THE BLACK AVENGER

IN ATLANTIC CULTURE

GRÉGORY PIERROT

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

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Be it ancient Rome or modern-day America,
you're either citizen or slave.

—Paul Beatty, *The Sellout*

BLACK SPARTACUS AND BLACK LUCRETIA
IN HOLLYWOOD, 2012

Few U.S. films generated more discussion in 2012 than Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*. The tale of Django—an enslaved African American man setting out to free his wife, Broomhilda, from the clutches of evil slave owner Calvin Candie—was a finely honed entertainment machine sprinkled with Tarantino's usual mix of offensive talk, blood-drenched slapstick, virtuoso montage, and referential mise en abyme. Early conversations about the film predictably focused on its extensive use of racial slurs. Critics later moved on to debating the historical soundness of Tarantino's view of the slaveholding South in 1858, when the story takes place. Tarantino tends to be more faithful to his cinematic inspirations than to historical sources. *Django Unchained* self-consciously evokes the aesthetic and atmosphere of spaghetti Westerns and blaxploitation films: it notably borrows its title and title song from the Sergio Corbucci's 1966 spaghetti Western *Django* and, like the original and other Westerns, it "takes homicidal vengeance as the highest—if not the only—form of justice."[1] That's no surprise, from a director who has made no secret of his love for these genres throughout his career.

Yet, for A. O. Scott, Tarantino innovates with *Django Unchained*. His film "exposes and defies an ancient taboo. . . . Vengeance in the American imagination has been the virtually exclusive prerogative of white men." Vengeance in the American imagination is closely related to the Western genre;

it constitutes an essential element of what Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence have dubbed the "American monomyth," in which "a community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil" and saved by a "selfless superhero" who "restores the community to its paradisal condition" before riding in the sunset.[2] Variations on this myth involving people of African descent have generally left them on the outskirts looking in. African Americans might be actors in classic American revenge stories, but, according to Scott, "The sanctification and romanticization of revenge have been central to the ideology of white supremacy." In presenting an African American in a role traditionally reserved for whites, Tarantino "expose[d] and defie[d] an ancient taboo" concerning revenge as much as the motive for revenge: the subjection and sexual abuse of Django's wife, Broomhilda, a form of gendered, racialized terror that has also long undergirded reflections on freedom in the Atlantic world. Audiences cheering Django could feel they were supporting the righteous righting of wrongs history so sorely lacks. Why, oh why, did slaves not fight back? This is the question Tarantino's evil planter Calvin Candie asks in a tense dinner scene. Candie reminisces about "growing up the son of a huge plantation owner in Mississippi . . . surrounded by black faces." This entire time, he asserts, he had only one question in mind regarding the slaves around him: "Why don't they kill us?" Old Ben, the slave, shaved Candie's father on the porch for decades but never bothered to slash his throat.

The scene will seem familiar: it mirrors an iconic moment in Herman Melville's "Benito Cereno," a novella published in *Putnam's* in 1855, a few years before *Django Unchained*'s fictional present. As to Candie's question, the answer, quickly: in the real world, slaves did kill, time and again. In fiction they might, but only in very specific circumstances. In any case Candie does not distinguish between fact and fiction and appears to know precious little about both. He thinks most slaves are naturally submissive. He has phrenology—the racist pseudoscience that pretends to read the characteristics of people in the shapes of their skulls—on his side and demonstrates on the bleached skull of old Ben, the slave who raised his father and grandfather before him and served as their manservant. Like all black people, Candie argues, Ben has three dimples in an area of his skull conveniently associated with servility. Candie's belief in phrenology and ignorance of history go hand in hand with his theory about slave revolt: "There is a level above bright, above talented, above loyal that a nigger can aspire to. Say, one nigger that just pops up in ten thousand: the exceptional nigger." "Bright boy," he adds, pointing at Django, "you are that one in ten thousand."

Django is a familiar anomaly: though he must be spoken of in tones of wonder and disbelief, the extraordinary black leader who would lead his fellow enslaved to deliver righteous retribution on their white oppressors has been a fixture of Western culture for the best of three hundred years. The second edition of French philosophe and political economist Guillaume-Thomas Raynal's gigantic, best-selling study of European colonization, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (1774) thus asks virtually the same question as Candie, albeit in a distinctively more anxious tone: "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."[3] The Western world heard echoes of Raynal's words in every slave revolt, but after the French colony of Saint-Domingue erupted in a slave revolt in 1791, it "recognized" the new Spartacus in the insurgents' most prominent leader, Toussaint Louverture. These are but two salient points in the long—if systematically obfuscated—history of an essential trope of Atlantic modernity. This trope is the topic of my book.

The American monomyth elaborates on an older "race plot of freedom," originated in revolutionary-era Great Britain: the "Anglo-Protestant liberty story," rooted in depictions of the English Revolution that present "freedom as a racial inheritance and . . . revolution as racial renewal." According to Laura Doyle, in this narrative developed throughout the modern era, freedom is equated with whiteness.[4] An essential node in the genealogy of the race plot of freedom is Aphra Behn's 1688 novella *Oroonoko* and its eponymous hero, an enslaved African prince who leads an ill-fated slave revolt in the Americas. The novella has long been seen as a crucial point in modern Western treatments of race, perhaps to a fault. It remains useful for the way it connects a long tradition of reflection on freedom and citizenship rooted in classical culture to the new conditions and circumstances of the Atlantic slave trade.

