

“Black” Radicalism in Haiti and the Disorderly Feminine: The Case of Marie Vieux Chauvet

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My mother repeated too frequently for me to forget: “I will never align myself with any group. I abhor all indoctrination and all dictatorship.”

—Erma Saint-Grégoire, daughter of Marie Vieux Chauvet

I propose in the pages that follow some reflections on Haitian radicalism—the nature of its influence and the dimensions of its failures—via a look at the life and the works of novelist Marie Vieux Chauvet (1916–73). Inasmuch as women’s narratives—both those they live and those they write—provide “an important site in which to study the personal, cultural, and political transformations that are the legacy both of the colonial encounter and of the postcolonial ‘arts of resistance’ it produces,”¹ Chauvet’s lived experience and her fictional writings provide significant insight into Haitian politics after the US occupation.² One of Haiti’s most significant and mystifying writers, Chauvet has long been placed at a remove from her well-canonized predecessors and contemporaries. Though increasingly a subject of interest for scholars of Haitian women’s literature and of Haitian feminism, Chauvet’s work is only very

1 Françoise Lionnet, *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 3.

2 Following the assassination of Haitian president Guillaume Sam in 1915, US president Woodrow Wilson dispatched a contingent of more than three hundred Marines to Haiti—ostensibly to restore peace and political stability. These US forces remained in Haiti for nineteen years, enforcing American governance and securing US economic interests in the republic. The last marines left Haiti in 1934.

rarely considered alongside that of more politically visible figures such as Jacques Roumain, Jacques-Stephen Alexis, and René Depestre. This exceptionalized status has much to do with the fact of her nonparticipation in the gender-bound political culture of her time. While her narratives offer terrifically scathing portraits of Haitian society, they identify no clear “good” and “bad” guys, and her biography suggests a real wariness with respect to activism and practical engagement. Here, I look at both Chauvet’s life and her work in order to tease out the ways this pointedly nonaligned woman writer fits into the picture of Haitian radicalism and its historiography. What, I ask, might be the significance of Chauvet’s refusal of political affiliation during a period in Haiti’s history when the call to take sides was being sounded with particular urgency? How do her choices as a writer and a citizen—marking in both arenas a disorderly feminine presence—encourage us to rethink the parameters of the radical and, more broadly, the potential hazards of politicized community in Haiti?

The Radical Republic of Haiti

The Haitian Republic is, at its very origins, by its very definition, a radical nation, arguably the originary psychosocial space of the black radical tradition in the Caribbean and beyond. There can be no question but that Haiti’s fundamental radicalism can be traced to the spectacular seizing of political sovereignty from France by the black (former) slaves of Saint-Domingue and their creation of an independent republic in 1804. And despite the unfortunate trajectory of Haiti’s postrevolutionary history, the island nation has long been a productive site-source of memory from which a discourse of Afro-radicalism first emerged and continues to resound in the region. “Place where Negritude stood up for the first time,” as Aimé Césaire so eloquently described the republic, Haiti has engaged consistently with the politically radical over the course of the past two centuries as it has struggled to protect an often tenuous independence.³ Radicalism in Haiti did not merely spark the flame and then pass along the torch of revolution: since 1804, Haitians have offered multiple, if not always effective, manifestations of their refusal to tolerate exploitation at the hands of a predatory state and corrupt ruling social class, colonial or “post-.” Taking various political forms over the course of the twentieth century and met in every instance with repressive violence and brutality, the commitment to radical social revolution in Haiti is part of the very fabric of the nation.

In his 2009 study of Haitian radicalism, *Red and Black in Haiti: Radicalism, Conflict, and Political Change, 1934–1957*, historian Matthew J. Smith paints a rich portrait of the transformations of the Haitian state and nation during the period following the US occupation and preceding the advent of François Duvalier’s suffocating authoritarian regime.⁴ Chronicling the

3 Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1983), 24 (translation mine).

4 In considering the notion of Haitian radicalism in this essay, I am thinking about the term as it implicates practical political advocacy toward the goal of effecting dramatic social change—what Smith more succinctly qualifies as “militant political activism.” Matthew J. Smith, *Red and Black in Haiti: Radicalism, Conflict, and Political Change, 1934–1957* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 9.

rise and fall of the multiple intersecting radical groups that dominated the political landscape in these years, Smith's thoroughly researched and richly documented book presents a long-overdue exploration of Haiti's enduring radicalism. It provides an elegant account of the ideological divisiveness, violence, and ultimate failure of radicalism in mid-twentieth-century Haiti, weaving together a complex narrative that evokes all the key players, the intrigue, and the betrayals—in short, the politics—that undid the best efforts of Haiti's postoccupation radical reformers. In telling this story, Smith has generated productive discussion among scholars of Haiti's past and present history. Journalist and activist Michael Deibert and historian Millery Polyné in particular have reflected insightfully on Smith's book and on Haitian radicalism in general.⁵ Each of these scholars heartily agrees that this neglected period in Haiti's history must be thoroughly accounted for in order to truly understand the political, social, and economic issues that have faced Haiti well into the present day. The proverbial door is, then, wide open for the tracing of additional threads to enrich this narrative, and it is in this spirit that Chauvet should be considered.

Specifically, Chauvet's absence from *Red and Black in Haiti* is worthy of attention. While Smith's book references such prominent writers of the period as Roumain, Alexis, and Depestre, no mention is made of Chauvet.⁶ The writers Smith recognizes as "committed" are deemed so by virtue of their political activity. Their literary contributions are celebrated, yes, but it is the tangible political engagement of these men of letters that qualifies them as radicals: Roumain's founding of the Haitian Communist Party; Depestre's positioning at the vanguard of the 1946 student strikes that resulted in the ousting of despotic president Elie Lescot, and Depestre's later militance in Cuba alongside Che Guevara; and Alexis's involvement in multiple syndicalist movements and, ultimately, his torture, imprisonment, and murder on the orders of François Duvalier in 1961. In each instance the writer's political "credibility," so to speak, is linked explicitly to his performance of a decisive radical politics—a readiness to fight quite literally and even to die in the practice of his political beliefs.

