Reign of Terror Revisited:  
Volcanic Representations in Marie Vieux-Chauvet’s *La Danse Sur Le Volcan* (1957)

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The volcano is both the birthing force of the islands of the Antilles as well as a destructive one that has wreaked havoc on its landscape across centuries. The same force that brought about the very existence of the islands, that sculpted its landscape as well as its economy, has also eradicated a great part of the area’s history through its violent and unpredictable eruptions. The volcano’s dual nature has drawn the attention of Caribbean authors for its symbolic representation of revolt and revolution, but also as a representation of Antillean identity itself.

On the surface, Marie Vieux-Chauvet’s *Dance on the Volcano* is a story of a young mulatto girl who, despite her social status, is able to enter the white community in a colonial society. This acceptance is mainly due to her talent at singing opera and because of her strong-willed determination. This novel tells a story of love and loss, of hatred and fear, of politics and the longing for peace. A closer look, however, reveals the vast importance of the time period chosen by Chauvet for the setting of her novel. *Dance on the Volcano* is, apart from Bergeaud’s *Stella*, the only piece of Haitian literature set in Haiti’s pre-Independence era (Shelton p. 773). *Dance on the Volcano*, while greatly overlooked by literary critics due to its traditional structure, merits attention for its treatment of metaphors in representing the Haitian slave revolts of the late 18th century, occurring at the same time as the French Revolution of 1789. Chauvet’s choice in setting her novel during the Haitian slave revolts allows her to draw on themes common to
revolutions as a whole such as mob violence and injustice, while at the same time allowing her to draw a parallel between the Haitian revolts and the French Revolution’s Reign of Terror. Through this parallel, Chauvet creates a correspondence between the image of the spectacle, which played a major role in the French Revolution, and the image of the volcano, the pure Caribbean icon of revolution. In doing this, Chauvet creates a textual universality by painting for the reader an authentically local depiction of history and identity as understood by the Haitian people, while at the same time making the experience transparent to Europeans by paralleling the two similar historical events.

Many authors from the Antilles, among which are Aimé Césaire, Daniel Maximin, and Patrick Chamoiseau, have utilized the image of the volcano in literature as an emblem of the history and the identity of the islands. These authors, however, present the image of the volcano in a much different light than does Chauvet in Dance on the Volcano. Césaire sees the volcano as a positive symbol of revolt and revolution, attributing an altogether optimistic view to the image. Maximin presents the image as an unmaterialized revolution in his novel Soufrières and as a destroyer of history in L’Isolé Soleil. Chamoiseau portrays the volcano in the same light as most women writers of the Caribbean—as an arbitrary and indiscriminate killer. Pascale de Souza has pointed out that women writers tend to turn toward the landscapes’ mornes, or hillsides, which are often deceased or inactive volcanoes, and which traditionally served as havens for escaped slaves. These writers tend to represent the mornes as symbols of life, sources of solace, and protectors of mankind instead of invoking the more violent imagery of an active volcano. Another topographic area, the plains, play a role in Caribbean representations of identity through literature. According to de Souza, the plains generally
embodie a feminine representation of fertility and submission in Caribbean literature (de Souza p. 149, 155-156).

While mornes and plains do play a definitive role in Chauvet’s novel, they do not serve the same purpose as they do in the works of other writers of the Caribbean. There are three main topographic areas where the narration of Chauvet’s novel plays out its plot: the plains, the mornes, and the city. The plains of Dance on the Volcano are more associated with the repressive power of the colonizer, with the métissage, or combining of statuses and races found therein, and with the struggle for the two groups to coexist. The heroine of Chauvet’s novel, Minette, falls in love with a free black man, or affranchi, and slave holder named Jean Lapointe. He beats them mercilessly because he is afraid to see himself in them and to see them as his equal. The struggle of coexistence between slave and free-man is somewhat resolved in the novel, giving an optimistic perspective to the relationship, since Jean Lapointe eventually undergoes a change of heart under Minette’s influence (Chauvet). The fact that it was Minette’s eruptive outburst at Lapointe once she discovered how he treated his slaves, brings the presence of the volcano to the plains as a symbol of person and ideological revolution.