For all its apparent novelty, the black avenger narrative draws on classical literary motifs attached to the subject of national belonging, oppression, vengeance, justice, race, and gender. The black avenger himself draws essential characteristics from the figure of Spartacus, leader of slaves who revolted and almost overthrew the Roman Republic not long before it became an empire. By this lineage the black avenger trope systematically expresses a

critique of the terms of national self-definition, but also reflects on matters of racial and social hierarchy, justice, and revolution in an expanding Western world. In its multiple versions—much like original tellings of Spartacus's story—it echoes the ancient Roman story of the rape of Lucretia and through it rehearses conversations and anxieties concerning what Alexander Weheliye has called "racial assemblages"—the gendered, ethnic, social terms by which nations define themselves against outsiders.[5]

Audre Lorde famously declared that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house": the house that the slave trade built in the West rests in no small part on literary, narrative foundations.[6] In an unforgettable scene in Stanley Kubrick's 1960 film *Spartacus*, when given the chance to be spared if they identify "the body or the living person of the slave called Spartacus," his defeated companions stand each in turn to declare "I am Spartacus," dissolving the individual hero into the collective. This vision of the gladiator at the service of the people owes much to Marxist analysis and has become "arguably the most pervasive in the modern world," but for most of its existence as a modern Western icon, Spartacus served exactly the opposite purpose as the individual hiding collective action.[7] Antique figures linger in the bones of this narrative construct, but its shape was molded in the crucible of the Black Atlantic. The black avenger trope, used as it has long been in the service of resistance to racist oppression, always simultaneously contributed to maintain this system by promoting extraordinary, individual black heroism to the detriment of collective agency.

The core of this study is the Haitian Revolution, arguably the most formidable achievement of black collective agency in the Americas: the black avenger trope was designed in preparation for such an event, and ever since it occurred has played a central role in what Michel-Rolph Trouillot has called the "silencing" of the revolution's history. The link between Raynal's text and characterizations of Louverture has been the topic of many studies: mine is the first to explore in detail exactly how the identification of the textual figure to the man was carefully constructed in specific political circumstances the trope itself was designed to blur. The black avenger trope allows for the simplification of politics through race: this treatment, applied to Louverture, impacted portrayal and understanding of black politics throughout the Atlantic world. Organized in concentric layers around this beating heart, my book traces the genealogy of the trope from the early modern period to the turn of the twentieth century, from Europe to the Americas, and exposes its impact on Western conceptualizations of race, racism, and resistance.

Part of the novelty of the black avenger trope is precisely how this narrative downplays its cultural origins to emphasize the alleged newness of the

cultural clash on which it focuses. African characters were not unheard of in European drama and fiction of the late seventeenth century. Behn's creation breathed into a stock character inherited from the revenge tragedy tradition the novelty of modern racial relations as revealed in such brutal, head-on encounters as portrayed in the novel. Following in the path of their early incarnation, Prince Oroonoko, later black avengers appear, time and again, at the crossroads of African (and the African diasporic) cultures and Western culture, always extraordinary, always implied as new. The erasure of precedents is central to the black avenger tradition. It operates through, and is most obvious in, the treatment of female characters. Thus, Oroonoko's wife, Imoinda—in many ways the heart of Behn's novella, the reason for Oroonoko's every action—mostly lurks in the background, twice removed, her acts and words always reported through one or two intermediary voices. In Thomas Southerne's 1696 stage adaptation, she is quite literally erased as a black woman, as she turns white. The silencing of Imoinda is performed by the female voice of Behn's narrator, which covers some of its effects. Behn's narrative allows for an assertion of citizenship by a Western female voice at the expense of black voices, masculine and feminine. Behn's narrator becomes a white American by contrasting herself with both Imoinda and Oroonoko. She also does this by reversing a pattern of racial and national definition as old as the tale of Lucretia's rape.

Rape was a common weapon of the regime of terror Django and Broomhilda attempt to escape; it hovers over the entire film, but it never lands. Unlike most female characters in Tarantino's films, Broomhilda in *Django Unchained* is quasi-silent. Echoing in this literal silence is what the film figuratively passes under silence, although it is essential to the plot: the sexual abuse Broomhilda suffers at the hands of slaveholders. This is a peculiar choice on Tarantino's part, all the more so that the issue featured prominently in *Django Unchained*'s original script. In fact, it was presented there in such fashion that when the script was leaked, many took exception to the graphic treatment it promised, as it called for several graphic instances of sexual abuse all perpetrated on Broomhilda.[8] Rape is almost entirely erased in the final version of the film. When indirectly evoked, as when Candie gleefully mentions Broomhilda's role as a "comfort girl," the camera zooms in on Django. We see how he copes with violence wrought on Broomhilda. She is a perpetually passive recipient, a pretext for his revenge, an object lesson in Django's education in becoming a model westerner. For him to reach this status demands literacy in, mastery of, and compliance with Western narratives of agency, age-old formulas by which his existence can be deemed (nar-

ratively) acceptable. It demands he become a black avenger, following a scenario as old as Atlantic slavery, predicated on the silencing of black women.