As Valerie Kaussen has convincingly argued, Chauvet's work very explicitly engages with concerns similar to those of her male counterparts—"concerns over US economic penetration, dictatorship, [and] class issues,"⁷ among others. Chauvet's fiction indeed perfectly illustrates many of Smith's claims regarding the nuances of political affiliation in midcentury Haiti, particularly as regards the ambivalent role played by color in relation to class. Unaffiliated, though, with any of the Marxist, syndicalist, or nationalist groups active during the period, and not writing for any of the radical journals in circulation, Chauvet remained—as

5 See, in *Small Axe*, no. 36 (November 2011), Michael Deibert's "Notes on *Red and Black in Haiti*" (155–63) and Millery Polyné's "To the 'Sons' of Dessalines and Pétion: Radicalism and the Idea of a 'New' Haiti" (164–72).

6 It should be noted that Smith describes Alexis as "a Roumain follower" and Depestre as "a fervent communist who idolized Jacques Roumain" (*Red and Black in Haiti*, 74).

7 In her masterful study, Valerie Kaussen makes a compelling case for Chauvet as a radical political being, fruitfully considering her work alongside that of Roumain and Alexis. Kaussen does not take up, however, the question of Chauvet's remove from collective activism and affirms—too categorically, I would argue—the delineation of a clear political project in Chauvet's work. See Valerie Kaussen, *Migrant Revolutions: Haitian Literature, Globalization, and US Imperialism* (New York: Lexington, 2008).

noted by her daughter Erma Saint-Grégoire, among others—firmly at a distance from organized politics.⁸ It is perfectly reasonable, then, that she would be omitted from this historical narrative of Haitian radicalism. Smith’s parameters are clear: he is interested in tracing the political activities of ideologically based groups competing for state control—groups that were overwhelmingly male in leadership and constituency. Given this, one might be tempted to suppose that it was the fact of Chauvet’s gender that kept her from performing her politics as a radical activist in the manner of certain male writers of the period. After all, gender justice is one of the primary preoccupations manifest in Chauvet’s fiction, and even the most progressive political platforms in Haiti—past and present—have tended to overlook the particular circumstances and needs of women and children.⁹ Yet the question of Chauvet’s absence arises here, too. She is glaringly absent from the roster of the Ligue féminine d’action sociale (Feminine League for Social Action)¹⁰ and never wrote for its literary-political journal *Voix des Femmes* (*The Voice of Women*). Formed in 1934 and active until its transformation—its crippling, more accurately—into a charitable organization under Duvalier, the Ligue campaigned fervently for access to higher education, children’s rights, social assistance, and women’s citizenship rights, successfully obtaining suffrage for women in 1957. Very much of a kind with the bourgeois, intellectual leftist groups active during the period, the Ligue was made up of primarily upper-class women who, entirely conscious of their own privilege, sought to create a site of community unconstrained by color or class.

A member of Port-au-Prince’s “mulatto” bourgeoisie and daughter of a senator and ambassador, the beautiful and accomplished Marie Vieux certainly fit the profile for the politicized elite feminine community the Ligue represented. She attended the Annexe de l’Ecole normale d’institutrices, an institution for the training of elementary school teachers, and received her teaching certificate in 1933 at the age of seventeen.¹¹ In the years following the completion of her studies, she married and had three children with her first husband, a successful doctor. She later divorced him and wed Pierre Chauvet, remaining married to him until her exile to New York in 1968. Throughout these more than three decades spent in Haiti, Chauvet dedicated herself fully to writing, short plays to start and then several novels, making her the most prolific and best-known woman writer in Haiti (then as now). She published her

8 Saint-Grégoire’s quote that I use as epigraph to this essay comes from Mohamed B. Taleb-Khyar, “An Interview with Erma Saint-Grégoire,” *Callaloo* 15, no. 2 (1992): 465.

9 As Haitian writer, activist, and scholar Myriam J. A. Chancy argues, “Nationalist agendas, focusing as they do on ‘the people,’ have, by and large, been gendered as male even as they espouse gender-neutral politics.” Myriam J. A. Chancy, *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 39. In the Haitian context in particular, nationalist discourse of communal solidarity has been historically androcentric, with women “embodying both the conflicts and the fragmentations experienced during the establishment of a national, masculinist identity that is willing to sacrifice women to its cause.” See Helen Lee-Keller, “Madness and the Mulâtre-Aristocrat: Haiti, Decolonization, and Women in Marie Chauvet’s *Amour*,” *Callaloo* 32, no. 4 (2009): 1296.

10 “The Ligue féminine d’action sociale was formed by women of the upper classes, who chose to abandon their usual approach of individualized patronage and to adopt instead a more communal approach that would attack Haiti’s greater social problems. . . . The Ligue took seriously its mandate to disseminate information on the realities of woman’s lot in Haiti and to perpetuate an overtly feminist politic.” Chancy, *Framing Silence*, 40. See also Claude Moïse, *Constitution et luttes de pouvoir en Haïti (1804–1987)*, vol. 2, *De l’occupation étrangère à la dictature macoute, 1915–1987* (Montreal: CIDIHCA, 1990), 319.

