IN FOCUS

Beyond Revolution: Water and Gender in *Masters of the Dew*

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Jacques Roumain, *Masters of the Dew (Gouverneurs de la Rosée)*.[1]

How can we read the peasant novel in the early twenty-first century? Is it an artifact of a specific time and place, or can it speak to current concerns? Can new readings and re-readings give us fresh understandings of the contexts in which they were written? The Haitian writer Jacques Roumain wrote *Gouverneurs de la Rosée* sometime in the early 1940s; it was published posthumously in 1944. In 1947, the Harlem Renaissance writers Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook issued an English translation entitled *Masters of the Dew*. That translation was re-issued many times over the years, most recently in 2017. It has also been translated into Spanish, Portuguese, German, and Haitian Krèyol. It has broad appeal, and has survived decades of changing tastes and expectations for the genre. The book is set in Fonds Rouge, a Haitian village whose residents are struggling for survival, battling a punishing climate, greedy landlords, and the fading of communal cooperation. The title, *Masters of the Dew*, could be read as a question: who is master of the dew? The characters seek control of nature (both human and non-human) and through that, prosperity. While other peasant novels may share the themes of capitalist greed and a narrative arc that leads up to the political awakening of their (male) protagonists, close readings of this text bring us instead to a gendered ecological approach to questions of power and social change.

Roumain, from an elite family, was educated in Europe and came of age during the US occupation of Haiti (1915–34), to which he was vocally opposed. He founded the Haitian Communist Party in 1934, and was subsequently imprisoned and released to exile, which he spent travelling and studying in Europe (Fowler 1980). Critics have read *Masters of the Dew* as grounded in revolutionary claims,

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[1] The edition used for this review is Roumain ([1947] 1978).

connected to long-standing revolutionary traditions in the country (Dash 2008; Dash 1978; Willson 2017; Munro 2010). Haiti was of course the site of the first and only successful anti-slavery and anti-colonial uprising (1791–1804), during which Haitians gained independence from France and abolished slavery. This posed a problem to other new nations, including France and the United States. France demanded reparations, which kept Haiti in debt until the early twentieth century and hobbled its economic capabilities. The United States refused to recognise Haiti as an independent nation until 1862, and in 1915 intervened militarily and removed all the funds from the Haitian treasury with the justification that it needed to preserve order. The occupation lasted 19 years, and resistance to it, from the elite and non-elite alike, was fierce (Dubois 2013).

It is understandable, then, that critics should have read this novel as an expression of revolutionary sentiment; a kind of blending of Haiti's anti-colonial spirit in the nineteenth century with Communist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist sentiments drawn from prevailing intellectual currents of Roumain's own time. Indeed, it does contain many of the requisite elements and plot-lines to qualify. Ordinary rural people are its protagonists, the story is rooted in questions of land and agriculture, and it magnifies the concerns and ultimately the wisdom of its protagonists. There are rumbles about strikes and a malevolent landlord. There is an emphasis on collective work rather than individual gain. In addition, as Nicole Louise Willson has argued, the way that the book was translated and has circulated speaks to a context of black radicalism based on racial justice and transatlantic solidarities that became a powerful component of leftist intellectual and political circles. Hughes and Roumain had met and discovered a "shared radical vision" in 1931 during Hughes' visit to Haiti. Hughes' translation of the novel, argues Willson, was an effort to preserve Roumain's legacy, and extend "the ethics of collectivism, class power, and community pride embedded at the heart of the novel to new audiences in the English-speaking world" (Willson 2017, p. 148).

Yet these readings of the novel, as both megaphone and artifact of Communist or revolutionary movements in the Atlantic world of the 1930s and 1940s, pay scant attention to qualities that expand understandings of Roumain's radicalism and are at the same time anchored in Caribbean specificity. Attention to language and setting, as well as to the mechanics of the plot, reveal that in the novel, strikes and workers are less important than provision grounds and families. Also, attention to the actions of women disrupt the overwhelmingly masculinist readings of the book that centre on Manuel and his conflicts with other men from the village (Dash 2008; Munro 2010; Willson 2017). The novel is set in economic oppression that is based on ecological catastrophe. The solutions lie not in violence or in land reform, but rather in consensus-building and finding a way to make the land that the peasants already have more productive.