Laura Doyle asserts that the Anglo-Saxon myth of freedom on display in *Oroonoko* was the model by which later American myths of freedom—including African American variations—were developed.[9] I argue that, in fact, this myth was constructed as a prevention, a literary exorcism of sorts against the threat of a black nation. The narrator's citizenship comes about only to cancel out the possibility of citizenship for the enslaved, taking all of the novel's political ground and leaving none of it to the population whose political agency would most profoundly threaten the new American order. From *Oroonoko* on, the silencing of the enslaved and their political agency is enabled specifically through the silencing of enslaved women. Behn's narrator raises Oroonoko to a heroic pedestal and simultaneously unmans him, a piece of theater that deflects attention from a foundational phenomenon—the silencing of Imoinda. If this book offers a theatrical genealogy for the black avenger, it cannot do so without simultaneously excavating how the pattern of silencing and erasing black femininity was built and normalized over four centuries in the crucible of the Atlantic.

BACKGROUND

The black avenger first appeared under this moniker in studies in the early 1970s, the last time the notion of a new black American nation was discussed as a viable—if fantastical—political possibility; the term fit many contemporary protagonists in literature and film channeling (or at the very least paying lip service to) the concerns and attitudes of the Black Power movement.[10] Interest in these "new" characters can also be tied to the militant introduction of black studies on American campuses around the same period.[11] Catherine Juanita Starke notably exposed the black avenger figure as one of the standout representations of blackness in American and African American literature, offering a genealogy of black avengers with roots extending to the two protagonists of Sutton Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* (1899).[12] Jerry H. Bryant's *Victims and Heroes* (1997) extended this genealogy to the character of Picquilo in William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853), and, more recently, Céleste-Marie Bernier's *Characters of Blood* (2012) explored a "cultural tradition of black male and female heroism both within and beyond the United States."[13] Bernier's genealogy, though it opens up to the wider Black Atlantic, nevertheless remains very U.S.-centric.

In turn, studies on black presence in early modern English drama such as Anthony G. Barthelemy's *Black Face, Maligned Race* (1987) or Derek

Hughes's *Versions of Blackness* (2007) demonstrate that the genealogy of black avengers must be extended across the Atlantic. Hazel Waters's *Racism on the Victorian Stage* (2007) notably focuses on the black avenger tradition in British culture. Yet, while Waters does reveal the close ties binding nineteenth-century British theater to American culture and politics, her conclusions are also constrained by their historical and cultural focus.[14] This issue was recently addressed in convincing fashion by Elizabeth Maddock Dillon's *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World* (2014) and Jenna Gibbs's *Performing the Temple of Liberty: Slavery, Theater and Popular Culture in London and Philadelphia, 1760–1850* (2014). Both studies demonstrate how the opinions and concerns transpiring in theatrical performances circulated far and wide in the English-speaking Atlantic and how they contributed to building a complex network of self-understanding and self-representation. For Dillon, theatrical performances and spaces around the Anglophone Atlantic world saw the development of "performative commons" engaging the plays themselves, the actors performing them, and their audiences, articulating together "emergent possibilities and foreclosures of popular sovereignty by means of embodiment and representation, and in the promiscuous interaction between the two," in and between the great cities of Great Britain and its U.S. empire: London, Kingston, Charleston, or Philadelphia.[15] Gibbs's focus on the figure of the Genius of America and her argument—"theater did not simply reflect political events and debates; rather, it played an active role in steering them and shaping how they were understood"—are directly relevant to my work.[16]

Studies on such scale have to find their borders, and often these have followed national or linguistic lines, both in design and in inspiration. Although scholars take for granted that intertextuality prior to the nineteenth century was routinely—and, one might argue, necessarily—multilingual, following these patterns in practice can be very difficult. Léon-François Hoffmann's survey *Le Nègre romantique: Personnage littéraire et obsession collective* (1973) has seldom been considered outside of French studies, where its influence can be felt in such recent work such as *Colonialism, Race, and the French Imagination* (2009), in which Pratima Prasad discusses the influence of French Romantic fiction on discourses of race. My book shares with these studies a sense of the essential role played by literature and literary tropes in spreading racialized notions of citizenship and nationhood, yet I believe that a clearer assessment of the impact of racial thinking in the modern era demands that these concepts be considered in wider frames. There are undeniably unique elements to French, English, or U.S. American approaches to citizenship and race—and to such approaches within the groups of the African

diaspora and between them—but they have developed in constant conversation to one another. Race as a global concept circulated by way of such literary tropes as the black avenger, in translation, exchange, and—to use Brent Hayes Edwards's cross-linguistic terminology—*décalage*, working around "the kernel of precisely that which cannot be transferred or exchanged, the received biases that refuse to pass over when one crosses the water."[17] The necessity and benefit of looking across linguistic lines appear clearly in *Tropics of Haiti* (2015), Marlene L. Daut's study of the intertwined histories of race and of representations of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic world. My book is in direct conversation with Daut's, which explores what she calls the "mulatto/a vengeance narrative" of the Haitian Revolution. I discuss further how the black avenger predated the mulatto vengeance narrative, this scenario rising to match developments in racial thinking stemming from a specific Caribbean context before spreading to the broader Western world.

I am especially interested in the constitution of this black avenger concept and in its transnational existence and dynamics: it is a product of the acceleration of the Atlantic slave trade in the late seventeenth century, and as such it has developed in the cultures of the two main European actors in this acceleration, Great Britain and France, and in their colonial extensions in the Americas that would become the two first independent countries there, the United States and Haiti. I contend that, in these cultures, black avenger narratives have systematically been used to reflect on the slave trade, but also more subtly to imagine national singularities in the light of the slave trade. As Great Britain, France, the United States, and Haiti faced crises of self-definition, authors in each country summoned the literary trope of the black avenger as either a model or a foil to design national visions and project them into the world. In these processes, even as black avenger narratives expressed national anxieties toward the potential collapse of slave colonies, they also contributed to deny, stifle, and obfuscate the portrayal of black collective agency and its very reality.