11 See Jasmine Claude-Narcisse, “Mémoire de femmes,” www.jasminenarcisse.com/memoire/11_litterature/02_marie.html.

first three novels in 1954, 1957, and 1960, and each takes up issues of class, race, sexuality, and gender with daring incisiveness. These early fiction works are replete with thinly veiled allegorical references to the corruption and brutality of the Haitian state. They set the stage for her explosive 1968 triptych *Amour, colère, folie* (*Love, Anger, Madness*), an unequivocal denunciation of totalitarian state violence and of its particular impact on women and womanhood in Haiti.¹²

Considering Chauvet's politically grounded attentiveness in her prose fiction to the neglect and victimization of women, it is quite curious that she claimed no affiliation with the Ligue, the most visible and recognizable channel for women's activism in her time. Historian Jasmine Claude-Narcisse remarks on Chauvet's refusal as a young woman fresh out of teacher's college to follow the traditional path expected of a woman of her social position and with her education—"the 'rite of passage,'" that is, that would have her performing charitable works for those less fortunate than she. "Much later," Claude-Narcisse explains, "the charming and lovely young woman she was to become would not count herself among the militants for women's causes, nor would she join any of the bitter political struggles that so dominated contemporary events."¹³ To this I would add that Chauvet, as evidenced by the fearless condemnations of social injustice and foregrounding of individual liberationist action that mark every one of her novels, was arguably more radically minded than the reformist Ligue. That is to say, the world Chauvet presents in her fiction is too far-gone to be legislated into decency.

Claude-Narcisse describes Chauvet's rejection of feminist political community as the expression of her "phobia regarding any form of association, which, to her mind, could only lead to an execrable enlistment."¹⁴ This resolute nonalliance, I would argue, was born not of an irrational or disproportionate fear, as Claude-Narcisse's use of the term *phobia* might suggest, but of a reasoned perspective on the state of community—at least of the communities on offer—in postoccupation Haiti. I am suggesting, then, that Chauvet's reticence to join any organized struggle was, at least in part, a function of her profound wariness with respect to community in Haiti—her fundamental concern that "the desire to form collective identity sometimes turns into an enforcement of homogeneity."¹⁵ Inasmuch as political activism depends on some measure of politically motivated group identification, organization, and advocacy, and inasmuch as the radical implies participation in an association of likeminded dissenting individuals acting in community to overcome perceived social injustice, Chauvet's isolation is meaningful. That she is marginal with respect to the narrative of Haitian radicalism and

12 In addition to her own literary production, Chauvet served as "special friend" and hostess to the *Haïti littéraire* (Literary Haiti) group, a cohort of politically committed, celebrated male poets whom she welcomed regularly to her home in the wealthy suburbs of Port-au-Prince. Nearly all of those associated with the group were forced into exile during the 1960s. See Anthony Phelps, "Haïti littéraire: Rupture et nouvel espace poétique; Exemple fraternité," www.lehman.cuny.edu/ile.en.ile/paroles/phelps_haiti-litteraire.html. See also Clarisse Zimra, "Haitian Literature after Duvalier: An Interview with Yanick Lahens," *Callaloo* 16, no. 1 (1993): 80–81.

13 Jasmine Claude-Narcisse, "Mémoire de femmes" (translation mine).

14 *Ibid.*

15 Lee-Keller, "Madness and the Mulâtre-Aristocrate," 1296.

without a definitive presence in Haitian feminist circles necessarily raises questions about the possibilities for radical political engagement available to women in Haiti.

Radical Chauvet?

Chauvet’s writing life in Haiti was bookended by periods of particularly intense social tension between color- and class-based communities and marked by heightened militarism in the political arena. Beginning with Dumarsais Estimé’s election to the presidency in 1946, the year of the publication of her first play, and culminating with François Duvalier’s election in 1957, radicalism in Haiti, whether elite and Marxist or popular and nationalist, was being derailed consistently by anxieties around ontological and ideological “blackness.” Not since Jean-Jacques Dessalines’s 1804 declaration of Haiti’s status as a black nation had racial identity been so purposefully conflated with political identity. A century and a half later, polarizing constructions of racial community were having devastating material consequences for Haitians of all colors. Time and again, political contenders made appeals to rural and urban underclass populations based on the vilification of mulattos as responsible for the perpetual subjugation of blacks. The reality was, of course, though, that all of these would-be heads of state, whether black or mulatto, always and immediately consolidated political power in the hands of an elite at the expense of the majority population, giving the lie to any strictly color-based class distinction.¹⁶ Chauvet would have seen clearly and felt keenly, then, the corruptibility and dead-endedness of organized (radical) politics.¹⁷ She would have borne witness to the manipulation of the Haitian people by unscrupulous and charismatic political power-mongers, and observed firsthand how so many of Haiti’s popular leaders—swept into power on waves of populist organizing—ultimately relied on racial hierarchization and a divisive community to push agendas that very quickly forgot about (if indeed they had ever been genuinely concerned with) the needs of the nation’s most disenfranchised.

These phenomena took on mythical proportions during the regime of François “Papa Doc” Duvalier (1957–71). Perverting the Afro-centric, propeasantry cultural agenda of indigenist ideology, Duvalier crafted a political platform that combined racial mystification and

16 As Carole Charles points out,

In Haiti, less than 10 percent of the population received more than 46 percent of the national income. Wealth and power have been concentrated in the hands of a small economic elite of Creole whites, mulattoes, and Blacks supported by a violent military institution. These groups rule through an alliance with a small urban middle class residing mostly in the capital. . . . To that extreme class and power inequality are added cleavages of color, language, religion, and culture, separating the rural poor, illiterate mass of peasants from the urban, educated, and affluent elites. (“Gender and Politics in Contemporary Haiti: The Duvalierist State, Transnationalism, and the Emergence of a New Feminism [1980–1990],” *Feminist Studies* 21, no. 2 [1995]: 143)

According to Helen Lee-Keller, “From the administration of Jean-Jacques Dessalines (1804–6) forward, successive regimes rigidly maintained a system of social castes and hierarchies. With despotic leadership exacerbating and manipulating racial politics and social inequalities, the conflict between the elite *mulâtres-aristocrates* and the poor became increasingly more entrenched” (“Madness and the Mulâtre-Aristocrate,” 1294).

