

"All Misfortune Comes from the Cut Trees": Marie Chauvet's Environmental Imagination

To Sidney Mintz, with thanks

All misfortune comes from the cut trees, they have cut them down,
even the calabash trees, even the trees of Ogou.

Marie Chauvet, *Fonds des Nègres*

Marie Chauvet's *Fonds des Nègres* (1960) was inspired, as the author explains in her preface, by a brief sojourn in the community of that name in the Department of Nippes in Haiti's southern Tiburon Peninsula. The only one of Chauvet's works set exclusively against a rural landscape, the novel narrates the events that follow the arrival in the community of Marie-Ange, a young woman from Port-au-Prince who has come to live with her grandmother as she awaits funds from her mother to join her in the United States. Read most frequently (and most insightfully in Colin Dayan's *Haiti, History, and the Gods*) as the tale of the local *houngan's* efforts to bring the newcomer into the path of the Vodou faith, I want to offer here a complementary reading to Dayan's definitive reading of the novel as "the most radical fiction about Vodou ever written"¹—that of the novel as the most sustained exploration of deforestation and its impact on the rural population to be found in Haitian fiction, one that could arguably be described as Haiti's most consciously environmental text to date. The novel is Chauvet's "cri d'alarme" ["cry of alarm"] upon discovering "the agricultural problems that explain the peasants' frightful misery" and their root in the fast-growing

1. Colin (Joan) Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 82.

pace of deforestation in the district and the nation.² I will argue here that, armed with a solid knowledge of the causes and consequences of deforestation in the Haitian countryside drawn from observation and significant background research, Chauvet built her novel on two key elements—the reality that without trees the topsoil will be washed away, and its consequence, that without topsoil (what the peasantry in the text understands as *the land*), the filial, cultural and religious rhizomes that give Haitian peasant culture its character cannot thrive or survive. This message, what Chauvet claims to want to cry "to the four winds," imbues the text with its characteristic didactic tone and prompts questions about the novel's intended audience.

The problems posed by Haiti's catastrophic deforestation garnered international headlines in the wake of the devastation wreaked by the 2010 earthquake in Port-au-Prince. Deforestation had been already a matter of widespread debate, however, since the publication in 2005 of Jared Diamond's *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive*,³ followed in 2006 by David Guggenheim's award-winning documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*.⁴ Both book and documentary had brought international attention to Haiti's acute deforestation and concomitant environmental plight, addressing the loss of nearly ninety-nine percent of the trees that once covered Haiti's portion of Hispaniola as the most significant long-term threat to the nation's viability and showcasing Haiti as emblematic of the condition of a nation in environmental collapse. From these narratives Haiti emerges, not as a victim of "a complex web of progress-resistant cultural influences," as some argued after the 2010 earthquake,⁵ but as the canary-in-the-coal-mine of the Anthropocene,⁶ a dire warning to other

2. Marie Chauvet, *Fonds-des-Nègres* (Port-au-Prince: Henri Deschamps, 1960), 1.

3. Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

4. David Guggenheim, *An Inconvenient Truth* (Documentary Film). Teleplay by Al Gore. Lawrence Bender Productions/Participant Productions, 2006.

5. David Brooks, "The Underlying Tragedy," op-ed, New York Times, January 15, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/01/15/opinion/15brooks.html?pagewanted=print.

6. The Anthropocene, a word coined in the 1980s by ecologist Eugene Stoermer and popularized by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen, is a geological term denoting the period of significant human impact on Earth's ecosystems, accomplished chiefly through the burning of fossil fuels and leading to acute deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and climate change. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter 2009): 197–222.

nations of the dismal impact of acute deforestation in an era of climate change, global warming, and rising sea levels.

For both Diamond and Guggenheim, Haiti is "Exhibit A"—an environmentally despoiled canvas on which to project their arguments about ecological mismanagement and climate change. And there is, understandably, limited engagement in their presentations with either the complexity of the local issues or with Haitian perspectives on the crisis. But while the absence of Haitian assessments of the situation presented in either the book or the film implies a dearth of local understanding as regards the level or scope of the nation's predicament, this is far from being the case. As Haiti's population grew throughout the mid-twentieth century, putting increasing pressure on the forests to provide lumber for the international market and charcoal for cooking, the growing deforestation, and the concomitant soil erosion, droughts, and frequent disastrous flash floods created a situation difficult to ignore. With a dwindling percentage of the land covered in forests, previously fertile fields became desert-like, rain grew more unpredictable, and heavy rains, when they came, washed the topsoil off to sea, where it contributed to the destruction of breeding habitats for marine life. This has been understood—though inefficiently addressed by Haiti's government and local and foreign NGOs—since the scale of the problem was first identified in the 1950s.