The black avenger trope has been a transnational print phenomenon with ramifications in historical writing, newswriting, and philosophy. The Atlantic slave trade was a global system of exchange with local specificities; black avenger texts in turn were produced in historical and geographic circumstances dependent on the slave trade—but were never bound to them. The black avenger trope is a tree with distinct branches: its trunk is the fact of the Atlantic slave trade and slaveholding societies' anxieties in the face of potential revolt. As it grew, local and individual particularities impacted related but distinct expressions of a similar trope, each branch in turn potentially intertwined with the next and growing new shoots throughout the years. In

choosing certain texts and events to focus on, I have ignored or missed others. I do not claim this to be an exhaustive study. *The Black Avenger in Atlantic Culture* follows a path along early English and French engagements with the trope in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, then from the event horizon of the Haitian Revolution bifurcates into U.S. variations, studying important articulations of the traditions, moments, places, and texts in which the figure shifted significantly.

Chapter 1 focuses on the transition from the black villains of English revenge drama by way of heroic romance to Aphra Behn's protoavenger *Oroonoko*, in the context of France's and England's expansion into the Americas and increasing involvement in the Atlantic slave trade at the end of the sixteenth century. Characters of revenge drama—most notably for our purpose here, black villains—were instrumental to the portrayal and expression of political dissent in England and budding notions of what defined the English national spirit in the revolutionary period. Before writing *Oroonoko*, Behn adapted the 1601 revenge drama *Lust's Dominion* into *Abdelazer*, whose eponymous black villain in turn inspired crucial elements of *Oroonoko*. The other reigning literary genre of the time, the French-inspired heroic romance, also influenced the making of the black avenger trope through conventions of characterization deeply marked by the concerns of courtly literature. The chapter highlights *Oroonoko*'s overlooked conversation with Roger Boyle's *Parthenissa* (1676), a successful English heroic romance and perhaps the earliest treatment of Spartacus in the modern period. Behn's hero channels the antique slave rebel, but the novella at large also rearranges and adapts elements of the story of Lucretia, the essential myth of nation making, to foreclose the possibility of a black American nation. The silent Imoinda is an anti-Lucretia, and Oroonoko a Spartacus caught alive and executed. His person strips the revolt of collective agency, and his death symbolically dismembers the black body politic in the Americas, whose purpose becomes to mark the boundaries of a white colony.

Chapter 2 looks at black avengers in the eighteenth century, at a time when Great Britain and France were the two most prominent powers in the Atlantic world and were both engaged in debates over national identity in a widespread, colonial world. France and Great Britain defined themselves against each other and in relation to colonials. Authors from both countries and their colonies were in constant conversation, notably over the seemingly unavoidable prospect of major (and successful) slave revolts. English national sentiment, as expressed in drama that revisited episodes of Roman history (notably the aftermath of Lucretia's death), inspired such French authors as Voltaire to ponder the characteristics of Frenchness in the light of

classical history and increasingly influential notions of racial and national belonging. These efforts coincided with a trend in literary black avenger narratives—including rival adaptations of *Oroonoko* in English and French—that purported to measure national worth against the practice of slavery. Rising in the late eighteenth century, abolitionism both drew on and further inspired literary treatments of slavery in the Americas. I also explore the introduction of the figure of Spartacus in Bernard-Joseph Saurin's popular play *Spartacus* (1760) into France's rising sense of national spirit at the dawn of the French Revolution and the rise of the motif of slave revolts in the abolitionist poetry of Thomas Chatterton and Edward Rushton. Their texts portray and lament the violence wrought on the enslaved and envisaged black avengers' reaction to the sexual abuse of their companions, but they struggle to imagine a black politics in response.

In chapter 3 I explore the ways in which the main actors of the Haitian Revolution, a complex conflict that opposed former slaves and free people of color to Spanish, French, and English colonial forces between 1791 and 1804, engaged with the figure of the black avenger in forms of print discourse directed toward the French revolutionary public and the global stage. At the heart of my chapter is the 1796 speech in which French general Etienne Laveaux allegedly dubbed Toussaint Louverture the "black Spartacus," inspired by a figure famously developed in Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *L'An 2440, rêve s'il en fût jamais* (1770) and Abbé Raynal's *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (1774). My close study of the records of the "Affair of 30 Ventôse Year IV," the coup attempt that led to Laveaux's speech, shows for the first time how the famous and traditionally unquestioned phrase was carefully crafted to serve in the war of words of the revolution. This chapter reveals how local actors Etienne Laveaux, Toussaint Louverture, and later the first ruler of independent Haiti, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, made use of essentialist racial arguments tied to the black Spartacus figure to attract European support—a political act that ironically contributed to giving credibility to a literary trope that channels and constrains black political agency into a romantic hero figure.

In chapter 4 I look at the impact of the black avenger trope on U.S. racial politics in the nineteenth century before the Civil War, beginning with David Walker's *An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1830), which introduced and adapted the black avenger trope for American public discourse. Walker's effort serves as a counterpoint to the use of the trope in antebellum abolitionist texts written by white authors in which they present themselves as discoverers of the extraordinary Haitian Revolution and nec-

essary translators of its significance for the broader American public. I focus on Martin R. Delany's effort to claim it for African Americans in *Blake* (1859–1861), where Delany works to bend heroic representation to serve the demands of collective political action. Delany recognizes race-based nationalism as a function of the black avenger tale and is interested in designing a U.S. American version of a tale then attached to Haiti. In this innovative novel, Delany also attempts to adapt the Lucretia myth to African American experiences of slavery.