17 “Throughout her writings,” notes Colin Dayan, “Chauvet exposes how the revolution, proclaimed in the name of the people, did not change the broad outlines of the social system. Mulattoes and blacks merely took over the top ranks of society.” Joan [Colin] Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 89.

authoritarianism into a discourse of *noirisme* (literally, “blackism”).¹⁸ This radical doctrine of essentialist black power valorized Haiti’s African roots exclusively and posited absolute racial purity as the foundation for national identity. Duvalier went so far even as to declare Haiti’s mulatto citizens enemies of the state, thereby concretizing the racial and class enmity that had marked the republic since its beginnings.¹⁹ Manipulating and exacerbating the striking social schism between the tiny population of primarily light-skinned “haves” and the masses of dark-skinned “have-nots,” Duvalier’s *noirisme* emerged as a pointed response to the historical injustice perpetrated by Haiti’s minority urban mulatto elite on the rural and proletarian blacks that make up the bulk of the population. With the acute suffering and disempowerment of the poor rendered all the more stark by the bourgeoisie’s enjoyment of seemingly unlimited privilege, the populist Duvalier had little difficulty collapsing class and race into one another and thus rallying support for his radical, ostensibly problack politics.²⁰

The racism and corruption that informed the Duvalierist state very much mirrored the discriminatory practices that had long been in place in Haiti, and Duvalier’s color-based fracturing of the nation quite quickly revealed itself as yet another iteration of the scenario whereby wealthy insiders would exploit the largely impoverished *moun andeyò*.²¹ Moreover, Duvalier’s regime was notable for its all-encompassing brutality—its expansion of the parameters of victimization. Targeting religious groups and sports clubs, schoolteachers and priests, Duvalier’s personal police force, the Tontons Macoutes, operated without logic or sanction: “What the Duvalier regime created and promoted in its culture of terror was an arbitrariness that prevented any social group from feeling that it would be excluded.”²² Absolutely no one was exempt from persecution by the state, including women and children, and rape was commonly employed against the wives and daughters of Duvalier’s political “enemies.”²³ Duvalier implicated women in national politics in accordance with a very specific model of femininity, constructing women “not only as mothers of the nation but also as important political actors.”²⁴

18 Haitian writer Yanick Lahens posits that “in Haiti, politics defeated Indigenism, since Duvalier himself claimed to derive his own ideology from Indigenism.” Quoted in Zimra, “Haitian Literature after Duvalier,” 81.

19 See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “Color, Culture, and Politics in Haiti,” in Steven Gregory and Roger Sanjek, eds., *Race* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996): 146–74.

20 As David Nicholls has rightly noted, “Duvalier himself claimed to be a product of the masses, whose policy was designed to eliminate economic and social inequalities. His was a revolutionary government, and ‘revolutions must be total, radical, inflexible.’” David Nicholls, *From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Color, and National Independence in Haiti* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 236.

21 “People on the outside.”

22 Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw, “My Love Is Like a Rose: Terror, Territoire, and the Poetics of Marie Chauvet,” *Small Axe*, no. 18 (September 2005): 43. In 1959, having disbanded the army, assassinated all high-ranking officials, and shut down all law enforcement agencies in Haiti, Duvalier created the *Milice de volontaires de la sécurité nationale* (MVS/N; Militia of National Security Volunteers), a private paramilitary organization commonly known as the Tontons Macoutes. Loyal only and entirely to Duvalier, the Macoutes were granted automatic pardon for any crime they committed and so had full legal carte blanche to extort, rape, torture, murder, and otherwise terrorize Haiti’s citizens.

23 Carolle Charles affirms, “The gender of those in the opposition did not prevent repression or torture. As many women refugees and political exiles testify, women were held accountable not only for their own actions but also for those of their relatives” (“Gender and Politics in Contemporary Haiti,” 140).

24 Georges Eugène Fouron and Nina Glick Schiller, *Georges Woke Up Laughing: Long Distance Nationalism and the Search for Home* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 147. Duvalier appointed, for example, a woman as warden of the infamous detention center and torture facility Fort Dimanche and, later, to the position of national commander of the Macoutes. He also created an all-female unit of the Macoutes named after the legendary rebellious slave woman Marie-Jeanne.

In every way, “the Duvalierist state focused on a ‘patriotic woman’ whose allegiance was first to Duvalier’s nation and state. Any woman who did not adhere to these policies became an enemy, subject to political repression.”²⁵ This coercive “state feminism” perverted any pre-existing women’s movements to its aims, such that women’s activist organizations, like the Ligue, were entirely coopted to the program of national security.²⁶ It should be noted, however, that “while Duvalier reenvisioned women as political agents, the nationalism he promoted did not challenge the upper-class ideal that the respectability of a family is judged by the behavior of its women.”²⁷