The acute environmental crisis featured by Diamond and Guggenheim in their work has also emerged as a central motif in Haitian literature. Understanding full well the import of Haiti's environmental situation, both as a historical reality and as a metaphor for addressing this history in literature, Haitian writers have made it a cornerstone of the development of the national novel and drama. From Jacques Roumain's *Masters of the Dew* (1944), a seminal text in the development of the Haitian novel, to Frankétienne's *Melovivi or the Trap* (2010), Haiti's writers have delved into the impact of the country's accelerating environmental decay with deep insight and detailed knowledge of the scale of the deforestation and its consequences.⁷ As Dayan has argued, the Haitian novel's concern with the mistreatment of the land has led to the repetition of "certain rituals of nationalism and loss . . . almost for-

7. For a more detailed discussion of Haitian environmental writing, see Elizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, "Deforestation and the Yearning for Lost Landscapes in Caribbean Literatures," in *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, ed. Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

mulaic in their intensity. The land has been mistreated, the trees have been cut down, the sun blasts the barren earth, while the peasants remain ignorant, oppressed and miserable" (Dayan, 87). Behind Diamond and Guggenheim stands this decades-long tradition of Haitian environmental writing, exemplified most eloquently in *Fonds des Nègres*.

Chauvet's anchoring of the narrative on her own observations during a visit to Fonds-des-Nègres in the late 1950s and her implied intent to reveal the truth of the causes of the peasantry's misery link her novel to a contemporary body of ethnography focused on the Haitian peasantry that included Rémy Bastien's *Le paysan haïtien et sa famille* (*The Haitian Peasant and his Family*) (1951) and Paul Moral's *Le paysan haïtien: Étude sur la vie rurale en Haïti* (*The Haitian Peasant: Study of Rural Life in Haiti*) (1961). We gain particularly useful insight into the level of ethnographic observance practiced by Chauvet in the novel by reading her descriptions of the novel's setting against those offered in the field reports of United States anthropologist Sidney Mintz, who in 1958 conducted research that shed light on contemporary concerns with deforestation and soil erosion in the settlement.⁸ Mintz's study, "Living Fences in the Fond-des-Nègres (sic) Region, Haiti," describes the village in terms quite similar to Chauvet's depiction, as a settlement of "scattered homesteads, with the houses located mostly on the crests of rolling land and on hilltops,"⁹ positioned in an area "where deforestation has proceeded apace—particularly where charcoal-making is economically important"—and where there is little evidence that preventative measures against erosion have been implemented, despite the fact that "run-off [on the slopes] is likely to be considerable, unless there are stands of coffee with their protective cover of fruit and other trees" (Mintz, 105). The "living fences" of Mintz's study are the type of vegetation that can prove helpful in

8. In my description of Fonds-des-Nègres, I use the terms "village" and "settlement" to describe the community, but Sidney Mintz remembers it as geographically "unusual"—not a "town" *per se*, as it lacked a square or church, but more akin to "what the Germans call a *Strassendorf*" or "line village" in English. The center of the settlement was the market, which Mintz estimated involved "some 15,000 market-ers and customers, on a fair day," with "paths leading off of it northward to several rural sections: along the road were such things as a tiny restaurant . . . the home of a priest; the government agriculture 'center' (called *teknik* by the local people); and the small shack where a young auto mechanic lived" (e-mail exchange with Prof. Mintz, June 18, 2014).

9. Sydney W. Mintz, "Living Fences in the Fond-des-Nègres (sic) Region, Haiti." *Economic Botany* 16/2 (1962): 101.



Fonds-des-Nègres, Haiti (1958). Photo by Sidney Mintz, originally published in *Economic Botany*. Reprinted with permission from Sidney Mintz and the editors of *Economic Botany*. Image supplied by The LuEsther T. Mertz Library of The New York Botanical Gardens.

controlling topsoil from blowing away or being washed away by rain, and their use is one of the land recovery techniques recommended by Chauvet's Papa Beauville in *Fonds des Nègres*.