Another geographical area represented in Chauvet’s novel, the mornes or hillsides, rather than characterizing a source of solace, play a more pessimistic role. In the first revolt portrayed in the novel, the freed blacks and mulattoes, or affranchis, secured the assistance of the runaway slaves residing in the mornes for their first attack against the white colonizers. The runaway slaves joined the affranchis in the battle and were highly instrumental in their victory, only to be turned over later by the affranchis to the white enemy troops. They were then led to their death by execution. In Chauvet’s case the
mornes and the slaves who live on their hillsides represent a more pessimistic image as suppliers of tragic heroes who, despite their bravery and valor, will only be led to their death—for it is their fate. The fact that the slaves leave the mornes to enter the city and to join in the battle toward their common future as free Haitians is key in the novel, and provides a linking point between the topographical differences (Chauvet).

The city is the area where most of the novel’s action takes place. It represents the increasing metissage and hybridity of the Haitian culture, encompassing the white colonizers, the black colonizers, the colonized affranchis, as well as slaves, both runaway or in servitude. The city is the crossroads for all people of the island, regardless of color or status. The fact that it is a crossroads does not, however, preclude the existence of divisions therein. The divisions are clear in the difference between the particularly poor Traversière Street, where Minette lives, and the city’s Opera where Minette controversially sings in an otherwise white company (Chauvet). The word “crowd” is also a recurrent one in the descriptions of the city, and will be discussed more later.

As is implied by the title of the novel, the volcano envelops all these geographical areas as a single icon of the Haitian landscape and as the force which assembles them all together in unity. Whether it be a favorable or unfavorable unity, it is a necessary one, and the Haitian people must all “dance on the volcano”. The one instance in the novel where the volcanic imagery is stated outright displays clearly the ideological merging of the geographic areas. The passage describes the revolt in the city as follows:

*The volcano, which the colonizers for many long years had wanted to believe inexistent, was in eruption. Like lava and ashes, the immense crowd flowed from the mornes, coming out of the workshops and the*
woods as though vomited by a crater. And their armed hands, struck, struck each in turn, without pity...(Chauvet p. 360)

The mornes are directly referenced in the passage, the plains are evoked by the term “woods” and by the reference to the colonizers, and the city is present though the “workshops.” The three combine only in the eruption of the volcano. It is through the volcano that they are brought together, even if in conflict. Anne Malena explains the Haitian tendency toward struggle in saying that for the Haitians, “identity becomes a processual part of the struggle for survival and a matter for conflict or negotiation” (Malena p. 129-130). If the struggle for survival and the search for identity are inherently linked for the Haitians, it would then be logical that it is through the eruptive, revolutionary force of the volcano that Chauvet gives the three peoples of Haiti (colonizers, free, and slave) their common identity. They must all reside on the volcano, and they must confront each other and themselves, in accordance with the law of nature, if they are to ever coexist on this potentially explosive land.

As Dance on the Volcano is set during the late 18th century during the time of both the Haitian revolts and the French Revolution, there are a multitude of references to conditions common to both revolutions. The reaction through violence in response to unnatural restrictions on a population was a driving force behind both revolutions. In her novel, Chauvet points out this common point, though the restrictions for the French were based on social status, and for the Caribbean people they were based on race. The outbreak of mob violence and the different character taken on by humanity when it forms into a mob is another common theme to the French Revolution. Chauvet makes this image particularly present in her novel. The recurrence of the word la foule or “the
crowd” draws the readers’ attention to the constant overcrowding of the island, making mob tendencies in revolution a natural occurrence. The crowd is ever-present in the novel: on the streets, in the neighborhoods, in the theater. They all form part of the dance, and their dance continues into the realm of violence when it becomes one of revolt. It is at this point that the spectacle and violence merge, drawing true parallels between the French Revolution and the Haitian revolts.

The presence of the spectacle is strong in Chauvet’s *Dance on the Volcano*. The main references to the spectacle, or performance, are the facts that Minette plays leading roles in classics at the Opera as the only non-white member of the opera; Minette’s sister, Lise, acts and sings in the local plays degrading to blacks; and the novel’s title clearly indicates the spectacle of dance. In direct reference to theater, The French Revolution has been the inspiration for and the subject of over 100 major dramatic works over the last two centuries (Kinzer p. 163), and the Haitian Revolution inspired its fair share as well. Vévé Clark revealed that 63 plays concerning the Haitian Revolution were either published or performed between 1796 and 1975 (Clark p. 240). The colony of Haiti, then known as St. Domingue, also frequently received French theater troops who would go there to perform for the colonists in the Cap-Francois theaters (Clark p. 238), therefore, Haiti has been exposed since its colonizing to the theater culture of the metropole.