As a bourgeoisie, a mulatto, a woman, and a writer, Chauvet found herself at the eye of the sociopolitical storm that was Duvalier’s Haiti. Given the extent to which state violence permeated every level of society, those of the nation’s writers and artists who chose—or dared—to remain and create in Haiti under Duvalier were harassed, censored, and even killed. This reality was made plain for Chauvet in 1968 on the publication of the virulently anti-Duvalier *Amour, colère, folie*. Chauvet submitted the manuscript, which she’d written over a period of six months, to French feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir, and the latter’s endorsement led to the novel’s acceptance by prestigious Parisian publishing house Les Editions Gallimard. While Chauvet’s previous works had won regional prizes, and while she already enjoyed a certain celebrity in Haitian literary circles, Gallimard’s publication of her trilogy would have all but guaranteed her an immediate international celebrity and definitively inserted her into extra-insular literary canons. Would have. Instead, Chauvet’s success was very much undermined by the political realities of the time: all too aware of the pervasive repression and violence directed at Haiti’s putatively former mulatto elite by Duvalier, Chauvet’s husband enjoined his wife to block the trilogy’s distribution and prohibit any further printings.²⁸ Upon its publication, *Amour, colère, folie* was effectively stifled—shut away from the world for the next nearly half a century.²⁹ In the wake of this demoralizing experience, and still faced with the very real danger

25 Charles, “Gender and Politics in Contemporary Haiti,” 139.

26 “During the François Duvalier era, the women’s movement went undercover. Most of its outspoken leaders went into exile and the remaining members turned the movement into a kind of charitable organization in order to avoid persecution by the government.” Marie-José N’Zengou-Tayo, “‘Famn se poto mitan’: Haitian Woman, the Pillar of Society,” *Feminist Review*, no. 59 (Summer 1998): 131. Ironically, the very feminist organizing that had culminated in Duvalier’s ascension to the presidency (women were first granted suffrage for the 1957 presidential elections) was suppressed in anything but its explicitly nationalist dimensions under his government.

27 Fournon and Schiller, *Georges Woke Up Laughing*, 147.

28 Yanick Lahens laments this deferral of Chauvet’s prominence:

For the first time, with Chauvet, we realized at last that there *were* women who wrote, and that they wrote important stuff. But this realization came late. [*Amour, colère, folie*] was published in 1968, but it was not until years later that the journal *Mot pour mot* brought out a special issue on Chauvet. . . . Undisputably, Marie Chauvet opened the way for the modern novel in Haiti, even if, unfortunately, she has remained completely misunderstood in her own country. (quoted in Zimra, “Haitian Literature after Duvalier,” 77)

Chauvet’s husband’s fears were by no means unwarranted. One of Chauvet’s nephews had been arrested and “disappeared” in 1968, and two others had been murdered.

29 The family subsequently destroyed all copies of the trilogy and, for several decades, refused to allow its translation or republication. While a scarce number of clandestine copies remained in circulation, the novel was officially rereleased for the first time only in 2005. See Rose-Myriam Réjouis, translator’s preface to *Love, Anger, Madness: A Haitian Trilogy*, by Marie Chauvet (New York: Modern Library, 2009), xix–xx; and Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, 119–20, 302n76. Jasmine Claude-Narcisse, among others, has traced the broad strokes of the trilogy’s publishing history.

of reprisals from the Duvalierian state, Chauvet divorced her husband and went into exile in New York City, where she remained until her death in 1973.

Chauvet's exile—both from the geographical space of Haiti in the last years of her life and, for close to four decades, from the discursive space of the Haitian literary canon—should be understood as a consequence of her disorderly being and behavior with respect not only to Duvalier's monstrous national "family" but also to the bourgeois community to which her actual family belonged. Her unsparing accounts of color anxiety and racism, of sexual perversion and abuse are as condemning of Duvalier's government as they are of the alienation, greed, and cynicism of the Haitian bourgeoisie. As Clarisse Zimra has plainly asserted,

Had [Chauvet] not been a woman who dared write out of our deepest desires, that is, in an "unladylike" manner, one might wonder whether Chauvet's relatives would have dared suppress her last book with such single-minded determination. They behaved not only as embarrassed blood-kin but, as well, as members of a complacent class under attack in her novels. One might also wonder whether her contemporaries would have dismissed her as a minor writer, as did Pradel Pompilus, for example.³⁰

In effect, one detects in contemporary responses to Chauvet's novels an effort to deny their political value and to treat them as sordid, if titillating, exaggerations—entertaining but of dubious taste. Her narratives fly in the face of what J. Michael Dash dubs the general "prudishness" of literature in the francophone Americas.³¹ As Kaussen has argued, the "suppression of the trilogy exemplifies the institutionalized marginalization and silencing faced by women in a male-dominated literary tradition."³² To write for Chauvet was, then, to write (in her comfortable house, in her fancy suburb) at once in opposition to a brutalizing, authoritarian government and to models of elite female subjecthood in Haiti. This self-positioning outside of political community makes Chauvet a real challenge to situate within Haiti's radical tradition, though her literary works propose a radical critique of the sides-taking and politicking that overdetermined the atmosphere in which she lived and wrote.

Radical Chauvet

To get a sense of Chauvet's radical intervention into discourses of social and political community, it suffices to consider the first and last novels she wrote while living in Haiti, *Fille d'Haïti* (*Daughter of Haiti*) and *Amour* (part 1 of the abovementioned triptych).³³ In each of these works, Chauvet presents an isolated female character whose political ambivalence implicitly critiques the coercive communities that seek to determine her existence. What is significant about her configuration of these characters is that the critique they issue does not

30 Zimra, "Haitian Literature after Duvalier," 77.

31 J. Michael Dash, "Vital Signs in the Body Politic: Eroticism and Exile in Maryse Condé and Dany Laferrière," *Romanic Review* 94, nos. 3–4 (2003): 311. Dash further evokes the "repressed libido" (309) of writers such as Jacques Roumain, for whom the messiness of the erotic could only be a distraction from the revolutionary political imperative.