U.S.-centric developments of the black avenger trope at the turn of the twentieth century occupy chapter 5. With the normalization of white supremacist terror in the post-Reconstruction South and the rise of Jim Crow, at a time when the United States launched into colonial expansion in the Pacific and the Caribbean, African American authors strove to imagine a place for African Americans in a white supremacist republic. Sutton Griggs's *Imperium in Imperio* explores alternative approaches to this conundrum, transposing schemes for the creation of a black nation entirely within the United States, geographically and politically. Griggs's novel ends in abeyance, trapped in its equation of black agency with black masculinity. Looking at Charles Chesnutt's rejection, in *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), of the very idea of a black American nation outside the boundaries of the United States, the chapter ends with Robert Lewis Waring's little discussed novel, *As We See It* (1910). Waring adopts a rugged, masculine individualism notably popularized in the Western genre and declares support of an ideal, elitist United States, in which deserving African Americans would be given a chance to thrive like their white peers, in separation and equality. Waring's novel is a declaration of U.S. patriotism. His main character's bid to citizenship rests on the silencing of black women and on accepting conventions that effectively make him an honorary white man.

In his review of *Django Unchained*, A. O. Scott asserts that "the idea that regenerative violence could be visited by black against white instead of the reverse . . . has been almost literally unthinkable."[18] Though it is likely an accident, Scott's words significantly echo the phrase Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot uses to describe a pattern of historiographic obfuscation in the reception, portrayal, and understanding of the Haitian Revolution in the white West. According to Trouillot, the complex events that made the Haitian Revolution "were unthinkable facts in the framework of Western thought . . . made to enter into narratives that made sense to a majority of Western observers and readers." He is concerned with unraveling the complex legends of the revolution itself and offers a logic that might account for

the ways in which the Haitian Revolution was made to be unthinkable even as it was occurring. As he further notes, "The successive events within that chain [which constitutes the Haitian Revolution] were systematically recast by many participants and observers to fit a world of possibilities. That is, they were made to enter into narratives that made sense to a majority of Western observers and readers": framed, boxed, and stored away on the shelves of exotic history so efficiently as to make the world forget, for ages, that this, Sire, was not a revolt, but the revolution that most challenged the political and moral conventions of its time.[19] In the light of Trouillot's analysis, Scott's statement is revealed as the byproduct of a long cultural tradition by which black retributive violence and the politics that underlay it were systematically undermined in incredulous representations. These narratives remain active, framing not only the Haitian Revolution itself but also broader understandings of black collective agency. Some time ago, in conversation with a friend and colleague, this not-so-innocent question came up: How is it that an event as crucial to Western modernity as the Haitian Revolution keeps getting "discovered"?[20]

Let us find out.

Black Avengers of America
in Hollywood, 2018

This is a story about the stories men tell one another.

The island, this "original Garden of Eden," has long been inhabited, but when men tell the tale, they always first discover it. It is a place of rapturous beauty, but there is trouble in paradise: the island's "virgin fertility" falls into the hands of a "master . . . [of] unsurpassable cruelty." This "tyrant" rapes the land, massacres locals, and imports slaves, influencing in the process the "whole of Western civilization."[1] This original wrong dooms Eden: in all the violence wrought on the island, none came to right this original wrong, no oath to make the martyred land the foundation of civilization.

Thus begins the story of Haiti as told in a 1903 speech by future NAACP field secretary William Pickens, then a student at Yale. No Brutus stands up to the European Tarquins here: there are only "mulattoes" who launch "the most bloody, cruel and vindictive struggle of history," after catching the "intractable spirit of liberty from the mother country." That unnamed "mother country" of spirit is faraway, Enlightened France; Hispaniola is for the tortured flesh. Pickens speaks in the halls of white supremacy, and it shows. He speaks of Toussaint Louverture, whose kindness to his former master's family is deemed a form of fidelity similar to that showed by "the American slave, who lay like a watchful mastiff on the doorsteps of the absent confederate soldier." Things could have been so good: but Louverture failed, and he was replaced by Dessalines, the "first black emperor" whose name Pickens cannot find it in himself to pronounce. Imagine a Rome where Spartacus has won. Former slaves do not build a republic over an outraged woman's body; they build it on a pile of the former oppressors' dead, and thus, "having destroyed every trace and hope of internal civilization," are apparently doomed not to enter the concert of nations. The United States could teach Haitians what black American men like him purported to have learned during the

Reconstruction: "that the savage and the child to rise to higher things must feel the power of a stronger hand." Pickens demands an American intervention, employing to that effect the vocabulary of a rapist: "All weak sentimentalism must be dismissed. The letter of humanity should be violated for the sake of the spirit. The subjugation of the island would be an act of kindness."[2] There is a right way to do this, and it begins with rape.