Setting aside the formal materializations of the spectacle as a result of the revolutions, I would like to focus more on the spectacular nature of the revolutions themselves. The French Revolution has a reputation for being based on theatricality in its manifestation. Marie-Helene Huet observes, “For the theatricality of the guillotine came to symbolize in the eyes of Europe the frightful determination of a government eager to
do away with the secrecy of the old regime.” In 1791 Dutau said, “If you want the death penalty to retain all its exemplary effectiveness, make the punishment of the guilty into an imposing spectacle; link the execution to a painful and most touching display; let that terrible day be a day of national mourning; let the general suffering be depicted strikingly. Imagine the forms that are most compatible with a tender sensibility…Let the magistrate robed in black crepe announce to the people the crime and the sad necessity of legal retribution. Let the different scenes of this tragedy make an impression on all the senses.” Another deputy added, “The spectator must return home filled with terror” (Huet p. 136). The theatricality, the spectacle of the French Revolution was then central to the occurrences that comprise what we call the “Reign of Terror.” Much of what was done was done for its theatrical value. Perhaps one of the most striking recent discoveries of this was the discovery of the multiple statue heads that were found buried at the headquarters of the Banque Française du Commerce Extérieur on the Rue de Chaussée d’Antin. The heads were from the statues of the Galerie des Rois de Judah, and it was clear that the act was committed as an overt theatrical spectacle utilizing what the Revolutions de Paris called ‘the powerful language of images’. This leaning toward a public, theatrical revolution was fueled still by the decrees issued removing censor on theaters and opening them to selections of patriotic plays to be performed at no cost to the public (Huet p. 135-136).

For the Haitian Revolutionary experience, Marie Vieux-Chauvet utilizes her text, in a sense, to reinterpret the theatricality of the French Revolution into the spectacle specific to the Caribbean. One way she does this is by putting her novel’s heroine, Minette, a mulatto, in a leading role at the all-white Opera. The physical nature of this
act recalled to Bill Ashcroft the writings of Fanon when he discussed the “inescapable ‘fact’ of blackness, a ‘fact’ which forces on ‘negro’ people a heightened level of bodily self-consciousness, since it is the body which is the inescapable, visible sign of their oppression and denigration” (Ashcroft p. 321-322). Minette cannot escape her skin, and her skin itself, because of its color provides its own spectacle every time she steps on the Opera stage. The art, however, is what is revolutionary. Minette’s voice is what allows her to both physically and ideologically create a fissure in some of the segregationist ideas. Blacks and whites together on stage is itself revolutionary. The mob, as it parades through the streets and terrorizes the whites in recompense for their years of suffering under slavery, presents a spectacle of its own. The manifestation of this spectacle becomes even more apparent once we note that it is the physical revolt of the people that is linked to the image of the volcano. To state again Chauvet’s one mention of the volcano in the novel’s entirety:

_The volcano, which the colonizers for many long years had wanted to believe inexistent, was in eruption. Like lava and ashes, the immense crowd flowed from the mornes, coming out of the workshops and the woods as though vomited by a crater. And their armed hands, struck, struck each in turn, without pity…_(Chauvet p. 360)

“The erupting volcano is a natural catastrophe against which white society has no refuge. It is also a flamboyant spectacle itself whose splendor cannot be ignored” (Rosello p. 137).

The volcano, then, as spectacle itself and as an emblem identified with the Antilles and its people in revolt, provides the very essence of Caribbean identity as is
expressed in *Dance on the Volcano*. The various geographical areas where the novel’s action is carried out all unite in the volcano, the permanent land structure of the islands, and the one symbol Chauvet irrevocably associates with the Haitian land and peoples. The image of the volcano as representative of the islands’ identity is made transparent for the outsider to the islands through the parallel drawn between the Haitian Revolution and the theatricality of the French Revolution. Chauvet’s choice of the volcano as the inherent symbol for Haitian identity seems a pessimistic one in her case since it is inevitable to erupt at intervals throughout Haiti’s history. Since Chauvet wrote the novel in the mid 20th century, knowing the post-Revolutionary history of Haiti, this may have been a deliberate choice on her part and an avowal of her disappointment in the path Haiti took after its independence. Chauvet may be alluding that the volcano, the very character of the Haitian people, must change internally to become something entirely different if the tendency toward violence is to end. Is such a total transformation possible? Perhaps history will tell.

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