32 Kaussen, *Migrant Revolutions*, 50.

33 Marie Vieux Chauvet, *Fille d'Haïti* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1954).

come from a place of higher morality or alternative community. Rather than the auxiliaries, muses, martyrs, and mothers we find in the explicitly engaged fiction of Roumain, Alexis, and (the early) Depestre, Chauvet’s heroines are off-puttingly self-centered—petty, unkind, and only variably invested (if at all) in making the world a better place. Not only do these female characters trouble the gendered order promulgated by Marxist, elite radicals and by *noiriste*, working-class black nationalists alike, they also will not be feminists. Refusing any straightforward sisterly solidarity, Chauvet’s women “are shown to be haughty, greedy, and feeble. They participate in and perpetuate social and economic divisions.”³⁴ They make no sustained attempt to nourish gendered allegiance. They proclaim no sisterhood. The women of Chauvet’s fiction constantly betray other women—they betray family members, they betray across and within color and class lines, they betray for men—and the underclass woman is represented as no more noble, no less ignoble than the bourgeoisie, the black peasant woman no more or less victimized or culpable than the mulatto urbanite. These women are at each other’s throats. Largely confined to a domestic space encroached on by political realities over which they have little, if any, direct influence, they primarily look out for themselves. The kind of feminine community and cross-class solidarity put forward by the Ligue does not find sustained expression in Chauvet’s fiction.

Fille d’Haïti introduces the template for the conflicted heroines that figure in all of Chauvet’s subsequent works. The events of the narrative mirror those of the period preceding the overthrow in 1946 of elite mulatto dictator Elie Lescot by a tenuously and temporarily linked cabal of black empowerment *noiristes*, populist leaders, Marxists, and bourgeois students, and the subsequent installation of black nationalist president Dumarsais Estimé, Haiti’s leader until 1950. The novel looks back to the final months of Lescot’s repressive regime and the ensuing rise of Estimé’s radical black state in its place.³⁵ Set against the backdrop of this moment of potential in Haiti’s history and its derailment by the polarizing issue of color prejudice,³⁶ *Fille d’Haïti* also very much anticipates François Duvalier’s ascension to power as the self-proclaimed legitimate heir to Estimé.³⁷

The novel is the first-person account of the life of Lotus Delgrave, orphaned daughter of a wealthy prostitute and a white naval officer. The beautiful and headstrong Lotus exists entirely

34 Lee-Keller, “Madness and the Mulâtre-Aristocrate,” 1308.

35 See Smith, *Red and Black in Haiti*; Michael Deibert, *Notes from the Last Testament: The Struggle for Haiti* (New York: Seven Stories, 2005); and Polyné, “To the ‘Sons’ of Dessalines and Pétion.” Both Smith and Deibert point out that Estimé was “not exactly a *noirist* himself” but followed Lescot’s colorist mulatto government and “drew his political base from the country’s disenfranchised black majority” (Deibert, 160); his policies also “deepened black radicalism” (Polyné, 170) for subsequent *noiristes*, including Duvalier.

36 Smith characterizes the postoccupation era as “Haiti’s greatest moment of political promise” (*Red and Black in Haiti*, 2).

37 A popular rural doctor prior to his implication in national politics, Duvalier was appointed director general of the National Public Health Service by Estimé and then went on to serve as minister of both health and labor in Estimé’s government. “[Duvalier] inherited a vision of Haitian society that . . . presupposed continuity in change, the desire to complete an unfinished ‘revolution’” (Trouillot, “Culture, Color, and Politics in Haiti,” 169). As Deibert wryly remarks, Estimé “had the questionable claim to fame of bringing to the center of political power for the first time the particular political skills of François Duvalier” (*Notes from the Last Testament*, 161). Further emphasizing the Estimé-to-Duvalier continuum, Deibert asserts: “We see under Estimé, as under Duvalier and Aristide years later, the emergence and gradual expansion of a nouveau riche black political and economic class that benefited from what had often been the prerogative of the traditional elite: political nepotism and corruption” (ibid.). It is worthy of note that Duvalier had Estimé’s remains reinterred in Port-au-Prince in 1968.

on the margins of society, alone except for the company of a black maid who despises her. The gated mansion in which she lives, fruit of her mother's labors, is set physically apart from the dilapidated shanties right outside its borders, and the young woman's relatively comfortable existence within its walls contrasts starkly with the desperate poverty of her neighbors. As a mulatto woman of some means, Lotus meets certain of the phenotypic and economic criteria required for belonging in the local bourgeoisie. But, of course, her less-than-respectable lineage precludes acceptance by this elite community. As such, Lotus is isolated from both the mulatto and the black—the materially advantaged and disadvantaged—communities in Port-au-Prince. She is an uncomfortable misfit with regard to the normative identity categories that determine social existence in mid-twentieth-century Haiti, and her every social exchange foregrounds this issue of her nonbelonging.

At the outset of novel, Lotus is depicted as unabashedly apathetic and frivolous, more or less indifferent to the social injustice so visible all around her. Though on multiple occasions she takes note of and is even moved by the misery of the poor, she nevertheless explicitly refuses to implicate herself beyond the odd spontaneous act of charity. As the narrative unfolds, however, Lotus exhibits what appears to be a “gathering commitment to social revolution”—to become an increasingly “useful comrade and advocate of the masses.”³⁸ In effect, by the midpoint of the novel, Lotus has begun to invest herself politically, fully awakened to the corruption of the elite and ready to reflect more seriously on the systems of exploitation by which the powerful maintain their privilege. It must be noted, however, that this political enlightenment has everything to do with her passion for Georges Caprou, an educated, socialist hero crafted on the model of the student revolutionaries of 1946. Because Georges will not have anything to do with her unless she embraces his revolutionary political commitment, Lotus begins harboring antigovernment activists in her home. Through these efforts to earn Georges's love she succeeds in achieving some measure of political “legitimacy” and eventually ends up targeted by violent noiriste officials. She is shot, recovers, and is later raped as a result of these revolutionary activities, thereby proving her devotion to the cause of social justice and her willingness to put herself at risk physically for the benefit of the suffering masses. At the novel's conclusion, the mulatto Georges dies a hero, having martyred himself to the cause of racial harmony by saving a poor black girl from being hit by a car. Lotus transforms her home into a school for women and children, thus passing on Georges's dream of raceless, classless community to the next generation.

