home of blackness: "All acception of colour among the children of one and the same family, of whom the chief magistrate is the father, being necessarily to cease, the Haytians shall hence forward be known only by the generic appellation of Blacks."¹³¹ In this effort, Dessalines's argument is strikingly reminiscent of Ottobah Cugoano's in his *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, in which the self-professed "black man" defined his community as "brethren and countrymen in complexion."¹³² Article 13 also made clear that even those phenotypically white people naturalized as Haitians would be considered black. The effort at curing the wounds inflicted by the socioracial civil wars that overlapped the revolution and the War of Independence is fairly transparent. It was also ultimately unsuccessful, as later developments proved. But in the meantime, here was a bold attempt at lighting a beacon beyond the confines of white Western thoughts.

Speaking in the language of freedom is a gambit. The birth of Haiti might have brought its population out of the realm of European fiction and into that of international politics, did the two not overlap so thoroughly. The black avenger trope, if it allows for the recognition of extraordinary black individuals, simultaneously does work to maintain the racist assumptions of the day. Dessalines's efforts at appropriating the device did little to challenge its most problematic aspect: the black avenger myth is a racialized version of the great man theory of history. Upon declaring himself emperor of Haiti, despite pressure from his foremost officers, Dessalines refused to create a Haitian nobility, stating, "I alone am noble."¹³³ This unmistakable declaration of uniqueness kept him within the confines of a tradition the revolution had threatened to explode: the dreaded, unthinkable black nation looming large in Mercier's text could immediately be cut to size as its revolutionary, collective potential took second seat to Dessalines's personal ambition and the coming elitist state apparatus. Dessalines's subversion of the black avenger trope also confirmed its cultural relevance and contributed to its perpetuation as a valid representational frame for the Haitian Revolution. Henry Fuseli's engraving "The Negro Revenged" demonstrates this in striking fashion (fig. 1). The image was first published in the 1808 edition of William Cowper's *Poems*, purportedly as an illustration for those lines in

The Negro revenged.

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J. Parli. del. pinx.

Reinbach. sculp.

*Hark! he answers—Wild tornadoes,
Sweeping yonder sea with wrecks;
Wasting towns, plantations, meadows,
Are the voice, with which he speaks.*

Pub. by J. Johnson, London, March 2, 1807.

“The Negro Revenged” (1807), after a painting by Henry Fuseli, in William Cowper’s *Poems* (1808). © The Trustees of the British Museum.

“The Negro’s Complaint” portraying natural catastrophe as God’s answer to slavery. Yet designed as it was two decades after the poem’s first publication and in the aftermath of the English abolition of the slave trade and the Haitian Revolution, the engraving is more commentary than illustration. The image shows a black man and his lighter-skinned companion hugging and cheering from a cliff the destruction of a ship down below, with a cloaked figure, possibly their child, sitting behind them. It may not be too bold to see an indirect reference to the success of the Haitian Revolution in Fuseli’s granting the lone voice of Cowper’s poem a companion and child. It also channels decades-old elemental tropes: the engraving’s title all but assigns the destruction to the man himself, lending in the process a supernatural quality to the proceedings. Fuseli’s “Negro” is not so much an individual as it is the same scary but familiar type channeled by Dessalines himself. Both Dessalines and his opponents found something in preserving the black avenger figure: a singular image of racial purity, which served both outsider racist and Haitian nationalist purposes.