The settlement, we learn from Mintz's observations, had recently experienced some economic decline due to the lowering of the price of coffee in the world market and, consequently, had seen a rise in the production of subsistence crops. The novel also alludes repeatedly to this decline in prosperity, which it attributes to deforestation and to the persistence of unsound agricultural practices that fostered erosion and exacerbated the loss of topsoil. Land, according to both Mintz and Chauvet, was held and cultivated in small and ever-diminishing plots, and agricultural management was minimal; fallowing was the principal means of renovating or nourishing the soil, and terracing and contour cultivation were not practiced. As such, soil erosion loomed large as the most significant threat to the village's viability as an agrarian community and this, in turn, was shown to be the result of deforestation. Coffee trees (like those owned in the novel by the young planter Facius) were safe, as "law forbids the cutting

of coffee trees" (Mintz, 101), but sisal needed to be planted around a stand of young trees "to protect the saplings from anything but man" (Mintz, 104). In any case, Mintz reports, trees are "rarely planted" although "the land may receive the protection provided by standing trees" (Mintz, 105). From Mintz's report, and Chauvet's novel, we get a picture of a village where the main threat to its limited economic security is deforestation, but where there are no sufficient practices in place to protect trees or soil other than the coffee trees safeguarded under existing legislation. In Chauvet's novel, the local Vodou priest, Papa Beauville, serves as the proponent of many of these much-needed soil conservation measures, convinced as he is that such measures will allow for the land to be healed: "I now know that any land can be saved," he tells his fellow villagers (149).

The denuded hills of the Haitian countryside make their appearance in the opening paragraph of *Fonds des Nègres*, which introduces Papa Beauville as he makes his way to his village against the backdrop of the beautiful but stripped mountains, which resemble "mangy she-dogs" (3) and are "bleached by erosion" (130), and of trees with severed limbs.¹⁰ The mountains in the distance reappear periodically throughout the text, as icons of a devastation that has taken place during Papa Beauville's own lifetime and with which he has been complicit through the selling of his own lands. Chauvet, one must assume, has deliberately made her character old enough to allow him to play this role as witness and repository of the memory of increasingly catastrophic deforestation in Haiti's rural landscape. Beauville's personal chronology follows the historical trajectory of deforestation in Haiti, especially when we consider that in the early 1920s (during the character's youth) over sixty percent of Haiti's land was still covered by forests. By 1945, following the American Occupation (a period of intensified lumber exportation), this number had been reduced to twenty-one percent; ten years later, the number was eight to

10. In *Love*, Chauvet will use similar imagery to describe the despoiled mountains: "The peasants look like beaten dogs. They extend their hands sulkily to receive their payment, their eyes fixed on the ravaged mountains in the distance. Big white patches spread upon them like leprosy. Enormous crags jut upwards like tombstones. They stand there, dressed in dark blue, barefoot, their sacks around their necks, their expressions marked with bitterness." Chauvet, *Amour, Colère et Folie* (Albania: Voix des Femmes, 2003), 59. I will be using my own translation of the book. Further references to this work will be abbreviated *Love*. Regarding the publication and translation history of Chauvet's work, see Thomas C. Spear, "Marie Chauvet: The Fortress Still Stands" in this volume.

nine percent.¹¹ The bared hills whose despoiling he has witnessed in the past and observes as scabs and scars in the present are often juxtaposed with his memory of the distant past, when trees rose everywhere around him and coffee grew profusely in their shadow. In Papa Beauville's recollection, the trees are linked to widespread prosperity and to the beauty of the green branches laden with "red, gleaming, perfumed" fruit (103) that once obscured what is now a visible and degraded horizon. Chauvet describes the compromised environment left in the wake of the catastrophic deforestation through Papa Beauville's eyes as the epitome of what Rob Nixon describes as slow violence, "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all."¹² No less acute because of its slowness, the violence of deforestation mirrors the speedier political and economic violence inflicted by corrupt politicians on Haiti's peasantry, whose deepening poverty is at the center of *Fonds des Nègres*. Thus does Chauvet's characteristic concern with social justice emerge in this work as a strong commitment to environmental justice in particular.

Chauvet often has Papa Beauville pause briefly to contemplate "the old denuded mountains, swept by the rain and the wind" (39), and she returns repeatedly to the image of the severed branches of the few remaining trees, drawing on the discourse of disability and impairment to highlight the wrenching pain of their "maiming." Children dance and play *Iago* (a game like tag in which wolves chase chickens) around the stumps of the cut trees. Marie-Ange is described as watching the shadows of the cut trees and lamenting their loss as "disabling" (66), and Papa Beauville describes the bare mountains in the distance to Marie-Ange as "looking like they're suffering from alopecia" (78). The calabash tree that presides over the *lakou* (a central courtyard and the housing units within it, and the family and community members who live there) is portrayed as having suffered an amputation after the loss of one of its limbs. Marie-Ange, watching Madame St. Flè's deformed body, is filled with the infinite sadness of seeing her old, deformed body resemble an "uprooted, dying tree"

11. Nancy Roc, "Haiti-Environment: From the 'Pearl of the Antilles' to Desolation," *Fride* (September 2008): 1. http://www.fride.org/descarga/COM_Haiti_perla_desolacion_ENG_sep08.pdf. Accessed on April 14, 2014.

12. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

(139). The disablings, amputations, and deformities through which Chauvet signifies the wounds on the landscape ultimately consolidate the land, its trees, and its people into one traumatized body and allow Chauvet to address the incapacitating nature of loss and the need for communal action (to act as one body with the land) to promote recovery and a return to prosperity. This conceit is crucial to her structuring of the novel, which "comes out of an experience of mourning" (Dayan, 82), and moves from ongoing trauma to bereavement and eventually to regeneration (the stages of recovery from trauma, to which I will return below) through political action and a communal resolve to protect and heal the land.¹³ Chauvet's personification of the landscape also allows her to imbue the events taking place in Fonds-des-Nègres—the trauma of loss and amputation—with the power borne by the glorious amputees of Haitian history, folklore, and religion: Makandal, one of the "fathers" of the Haitian nation and the Vodou *Iwa* Legba, particularly in his Legba-pied-cassé avatar, whose "apparent fragility conceals terrific strength."¹⁴ Makandal's transformation (his ability to develop deep knowledge of poisons and magic in the service of the Revolution after the loss of his arm), as Heather Hewett has argued, "suggests a recurring Haitian narrative about disability: that reciprocity exists between humans and spirit" (Hewett, 136).¹⁵ This reciprocity becomes instrumental in the potential regeneration of land and community through Beauville's devotion to Ogou and his calabash tree and his exhortation to the community to come together politically, as small landowners, and as individuals

13. James Berger, "Trauma Without Disability, Disability Without Trauma: A Disciplinary Divide," *JAC* 24/3 (2004): 582.

14. Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 125. For a discussion of the role of the disabled in Haitian culture and fiction see Heather Hewett, "At the Crossroads: Disability and Trauma in *The Farming of the Bones*," *Melus* 31/3 (2006): 123–45.

15. Dayan explains this reciprocity as also central to the language of possession: "Possession, or the *crise de loa*—the moment when the god inhabits the head of his servitor—articulates the reciprocal abiding of human and god. The 'horse' is said to be mounted and ridden by the god. The event is not a matter of domination, but a kind of double movement of attenuation and expansion. For make no mistake about it, the loa cannot appear in epiphany, cannot be made manifest on earth without the person who becomes the temporary receptacle or mount." Dayan, "Vodou, or the Voice of the Gods," in *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean*, 13–36, ed. Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 19.

committed to the Vodou *lwa*, to save their economic and cultural heritage through the incorporation of new agricultural management techniques.

The first stage in this recovery, as Chauvet presents it, is that of Papa Beauville's prolonged *mea culpa*. His personal sense of guilt for the devastation of the land will be projected onto the entire village, which is portrayed as having succumbed to "his guilty example" of selling the land only to return to see it as a despoiled savannah (5). Beauville's own story—selling his land, leaving to work in the city, returning to find the land devastated—is a cycle against which he warns others repeatedly. His tale, which he has told "one hundred times," "enacts the original sense of abuse that compels his prophesy of salvation" (Dayan, 95). An abandoned land, he continually observes, is at great risk of losing its trees and topsoil and hence its fertility. From his state of self-condemnation he will hurl accusations at his fellow villagers, countering denunciations that the land is bad or cursed with a simple statement of scientific fact: "There is no fault with the land, it is you who have killed it when you deforested it" (105); "You have cut all the trees, and the land is no longer protected. Look, she's going away and shows you her teeth in revenge" (10). His expiation comes through his defense of the calabash tree standing before his *ounfó*—the tree of Ogou—whose symbolic survival opens (quite literally) a space for accusation, prayer, repentance, and pragmatic enlightenment. From the space under the calabash he can both rail at his neighbors "When you have cut the trees on this land, you have opened your arms to misery" (15)—and instruct them in the knowledge of land management through which the "deteriorated" land can recover its fertility. The space under the calabash tree is the space where the discourse of/about the gods meets the discourse of agrarian knowledge and new technologies of land management, moving from questions about the harm that men could do to the land to an understanding of land protection that comes from outside the village, from the city agronomists with whom Beauville had come into contact in Port-au-Prince—from whom he has heard, as Papa tells Docé, "that when we kill the trees we kill the land" (45).