Pickens must have sounded convincing: with this speech, he became the first African American to win the prestigious Ten Eyck prize for oratory. The text was circulated broadly around the country, and African American voices rose to sternly rebuke him.[3] But Pickens also found supporters. Evangelist N. L. Musgrove contacted him from rural Kentucky, where he had recently settled to found one in a purported national network of lodges of the "Sons of Freedom," a brotherhood of "true members of the Afro-American race." Musgrove read about Pickens and decided he had found in the college student the extraordinary leader his black nation-building organization needed. In full awareness that "a true union between the Afro-American and the Anglo-Saxon peoples of America" was impossible "and that the future welfare of both would be best conserved by a friendly, but none the less irrevocable separation as regards national existence," Musgrove advocated the annexation of Haiti, "whose sovereignty might be bought or wrested from revolutionary and unworthy hands—or other countries contiguous."[4] Building on Pickens's speech, Musgrove floated the idea of a segregated, black version of U.S. imperialism.

The details of Musgrove's scheme were listed in many articles published around the country. Lodges would contribute money to the treasurer in Alabama, the money serving notably to secure one or two warships and organize black troops to take over Haiti and organize a new form of government, "republican in its formation . . . yet to be administered as a gigantic corporation, of which all members of the society are to be stockholders." The United States would likely condone the invasion of Haiti, as "the blacks there, being usurpers themselves, have no moral or legal claims to the country which the Afro-Americans or anybody else need necessarily respect."[5] Can Musgrove have meant to echo the wording of the *Dred Scott* decision? In any case, the implication was clear: as African Americans were to white Americans in 1857, so Haitians were to African Americans in 1903, on the eve of the centennial of their independence. The evangelist used the rhetoric of white supremacy to challenge the legitimacy of a revolution that had created the first independent black nation in the Americas. Musgrove's plan provided a sorry end point to a century of white resentment and cultural retaliation by turning against Haiti a declaration of black insurgency and independence. In his

outlandish scenario, Musgrove squarely replaces the black republic and its legend with a plot for a black settler colony shaped by, and palatable to, the white supremacist United States. The term "usurpers" exposed the old literary undercurrent in Musgrove's plan, with its evocation of undeserving rulers (the barbaric Haitians, having wrested the country from Europe) and of the heroes who challenge them (African Americans, champions of Western civilization), coming to set things right. The plan invoked all the elements of black avenger narratives of old; like them, though it spoke in the accents of black politics, it seemed dedicated mostly to the white audience implied in the venues in which Musgrove's plan appeared: Lexington, Kentucky's *Morning Herald*; Cleveland's *Plain Dealer*; the *Washington Post*, all marveling at the prospect that such a familiarly novel spectacle as "Government for the Negro, by the Negro" might unfold under the West's watchful eyes.[6]

A decade later, in July 1915, pretexting the volatile political situation on the island warranted the armed defense of U.S. interests, marines landed in Port-au-Prince and took control of the Haitian capital and its governing institutions. The African American press—notably W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Crisis*—was quick to criticize U.S. encroachment on Haiti and the litany of abuses the population soon had to suffer from occupying troops. Calls for a withdrawal of the United States were left unheeded.[7] Although somewhat reserved in their support for the invasion, more moderate African American figures such as Booker T. Washington could not but see the invasion as the work of (Western) civilization—its righteous revenge. African American outlook on the occupation took a drastic turn in the aftermath of the Red Summer of 1919, when cities around the United States erupted in racist violence, and white mobs—sometimes including police officers—chased African Americans in the streets of Charleston, Memphis, Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and even in the country's capital. The plight of the Haitians, forced into quasi slavery, assaulted, tortured, raped, and killed in their own land by the same white Americans now setting African American neighborhoods on fire suddenly felt increasingly close; "the spirit of the times made Haiti an important issue to blacks," and newspapers, but also organizations such as the NAACP, took up the cause of Haiti.[8] Support for Haiti led to renewed interest in its history and most notably in the heroic figures of its revolution. Louverture, Dessalines, and Christophe informed the living, active figure of Jamaican-born, Harlem-based political activist Marcus Garvey. Ridiculed by black and white intelligentsia alike, Garvey and his message of international black autonomy nevertheless found an audience: thousands of members around the world joined his United Negro Improvement Association, and the organization's newspaper, *Negro World*, had a broad interna-

tional readership. Garvey wielded a rhetoric of national redemption whose historical roots he made quite clear: "Africa must be redeemed, and all of us pledge our manhood, our wealth and our blood to this sacred cause. Yes, the Negroes of the world have found . . . a Toussant L'Overture [*sic*], and he will be announced to the world when the time comes."[9] Emulating the Haitian hero in appearance and intent, Garvey once more revised the trope by which black agency defines itself in the West as a tale of extraordinary manhood, redemption, and blood.

The story goes on. Not a decade has gone by in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that did not see a revisitation of the black avenger trope. There is no "ancient taboo" against black avengers: they systematically sprout as a paradoxical cultural rampart against that bogeyman of old, the terrifying prospect that is collective black political agency. When voices claim that black lives matter, demand that the names of the victims of white supremacy be said and their stories told, and expect new iterations of the same old *story*: soon an extraordinary black man will rise from the mass of his peers to lead a mass movement that will unavoidably fail.

I open this book with Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*; I conclude it with two more recent film iterations of the black avenger trope: Nate Parker's *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) and Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018), the former a retelling of Nat Turner's revolt, the latter an adaptation of the Marvel comic book about the superhero king of a fictional, hypertechnological African country. Parker's Turner evokes Jesus Christ, notably in the heavy-handed execution scene, but for most of the film he is a modern-day black Spartacus, enlightened avenger ushering in an American age where extraordinary, singular black males have their day. Coogler's film—though centered on an actual Avenger (the superhero team, that is)—reintroduces the black avenger as an American supervillain whose "monstrous hybridity" threatens an international racial order, where blackness and whiteness are equal but must remain separate.