This outcome would appear in many respects to support a definitive understanding of *Fille d'Haïti* as the straightforward account of one woman's moral and political conversion. Yet there is something of the parodic to Lotus's trajectory. Not only does the conclusion of the narrative caricaturize to an extent Roumain's 1944 *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (*Masters of the Dew*), but a close reading shows that Lotus's every effort for “the cause” is fueled in no small

38 Kaussen, *Migrant Revolutions*, 149.

part by her pursuit of the ego-nourishing pleasure that comes from making herself worthy of admiration by those around her. Be it her successful seduction of Georges (“This new charm I was giving off held him captive despite himself. I proudly counted this victory as the beginning of my reward for the new life I was leading”), her vain attempts to overcome the hostility of her maid (“I love to conquer. When I want to please, when I’ve sworn to myself to make someone’s eyes shine, to bring out a smile, to make a heart beat, nothing can dissuade me”), or her efforts to impress her brothers in arms (“What I saw in their eyes filled me with pride: I had become for them a comrade in the struggle—she who, in the most critical moment, was summoned to take on the active role”), Lotus’s radical activism has a distinctly narcissistic bent.³⁹ In so highlighting the measure of self-regard that underlies Lotus’s connections to political community, Chauvet very subtly unsettles the fantasy of selflessness that so often and so unhelpfully subtends the narratives of (nationalist) revolutionary actors in Haiti. Moreover, in the many conversations in which Georges declaims his radical beliefs to Lotus and others, it becomes clear that Georges’s seemingly unselfish devotion to helping “the people” is bound up in a conception of himself as uncompromising arbiter of political righteousness, a position of which we can be certain Chauvet is deeply apprehensive. Indeed, when Georges makes clear to Lotus that he expects “exclusivity in everything he possesses,”⁴⁰ including her, or when he implicates her in his dangerous revolutionary activities without even asking her consent, we are afforded glimpses of the egoism that underlies his activism as well.

Like Lotus, Claire Clamont, the antiheroine of *Amour*, is at once embedded in and marginal to the social and political communities vying for power in postoccupation Haiti. Eldest daughter of a formerly wealthy but now down-and-out provincial mulatto family, the loveless, unmarried Claire is a self-described “old maid.” A virgin at thirty-nine, she lives with her sisters Felicia and Annette and the former’s French husband Jean Luze in the house left to the sisters by their deceased parents. Claire is very much the “black sheep” of the Clamont family—much darker skinned than her sisters, both of whom might easily pass for white—and she bears this stigma ungracefully. She reveals herself to be a jealous and petty woman, consumed by the injustices of which she feels—more and less rightly—she has long been a victim.

Claire’s outsider status is first economic and then epidermic, to borrow Frantz Fanon’s helpful sociodiagnostic formula, and she is profoundly aware of her unworthiness as a social commodity.⁴¹ As sociologist Carole Charles has argued, women of the Haitian elite in particular “owe their position to marital and familial networks, and a high value is placed on mulatto women as objects in marital exchanges.”⁴² Chauvet’s Claire has absolutely internalized this ethos by which value is assigned to women’s bodies in Haiti and, as such, she

39 Chauvet, *Fille d’Haïti*, 119, 109, 211.

40 *Ibid.*, 121.

41 Fanon argues in the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks* that the “inferiority complex” of black peoples is a result of persistent economic disenfranchisement and oppression that only subsequently develops into a negative association with skin color. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (1952; repr., New York: Grove, 2008), 2.

42 Charles, “Gender and Politics in Contemporary Haiti,” 144.

recognizes—and suffers—her own lesser worth with respect to the criteria outlined by her community. Writing, for example, of her nonbelonging with respect to her own family, she bitterly explains, “I am the surprise that mixed-blood had in store for my parents, no doubt an unpleasant surprise in their day, given how they made me suffer.”⁴³ The reader learns of her father’s physical and psychological abusiveness, for which Claire alone of her sisters was a target, and of her mother’s ill-disguised shame at having a brown-skinned daughter, and so is meant to understand that the bitter and sexually repressed woman Claire has become is a product of the bigotry of the bourgeois mulatto community.

In the face of her damaging marginalization, however, Claire at no point gestures toward a feminist interrogation of the constraints of bourgeois domesticity in Haiti; rather, she angrily laments her own exclusion from this social order. Resigned to the country’s dystopic socio-political reality, the one instance in which she considers taking political action has only to do with keeping her brother-in-law—whom she is determined to seduce—from leaving Haiti: “He’s not happy. How can we possibly hold on to him? If he leaves, what will become of me? How do we change things here? For the first time in my life, I shall redouble my efforts toward the common cause. I will transform this place into the piece of paradise he has yearned for.”⁴⁴ Though she writes of a “common cause,” it is apparent that her only objective is personal. Decidedly more cynical than Lotus, Claire condemns her society without ever going so far as to envision or even to clearly desire profound social change. She privileges her own preoccupations over the political injustice at work in the world outside her bedroom because she judges that world unworthy of the moral effort it would take to behave or to be otherwise. “In my awful loneliness,” she explains, “I have discovered that society isn’t worth shit. Society hides behind a barricade of idiocy. Society is a killer of liberty.”⁴⁵ These are not the words of a radical (or a) reformist.