In her discussion of the harm done to the land by deforestation, perhaps in order to portray the crisis of deforestation as dependent primarily on human action and not on natural disaster, Chauvet avoids any direct allusion to the role of Hurricane Hazel (1954) in the condition of the trees and soil in Fonds-des Nègres in the period immedi-

ately preceding the events narrated in the novel. Hazel had crossed Haiti as a Category 2 hurricane, making landfall on October 8 on the southern peninsula in which Fonds-des-Nègres is located and causing approximately one thousand deaths, mostly from drowning and mudslides directly related to the acute deforestation. The storm destroyed forty percent of the coffee and shade trees and fifty percent of the cocoa trees and, ironically, in its wake the peasantry was persuaded to sell their remaining trees to face the failure of their coffee and cocoa crops. Chauvet would incorporate the destruction caused by Hazel, not in *Fonds des Nègres*, but in *Love*, set during the U.S. occupation but clearly alluding to the early years of the Duvalier regime, where her narrator, Claire, describes how the devastation caused by deforestation by U.S. corporations operating in Haiti made the nation more vulnerable to natural catastrophe:

It has been raining without check, and what is worst is that the rains came after the intensive clearing of the woods. Monsieur Long's electric saw has been buzzing without interruption for the last fifteen days. A tree falls every five minutes. Yesterday, I took a long walk down the length of the coast to take a look at the damage. I saw huge trees falling to the ground, making the most awful noise, as if they were roaring before letting out their last breath. . . . *Avalanches of soil stream down the mountains, forming mounds below.* There is no longer any coffee, except in our memories. Mr. Long is no longer interested in coffee. He now thinks of nothing but the export of lumber. When the lumber is gone, he'll go after something else. Maybe he'll start exporting men. He can have his pick from among the beggars and easily ship them out.

Chauvet's interest in the land in *Fonds des Nègres* is focused primarily on topsoil erosion and secondarily on the denuded mountains, where soil erosion, as depicted in the text, appears to have reached the subsoil, leaving the bedrock exposed and ending all hope of anything ever growing there. The "avalanches of soil" streaming down the mountains of *Love* are one of her central interests in this earlier text, from which Papa Beauville emerges as the conduit of modern notions of agrarian management gleaned from the city's agronomists to the embattled countryside. We see this most clearly in Chauvet's careful attention to the articulation of the need to contain soil erosion in the text, presented both through the contemplation of the observable damage to the landscape discussed above and through the presentation of several communal debates through which Chauvet

can illustrate the peasantry's mistaken notions (that the land is bad or cursed, for example) against Beauville's careful articulation of the land as simply harmed by bad management and (most importantly) still recoverable through careful husbandry. His service to the gods, as Dayan has argued, does not represent a rejection of modern notions of land management; "he respects and does not feel threatened by the agronomist from the city and he appreciates the practical benefits of agricultural technology" (Dayan, 92). His sojourn away from Fonds-des-Nègres, as he explains to Marie-Ange, has given him valuable insights into other agrarian cultures—he has "seen how in other places they weed the land, and how they plant and how they harvest" (81), and the knowledge has helped him understand "why we are poor over here; we don't know how to plant, or harvest, or how to defend our rights" (81). He has seen a tractor, that is "a big machine go for a drive over the earth and do in an hour what a thousand hands would do in a thousand days" (81–82). Beauville's plan for recovery, nonetheless, drawn from current ideas about sustainable land use, will represent a considerable political and technical effort. "A mighty task awaits us" he explains (106), only achievable through the leadership and authority he draws from his connection to Vodou and the *Iwa*. "Give me your oath that when the time comes you will give it your courage and your strength," he tells Docé. "Swear on your mother's head that you will answer my call" (106).

Chauvet's focus on topsoil in *Fonds des Nègres* evidences a level of familiarity with agrarian techniques unusual for an urban-based writer of her generation. She is not the only one to write with a deep concern for the loss of land fertility in Haiti, but stands alone in her command of the ramifications of topsoil loss and conservation techniques and in the specificity of her text's agrarian recommendations. The damage caused by Hurricane Hazel in 1954 had exposed the ways in which the island's widespread deforestation had exacerbated the rural population's vulnerability to natural disasters, and a handful of local and foreign scholars (Mintz among them) had turned their attention to the areas of research we would now call environmental. *Fonds des Nègres* brings to life the specificities of this vulnerability through characters caught in a weary fight for survival in a rapidly deteriorating environment over which the conservation of topsoil looms as an urgent matter. In a particularly poignant scene that illustrates how central topsoil is to her concerns in the novel, Chauvet describes Papa Beauville as emerging from prayer before his altar to Ogou to

stare at the bare mountains in the distance before he "bends down, grabs a fistful of earth and lets it slide through his fingers slowly. Then, sniffing as if he were trying to grasp its scent, he says: 'Do you hear the echo of the drums on the mountains? Well! Back then, we could hear them all the time'" (131). The *Iwa*, the soil, the degraded environment and the potential survival of both faith and believers merge in this brief scene, encapsulating the centrality of topsoil to life and faith in rural Haiti.