The principal source of information on Turner's revolt, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831), taken down by Thomas R. Gray, set the standards by which Turner has generally been represented: a smart, literate, well-treated, skilled slave and "complete fanatic," who explained that he had received instructions for the uprising from God. Gray was not satisfied: Turner and his companions died "without revealing any thing at all satisfactory, as to the motives which governed them, or the means by which they expected to accomplish their object."[10] What personal information Turner offered Gray says precious little about himself, some about his parents.

It says nothing about his wife.

Gray does not mention her in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, but he had written of her before, when the authorities, still looking for Nat Turner, tortured her into confessing that Nat had been considering insurrection for years and into relinquishing to them some of Turner's private documents.[11] Some historians speculate from this information that her name was Cherry, "a slave belonging to Mr. Reese," and that she and Turner may have had a son together, a theory Nate Parker adopts in his film.[12] In 1831 reporters did not care: "Before the trials in Jerusalem were over, curiosity about this woman either faded, as if her identity had been merely of passing interest, or was suppressed for reasons never explained."[13] Thirty years after the revolt, Boston abolitionist and John Brown supporter Thomas Higginson had peculiar words to address the matter of Turner's wife: "By day or by night, her husband had no more power to protect her than the man who lies bound upon a plundered vessel's deck has power to protect his wife on board the pirate schooner disappearing in the horizon. She may be well treated, she may be outraged; it is in the powerlessness that the agony lies."[14] The well-meaning Higginson turns the torture of Cherry into Nat's ordeal; the lash is a metaphor for rape, and rape a symbol of the unmanning of Turner before it is an atrocity visited on Cherry. As if to temper Higginson's allusions, David F. Allmendinger Jr. warns, "Nat Turner said nothing in 1831 to indicate that a separation from a wife and child had provoked him to rebellion, nothing to suggest a merely personal grievance fueled by sentiments about family. . . . Gray settled for an easier, stock explanation of motives, one that rested on the confession and involved the chief insurgent's fanaticism."[15] Allmendinger himself cannot completely discard the idea that the assault on his family may be what decided Turner; maybe his revolt was his revenge, a remembering after emasculation. Things would be much simpler that way.

And so things appear to be in Nate Parker's film: Nat is tasked with preaching to slaves in plantations all around, and at first he advocates submission. After patrollers brutally assault Cherry in Nat's absence, the tenor of his sermons changes drastically—the vengeful God of the Old Testament rises. The death of his grandmother Bridget finally pushes Parker's Nat to prepare for revolt. Bridget is Nat's last direct link to Africa; with that connection gone, Turner can fully become American. Céleste-Marie Bernier, reflecting on Cherry and more generally on "the erasure of enslaved female bodies," notes how "black female heroism has been a casualty not only of white dominant archives but also of revisionist attempts to commemorate black male exceptionalism."[16] Parker's film is one such attempt; in making Cherry's ordeal but a bit part of Turner's consciousness, it shows the birth not of the black American nation of white Western nightmares but of a dreamed United

States of male opportunity. In the last scene of the film, a black child, witness to Turner's execution, morphs into a grown man fighting in an African American military unit during the Civil War. Nate Parker's film is an inverted paean to respectability politics and assimilation. As in Waring's *As We See It*, by avenging his woman's honor, bleeding for the U.S. flag, and weaving himself into the violent fabric of this country's imaginary, any outstanding black man will earn the manly right—or so does the film strongly suggest—to claim a seat at the citizen's table.

The seat did not materialize; still a corpus of African American black avenger texts stretching from Waring to Parker insists on suggesting that this seat was gloriously earned, as if another tale of extraordinary black masculinity might finally do it, as if one day the *right* Spartacus might be summoned that would make a difference. Seeping as it did by way of African American contributions into African diasporic debates throughout the twentieth century, this U.S.-centered spirit has become a seemingly unavoidable element in global discussions of blackness. As I write this, Ryan Coogler's cinematic adaptation of Marvel Comics' African superhero, *Black Panther* (2018), has become the most commercially successful superhero film in history and is well on its way to breaking other records. With its quasi all-black cast, *Black Panther* met demands for black representation and simultaneously reminded those who might not have known that black sells. Black Panther's novelty has been a selling point ever since the character first appeared in comic-book form in July 1966 as a new character in the successful *Fantastic Four* comic-book series. T'Challa, prince of Wakanda, is initially driven by righteous revenge: he has spent much of his life preparing for the return of his father's assassin, the evil Klaw. T'Challa defeats him and, like most superheroes, transcends his initial motives to dedicate his life to fighting injustice and crime. T'Challa might be mistaken for a black avenger in the Atlantic mold but for one essential difference: his country, Wakanda, has somehow managed to eschew the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism, two defining traumas of collective, global black experience. Wakanda and its hero king wear a mask of Atlantic blackness but do not, cannot, quite embody it.