The personal tensions that determine the parameters of Claire’s domestic existence are paralleled by the overtly political crisis that has befallen her town. The novel is set against the backdrop of a communal power inversion whereby the formerly dominant mulatto elite has been brought low by a rising noiriste state power.⁴⁶ Specifically, a government official named Caledu has been installed in Claire’s town and given carte blanche to subdue the mulatto population using whatever means he sees fit. Thus mandated, Caledu creates a reign of absolute terror in the town, aggressively exacting revenge for the historical suffering endured by those of his color and class. His principal targets are the near-white women of the bourgeoisie. He subjects these women to brutal beatings, gang rapes, and other forms of torture in service to a politics of virility constructed largely on the humiliation and subjugation of “enemy” womanhood. Claire’s reaction to these public attacks on her should-be social

43 Chauvet, *Love, Anger, Madness*, 6.

44 *Ibid.*, 47.

45 *Ibid.*, 25.

46 Though the trilogy was published in 1968, the action of the narrative is explicitly situated in the year 1939 and so unfolds within the same historical moment as that of *Fille d’Haïti*.

group is quite curious. Though Caledu terrorizes her family’s acquaintances and makes plain his intention to upset the social order that has permitted the privileges of her elite existence, Claire harbors a perverse attraction to him. She cannot help but see in this dark man and the dark masses he represents a reflection of her own anguish as a darker-skinned member of her family and social class. That she stabs him to death—almost incidentally—in the final scene of the narrative is more an impetuous act of symbolic self-annihilation than any real gesture toward political insurgency. As Mildred Mortimer has argued,

[Chauvet] adopts a critical stance that positions her outside of the sociopolitical realm of Haitian women of her social rank and class. At the same time, however, she disappoints the constituency of readers seeking a politically radical text. Although Chauvet’s protagonist . . . ultimately commits an act that carries important political implications . . . her action is cloaked in ambiguity.⁴⁷

Claire’s final act, while radical, is committed in the absence of any clear or coherent political conviction and brings her no closer to being in community.

“Postoccupation radicalism . . . never possessed the tools to truly design an architecture of liberation,” writes Polyné, and both Chauvet’s first and last novels written in her homeland acknowledge and despair of this reality.⁴⁸ Both works affirm that class and color cannot be so neatly lined up in Haitian politics; both obliquely assert the inevitable dysfunction of a radically black republic that has never been clear as to what *black* actually means. Personal, intimate narratives of marginalized feminine existence during the most radical political moment in Haiti’s history, Chauvet’s novels feature women who dislocate and disorder the borders of subalternity. Mulatto, but not unequivocally privileged, and without the protection of husbands or fathers, Lotus and Claire are economically insecure and physically vulnerable. Though necessarily implicated in the radical changes taking place all around them, they are neither interested nor engaged in total social upheaval or revolution, at least not in any reliable fashion. And although threatened, abused, and even tortured, they are ambiguous victims at best. By no means innocent casualties of the battles being waged in their communities, they are implicated and even complicit—and so they prove very difficult to incorporate into any liberatory rhetoric of “collective . . . revolutionary movement.”⁴⁹

In effect, Chauvet’s fiction does not much resemble the literary radicalism put forward in so many of the social realist narratives of canonical male writers such as Roumain, Alexis, and

47 Mildred Mortimer, *Writing from the Hearth: Public, Domestic, and Imaginative Space in Francophone Women’s Fiction of Africa and the Caribbean* (New York: Lexington Books, 2007), 132. Or, as Colin Dayan asserts, Chauvet, unlike her two male precursors [Jacques Roumain and Jacques Stephen-Alexis], has not been popular. She writes as a bourgeoisie, locating herself emphatically outside the majority of women in her culture; and unread by those of her own class, she is scorned by those whose more “political” agenda demands that they speak for and with the people. . . . Therefore, in attempting to contextualize Chauvet’s work, we cannot turn to the revolutionary redefinition of identity and culture that is so much a part of the life and work of Roumain and Alexis. (*Haiti, History, and the Gods*, 80)

48 Polyné, “To the ‘Sons’ of Dessalines and Pétion,” 171.

49 Kaussen, *Migrant Revolutions*, 149.

Depestre. Her narratives are crafted independently of “the theoretical scaffolding, the too well oiled machinery that props the Indigenist novel or the committed novel.”⁵⁰ We will not find in her works the “happy ending” whereby, even in tragedy, a peasant or proletarian male hero awakens and mobilizes a politically radicalized and enlightened community. As Colin Dayan has affirmed, “Chauvet questions the apparently endless making of heroes in Haitian history: the cult of the founder, the father, and the protector who betrays or is betrayed. She proves how damaging the cult of the hero is, how the image of a savior plays into the totalitarian designs of the dictator.”⁵¹ Chauvet asks her reader to think about radicalism’s reliance on individualist heroism. Having observed a series of self-serving revolutionary “groups competing for state control,”⁵² during the time she lived and wrote in Haiti, Chauvet presents a vision of community that can only be described as cynical. In a context in which coercive communities undergirded by ideologies of opposition and exclusion make alignment a matter of life and death, Chauvet’s narratives remind us that revolutionary struggles for political dominance in mid-twentieth-century Haiti did not in fact alter the structural injustices by which power is seized and maintained in the radical republic. And while Chauvet’s women may not be “black” or “radical” in any “traditional” way, might not their—and her—resistance to explicit political identification illuminate the limitations of radicalism within the historically gendered space of political engagement?

50 Zimra, “Haitian Literature after Duvalier,” 86.

51 Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, 89.

52 Smith, *Red and Black in Haiti*, 3.