

Grégory Pierrot, *The Black Avenger in Atlantic Culture*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2019. viii + 263 pp. (Paper US\$ 32.95)

This ambitious and exceedingly well-written study traces the trope of the Black avenger from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century. Starting counter-intuitively with the Roman myth of the Rape of Lucretia and the Roman slave rebel Spartacus, Grégory Pierrot takes readers on a tour-de-force that encompasses English, African American, and French literature as well political documents by leaders of the Haitian Revolution. It also touches on recent films that employ this trope, such as Nate Parker's 2016 filmic adaptation of Nat Turner's 1831 slave revolt, *The Birth of A Nation*, and Ryan Coogler's 2018 Marvel superhero blockbuster, *Black Panther*.

The vast chronological scope, the diversity of the cultural material, and the analysis of both Anglophone and Francophone texts constitute major strengths of the study. Apart from countering the widespread linguistic myopia of Anglophone academia with his comparative approach, Pierrot manages to reconstruct a key triangular and transatlantic dialogue: one that took place between eighteenth—and early nineteenth-century English, French, and Haitian writers, and that revolves around the trope of the Black avenger. The *longue-durée* approach and the transnational angle also throw in sharp relief how this trope constantly re-emerges and how, despite its new guises and its appropriation by Black Atlantic figures, it is held back by its racist and patriarchal origins. As Pierrot states (and demonstrates throughout), the Black Avenger trope “is predicated on the silencing of black women” (p. 12).

However, the large ground that the study covers also risks significant omissions. Self-consciously, Pierrot seems aware of this danger, asserting that he does “not claim this to be an exhaustive study” (p. 15) of the Black Avenger trope. And he acknowledges that his choices of texts necessarily meant the exclusion of others. Overall, such courage to risk gaps largely pays off; his examples are well chosen to trace the genealogy of the trope. However, there are some instances where this strategy backfires. For instance, discussing the figure of the Black Avenger in the abolitionist poems *West-Indian Eclogues* (1787) by White blind Liverpoolian radical Edward Rushton, Pierrot criticizes the apolitical nature of the slave's vengeance: “it eschews the notion of black political agency by devolving to the personal” (p. 84). This might apply to these poems but significantly Pierrot fails to take into account Rushton's later poem “Toussaint to his Troops” (1806). The leader of the Haitian Revolution Toussaint Louverture's rallying speech portrays him as a political “Black Jacobin” avenger figure rooted in a Black collective.

Chapter 3, on the trope of the Black Avenger in the discourse on the Haitian Revolution, is largely compelling. It demonstrates that it was not merely North Atlantic writers who cast the leaders as Black Avengers, but also shows how these appropriated the trope, and, most strikingly, how Haitian independence leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines fashioned himself as the avenger of the colonial atrocities the Americas had suffered. Less compellingly is the alleged self-fashioning of Toussaint Louverture as the Black Spartacus. Pierrot curiously misquotes from Louverture's famous 1793 "Camp Turel" proclamation with which he entered the political stage: "I have undertaken vengeance for my race" (p. 101). While it remains vague in the proclamation exactly what Louverture claims to have taken vengeance for, "for my race" seems to be an addition by Pierrot rather than present in the historical source. Hence, it appears doubtful that Louverture would here recall Raynal's Black Spartacus figure as the avenger of the Black race.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus (largely) on literary nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American appropriations of the Black Avenger trope. Some of these are among the most compelling analyses. A detailed and incisive exploration of Black nationalist Martin Delany's fragmentary novel *Blake, or the Huts of America* (1861–62) teases out convincingly how Delany, recalling the Haitian Revolution, deploys the Black Avenger trope to ferment large-scale collective political action—a transnational slave revolt that is to encompass large parts of the Americas. These final chapters seem less of a tour-de-force than the first three, as Pierrot has more space to mount very balanced critiques of these African American appropriations of the Black Avenger trope.

The Black Avenger in Atlantic Culture forms a pioneering study on the genealogy of this key trope—very readable, refreshingly free from jargon, and thought-provoking. While the ambitious scope proves a mixed blessing, it clearly demonstrates how the Black Avenger (with all its racist and sexist pitfalls) has featured prominently from the beginnings of the transatlantic slave trade up to twenty-first-century popular culture.

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