The black avenger in *Black Panther* is T'Challa's foe and cousin, Erik "Killmonger" Stevens. Erik's father, Prince N'Jobu, is a secret agent for Wakanda living undercover in an Oakland, California, project in 1992 with his American son, whom he tells stories of faraway Wakanda. There he is confronted with the systemic racism faced by people of African descent in the United States and the West at large. As a result, N'Jobu decides to forswear Wakanda's splendid isolation; instead of keeping to his mission of observation, he decides to tackle the problem of racism, weapons in hand. His

plan for a black uprising is thwarted by none other than his own brother, T'Chaka, who kills N'Jobu and leaves Erik behind. Erik grows to become an extraordinary black man: a brilliant student and graduate from MIT, he decides to join the special forces and later on the CIA, excelling in killing foreign leaders and overthrowing governments—training he later reveals to have followed to achieve his father's plans of global black liberation. Like Dan Freeman, the protagonist of Sam Greenlee's 1969 novel of black revolution *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, Killmonger wants to turn the master's tools against the master's house. This and other references to revolutionary variations in the black avenger tradition pepper the film. Visual hints to the Black Panther Party flash in N'Jobu's apartment—the famous photo of Huey Newton holding gun and spear, an Emory Williams poster—tie the historical party's carefully designed political program and initiatives to N'Jobu's and Killmonger's cartoonish plans. With Wakanda as headquarters (he manages to wrest the crown from T'Challa after winning in ritual hand-to-hand combat), Killmonger means to support the wretched of the earth in a world insurrection that will lead the hidden country to become a global empire. This is the coming of the Black Code that Abbé Raynal warned against, the horrible prospect of a black nation that would behave the way white nations have. This is not what the Black Panthers had in mind, but it matters not: in twenty-first-century popular culture, their political legacy is forever tainted by their willingness to defend themselves, and all that surfaces here is Killmonger's unstoppable black rage. Killmonger cannot be allowed to be too sympathetic: he can ask the right questions but cannot possibly provide the right answers. His invocation of collective agency is but a fig leaf on what truly drives him: individual pain and ambition, the sorrow and anger of the cultural orphan. Killmonger is a patchwork of the black avengers that came before him: if his life history and master plan evoke American avengers, as a prince deprived of his birthright, he also hearkens back to the villains of revenge drama and, like one, dies stabbed in the side by his own kin, after proving that the mass movement he fostered was but an extension of his all-consuming personal ambition.

The curtailed pathos of Killmonger's death is tempered by the understanding that there is no other option for a "monstrous hybrid" like him. Not by chance is it the moment when he delivers his, and possibly the film's, best line: a spear stuck in his side, watching the only Wakandan sunset he will ever see, Killmonger chooses to die rather than be judged and likely imprisoned by the Wakandans. He tells T'Challa, "Bury me in the ocean with my ancestors who jumped from the ships, 'cause they knew death was better than bondage." The reference to the Middle Passage indirectly evokes that

side of his family nobody talks about: his mother's. She is neither shown nor named; for all accounts and purposes, she serves as a mere womb, a way for N'Jobu to clone himself into a leaner, meaner version. Women in *Black Panther* stand out for their intelligence and strength. The king's sister, Shuri, is a genius scientist and inventor; his praetorian guard, the Dora Milaje, is composed exclusively of women; and interactions at the court suggest that, in Wakanda, gender equality is taken for granted. There are no Lucretias there. By contrast, the complete erasure of the mother in a black American context is especially jarring. Hortense Spillers demonstrates the importance of *partus sequitur ventrem*—the central principle of American slavery by which the condition of the enslaved mother is bestowed to her children, a gross anathema in patriarchal societies—to the black condition in the Americas. In this context "the African-American woman, the mother, the daughter, becomes historically the powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated—the law of the Mother—only and precisely because legal enslavement removed the African-American male not so much from sight as from mimetic view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the Father's name, the Father's law." In the system of slavery, black fathers were forcibly removed, but black women were ungendered, turned into slave-makers, their motherhood denied "at the very same time that it becomes the founding term of a human and social enactment." It is Spillers's argument that rather than seek to achieve patriarchal and gendered relations traditionally foreclosed to them, "it is the heritage of the mother that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the power of 'yes' to the 'female' within."[17] Measure that exhortation against Killmonger's final moment: even where he appears to renounce his father's fairy tale, he still chooses the alleged purity of a defiant death over the defiance of black American life, honoring ancestors and ignoring his mother. Full personhood will have to wait.

In this partial genealogy of the black avenger trope, I have tried to suggest how certain narrative patterns are so engrained in our sense of history that they seem to erase what lies beyond their frame. It is a function of the black avenger narrative that we see the hero and imagine away the pedestal of ungendered flesh on which he stands. It is never too late to listen: for all that they rely on structures and arguments designed in fear of black agency, black avenger narratives also necessarily maintain black politics as a topic of conversation. There has never been any incompatibility between the visual celebration of blackness and the narrative undermining of black politics. Still, *Black Panther*, for all the gaping cracks in its narrative structure, can bring us back to grounded, earthly daydreams. Stepping out of the fairy tale and back

into this other world, I caught myself dreaming of a different, unsung Pan-Africa, which connects African shepherds and black American city teens, not as extras, not as chorus to the protagonist, but as an international collective, scorning states, parties, and nations—the hushed network of those who walk so they don't have to bow. Call them a Black Panther Party; call them Kisama, like the early modern fugitives who, fleeing the oppression of African monarchs and European slave traders alike, decided that the collectives they would build would eschew the repeating patterns of power. In her 2018 book *Fugitive Modernities*, Jessica A. Krug proposes, "Instead of searching for narratives to explain the accretion of power, we can begin to listen to the fragmented ideologies that underwrote what we all too often dismiss as mere survival."[18] These ideologies tell tales that need neither heroes nor kings.