Topsoil, the uppermost layer (or first 2 to 8 inches) of the soil, has a high concentration of microorganisms and organic matter, and most plants—except for large trees—do not extend their roots deeper, as they absorb all the nutrients they need from it. In Haiti, the loss of topsoil due to deforestation has led to the loss of almost 50% of potential farmland, leaving the nation unable to feed itself. David Montgomery, in *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilization*, calls this level of topsoil loss "crippling," and describes how "soil loss from the uplands in the rainy season is so severe that bulldozers function as tropical snowplows to clear the streets of the capital, Port-au-Prince"¹⁶—a description that recalls the avalanches of mud conjured by Chauvet in *Love*. In her depiction of erosion, Chauvet alternates between her panoramic description of the denuded mountains—the transformed landscape that speaks of catastrophic erosion—and the small vignettes that tell us of the everyday instances of topsoil loss, as when she briefly describes the river water laden with eroded topsoil: "On that late afternoon," she writes, "the river swept along a water that seemed to be filled with blood. The erosion itself, under the glow of the sun, took on a golden cast that made it look beautiful" (146). There are numerous examples in the novel of topsoil being blown or washed away: "Look," Papa Beauville exhorts the villagers in one of these scenes, pointing with his finger, "the trees have been cut here, and the water from the sky, when the good God and the *Iwa* are angry, falls onto the earth, wrests it away, and drags it along" (46). There are also, as the plot progresses, a number of pragmatic solutions outlined for the problems posed by deforestation and erosion. Papa Beauville counsels Docé, for example, to plant live fences around his property to prevent erosion, following the same recommendation Mintz reached in his study. The casual allusions to erosion during open community

16. David R. Montgomery, *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2007), 229.

discussions—like the warning, for example, not to buy a piece of land on a too-steep hill—reinforce the peasantry's growing competence with notions of soil conservation.

In *Dirt*, Montgomery argues that "prosperity disappeared along with Haiti's topsoil" (Montgomery, 220). It is an assessment with which Chauvet's Beauville's would easily concur. His self-imposed role *vis-à-vis* soil erosion in the text is precisely to lead the community back to some degree of that lost prosperity through agricultural reform. His goal is that of returning the village to the old bounty represented by the productive coffee plantation with its gleaming red fruit, repeatedly described throughout the novel as the natural state of ecological/economic balance. This can only be achieved, however, by reaffirming the link between the land and the *lwa*, without which prosperity remains an elusive dream in the particular social context of rural Haiti. "The land and the gods give the majority of Haitians their identity," Colin Dayan writes in her study of *Fonds des Nègres* (Dayan, 87), and the recovery of the land Papa Beauville envisions—his pragmatism notwithstanding—cannot be accomplished in the text without an upholding of the connection between *lwa*, land, and believers through the fulfillment of the latter's earlier commitments to the land and the spirits. In *Fonds des Nègres*, Chauvet

does not deal with Vodou as a metaphor for all that remains vital in Haitian culture, nor does she use a ceremony of god as symbol for what is "true" or "empowering." Refusing to take beliefs, services and devotion out of a context of attitudes, ideas, and feelings that are at best ambiguous, Vodou becomes *an element in a network of forces, part and parcel of changing economic, social, and emotional needs*. (Dayan, 90, my emphasis).

This "network of forces" is deeply connected to the topsoil itself, as it is the first layer of earth covering the dead and the last the *lwa* cross before entering into direct communion with their *serviteurs* during ceremonies. The burial ceremony for Céphise, which takes place early in the novel, shows these links between the dead and the land, as the body is consecrated to the shelter of the land and the care of the spirits through the symbolic tie of a branch of the silver thatch palm. The commitment of the ancestors' bodies to the earth to join the organic matter feeding the topsoil illustrates a more than merely symbolic connection between humans and the land. As the ancestors blend with the organic material of the topsoil, so are they washed to

sea with the eroded soil, severing the connection between the living, the *lwa*, the land, the trees, and the dead.

I want to linger briefly on this "network of forces," as it shows most clearly the complementarity between Dayan's reading of the depth of the novel's engagement with Vodou and my reading of its ecological implications. In Beauville's "redemptive vision of progress, ritual *konesans* (knowledge) remains pragmatic, as the spirits themselves convey the need for incorporating new practices into old belief structures" (Dayan, 92). The paths the spirits choose for communication (dreams, possession, the voices of the ancestors, for example) may vary, but the central focus of their interaction is the need to attend to the land and its fertility, and the steps they propose are down-to-earth and science-supported: an end to deforestation, curbing the topsoil erosion, coming together as a community to plant the land together. In a dream, the spirits of the dead counsel Beauville that "if the peasants from the hills grow poorer by the day it is because they scorn the earth . . . but it is the earth that will save you" (102).

To help impart this lesson to a skeptical population, the tragedy of the land unfolds alongside the loss of young children to a mysterious illness spreading through the countryside. A parallel tragedy in so far as their loss deprives the community of another promise of continuity, the children's death is like the loss of rhizomes (the botanical, rather than the philosophical term), the subterranean stems of the plants that cling stubbornly to the topsoil, allowing new shoots to grow upwards. Without topsoil, new shoots (like new generations) will wither and die, as will the community that cannot ensure its children's safety. The infertility of the land is attributed to Ma St. Flè, a woman who has been accused by the *lwa* of killing the children in the community. She is subsequently ostracized, and her banishment from the community functions as a sacrificial offering toward eventual regrowth, rebirth, and renewal. Chosen as a scapegoat because of her multiple unfulfilled promises to the *lwa*, her sacrifice allows the logic of Vodou, the "network of forces" that encompasses religious practice, to move a step further toward communal action to save the land. Her accusation by the spirits—and the condemnation of the community—therefore, is greeted with exclamations of "Da-homey is in agreement/The earth is blessed/The devil has left" (160). Most important, however, is Mme St. Flè's acceptance of her expulsion despite her claims of innocence as a mark of her obedience to the spirits. In her encounter with a doubting Marie-Ange in her exile, hair

matted and skin scabbed in her rancid cave, her submission to the will of the *lwa* is testimony to the importance of individual sacrifice to the "network of forces" that constitutes Vodou. Mary R. Harvey, in "An Ecological View of Psychological Trauma and Trauma Recovery," writes that, "in the realm of psychological trauma, the ecological analogy understands violent and traumatic events as ecological threats not only to the adaptive capacities of the individual but also to the ability of human communities to foster health and resiliency among affected members."¹⁷ Mme St. Flè's acceptance of her fate, as Marie-Ange gleans after their encounter, allows the community to move beyond their on-going, too-prolonged, slow violence trauma, demonstrating in the process how "community values, beliefs and traditions can bulwark community members and support their resilience in the wake of violence" (Harvey, 5). The encounter provides another source of understanding for Marie-Ange, triply marooned in Fonds-des-Nègres (first by her mother's emigration, then by the loss of her money, and ultimately by her mother's death abroad), as she comes to terms with the necessity of establishing her own roots in the community and joining the "network of forces" under which the acceptance of such a bitter fate as Mme St. Flè's helps the community transcend its trauma.

In the text, what Mme St. Flè's sacrifice ushers in is the coming together of the community in support of Beauville and Facius's plan toward the formation of a cooperative for the farming of the lands. As their chief interlocutor in the formation of these plans, Marie-Ange will receive constant assurances that such a cooperative is not only "not inconsistent with serving the gods" (Dayan, 92), but also a logical step in the saving of the land by a community organized around their faith in the *lwa*. Dayan argues that "even Papa Beauville's dreams evolve out of his experiences in the 'real' world and become goads to change. Services for the spirits are always inscribed in phenomena: things are variously reconstituted, relationships destroyed or healed" (Dayan, 85). *Fonds des Nègres*' "unabashedly utopian" ending shows "the power of a heritage reclaimed in Haiti as a legacy of fantasy, gossip, and dream, impossible to disentangle from what we call reason or reality" (Dayan, 117). It is also the most realistic and appropriate

17. Mary R. Harvey, "An Ecological View of Psychology Trauma and Trauma Recovery," *The Journal of Traumatic Stress* 9/1 (1996): 5.

solution to the agricultural impasse faced by communities such as Fonds-des-Nègres.

In a recent article on the World Bank website, "Cooperatives: One Solution for Agriculture in Haiti," Fritz-Gerald Louis argues for the formation of agricultural production cooperatives as a protection against the increasing and damaging fragmentation of individual farms. An agricultural production cooperative—the type in which production resources (land, labor, machinery) are pooled—could "boost the productivity of the agricultural sector and improve the living conditions of rural populations in Haiti."¹⁸ This was the sort of cooperative envisioned by Chauvet in *Fonds-des-Nègres* and proposed by her houngan Beauville, who exhorts the villagers: "Let's come together to work the land . . . I contribute my part, you also contribute yours, and the others contribute theirs, and the money will be blessed by the fact that it associated with this" (215). Among the advantages outlined by Louis (and, in the novel, by Beauville and Facius) are the effective management of productive activities, the possibility of purchasing raw materials in bulk, greater probabilities of securing land rights, greater ability to secure contracts for the sale of their crops and the establishment of social safety nets. In recent decades, Haitian farming cooperatives, under the leadership of MPP (The Peasant Movement of Papay), Haiti's largest peasant organization, have "recaptured 10,000 acres (40.5 sq kilometers) of arable land, planted over 20 million trees and created innovative barriers to mudslides such as stonewall terracing" (Cross).¹⁹ Their success—though a fraction of what is needed or could be accomplished with more resources—offers a glimpse into what Beauville envisioned as a "resurrection," his dream of seeing the land once again "adorned in her trees, arrayed in her fields, coquette, under the sun, exultant and laughing under a shower of leaves" (226).

In *Fonds-des-Nègres*, the solution Chauvet proposes to the nation's acute agrarian impasse is one remarkably compatible with the Vodou practices and beliefs of the rural population she portrays. Built

18. Fritz-Gerald Louis, "Cooperatives: One Solution for Agriculture in Haiti," *YouThink!* (blogs, worldbank.org), June 7, 2012. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/youthink/cooperatives-one-solution-agriculture-haiti>. Accessed on 4 May 2014.

19. Lucienne Cross, "Farming Cooperatives in Haiti: A Chance to Advance," *Foodtank* (June 14, 2013). <http://foodtank.com/news/2013/06/farming-cooperatives-in-haiti-a-chance-to-advance>. Accessed on 3 April 2014.

on the practices of rural culture, yet open to ideas brought in from abroad, her proposed solution (however utopian its presentation) has proven to be the key to the conservation of the land and its fertility in small pockets of rural Haiti and an important element in any plan for sustainable "resurrection." The land, the spirits, and the people as one body—soil, trees, and roots—moving from mutilation to strength, from death to rebirth, as was presented to Beauville by his dead in his dream: is this, then, what Chauvet wanted to cry to the four winds? And if so, to whom? It is true that Chauvet's project was "to let her bourgeois, Haitian-born readers in on a few secrets" (Dayan, 82); it is also true that in *Fonds des Nègres* her audience was also invited to see the secrets of Vodou as integral to the recovery of the land's fertility and of Haitian prosperity. As she penetrates and reveals the dynamic logic of Vodou practices and their importance to rural culture in Haiti to her limited reading public, so she presents to her readers a plan for sustainable agrarian renewal based on Vodou's faith in the connection between humans, the *lwa*, and the land.

In the half century that has elapsed since the publication of *Fonds des Nègres*, Haiti's environment has continued to degrade at an alarming rate. The 8–9% forest coverage that so alarmed scientists in the late 1950s and that may have contributed to Chauvet's decision to address deforestation and soil erosion in her fiction, is now nearly 1% (some say it has fallen below 1%), with no recovery in sight. When asking those familiar with Haiti about the country's prospects for recovery during the writing of *Collapse*, Diamond reported them using the phrase "no hope" in their answer:

Its perennially corrupt government offers minimal public services; much or most of its population lives chronically or periodically without public electricity, water, sewage, medical care, and schooling. There is extreme polarization between the masses of poor people living in rural areas or in the slums of the capital of Port-au-Prince and a tiny population of rich elite in the cooler mountain suburb of Pétienville . . . Haiti's rate of population growth, and its rate of infection with AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria, are among the highest in the world. The question that all visitors to Haiti ask themselves is whether there is any hope for the country, and the usual answer is "no." (Diamond, 329–30)

Just as Chauvet's visit to Fonds-des-Nègres allowed her "to discover the agricultural problems that explain the peasantry's frightful mis-

ery" (1), so too does Haiti's unimaginable ecological catastrophe continue to speak eloquently to writers across the Caribbean region. The seriousness of its ecological crisis represents a warning to the mountainous region and the valleys below about the dangers of deforestation and soil erosion as we face the prospect of rising sea levels, climate change, and food shortages. What remains of hope and encouragement in Haiti are those sectors of sustainable agrarian growth achieved by agricultural cooperatives through reforestation and land recovery—precisely what the community of *Fonds des Nègres* hoped to achieve through political action and the help of the spirits.