The novel opens in a dire mood: "Plunging her hands into the dust, Délira Deliverance said, 'We're all going to die. Animals, plants, every living soul!'"(Roumain [1947] 1978, p. 23). The text plunges into drought, loss, and the despair that comes from hunger. All of life is included in Délira's prophecy: she is as concerned about animals and plants as about people. While she surveys the suffering earth "where erosion had undressed long strata of rock and bled the earth to the bone," her husband Bienaimé avoids the present and muses about a more abundant past, recalling memories of planting eggplant or of tending his fields of corn and beans (*ibid.*, p. 24). He remembers, and mourns the loss of, the *coumbité*, the tradition of collective labour in which everyone cleared fields together, with nostalgia for the communal feeling and the powerful sense of well-being:

> In a single moment they would lift their hoes high in the air. A beam of light would strike each blade. For a second they would be holding a rainbow. (*Ibid.*, p. 26)

Only after this immersion in the present and the past does their son Manuel appear in the pages of the novel. He has returned from Cuba, where he was cutting cane. He experiences the poverty in which his parents are absorbed. Drought is visible everywhere and has changed the landscape, so that he barely recognises his own home. But drought is not the only factor that has brought the disappearance of communal labour. Fonds Rouge is divided in a bitter blood feud, and far from working together, the two sides cannot interact without violence. The feud arose when a large piece of land began to be divided up among the villagers. Dorisca, a resident, made an attempt to seize the land for his family's private use, and another villager, Saveur Jean Joseph, opposed and killed him. While Saveur eventually died in prison, Dorisca's son Gervilen still resides in Fonds Rouge and nurses the grudge, effectively dividing the village in two and preventing the *coumbité* from continuing. Manuel's efforts ultimately spark a solution for both of these at once, but it costs him his life. The novel ends on a note of redemption with sacrifice and renewal in the face of loss.

Some elements of the plot signal to readers, as others have observed, the novel's setting in, and critique of, a global economic system built on monoculture and cheap labour. In the first part of the twentieth century US corporations expanded sugar plantations in Cuba, and recruited workers from Jamaica and Haiti. Building on and reinforcing a system of cheap mobile labour, US capital benefited from economic disparities and Haiti's less fully integrated economy. Many Haitians stayed put, but many journeyed to Cuba every year for the regular wages. The critique of these systems is built into the novel as well, as Manuel returns with ideas about labour actions, and satisfied memories of secret plans for strikes and clashes with policemen. Indeed, literary critics have made much of this and deemed it central to their interpretation of the novel as claiming for Haiti a critical place within imperial capitalism (Dash 2008; Trouillot 1990). Lines of interpretation have drawn a

distinction between the novel as "national" or "worldly," asking whether the struggles depicted need to be understood as national allegory stressing the importance of the land and of rural folk, or as referring to the ways that Haiti took part both in global capitalism and the global Communist movements that challenged capitalism in the 1930s and 40s.[2]

It is possible, of course, to think of these as mutually constituted. Manuel is himself part of and participating in the capitalist system that has fully incorporated Cuba as a producer of sugar and a consumer of black workers, but the Haiti he has left and returns to is loosely and ambivalently connected to that system. Haiti was incorporated into imperialism that arrived in full force with the US occupation, which brought with it not just militarism and racialisation, but also corporate capitalism, facilitated by an amendment to the Haitian constitution that made it easier for Americans to buy land. The extension of sugar and coffee plantations occurred during this period. But Haiti's terrain was hilly and lent itself less well to monoculture than that of Cuba, or of the neighbouring Dominican Republic. So, while sugar plantations were developed and extended during the early twentieth century, much of Haiti held to its system of villages, smallholdings, and internal trade networks.

Roumain creates a distinction between cane-governed Cuba and the village where cane is non-existent. Villagers are curious about Cuba but few have experienced it, and the author renders their ambivalence and recognition that sugar is both a source of wealth and a site of exploitation. Laurelien, a neighbour, asks Manuel: "Tell me about Cuba." Manuel replies, "It's a country five times, no ten, no, perhaps twenty times as large as Haiti. But you know, I'm made out of this, I am." Laurelien persists: "Yes, but in Cuba there's more wealth. Folks live more at ease." This prompts Manuel to insist on the villagers' role in creating wealth and their own responsibility to wrest power for themselves: "Then we'll call a General Assembly of the Masters of the Dew, and great big *coumbité* of farmers, and we'll clear out poverty and plant a new life" (Roumain [1947] 1978, pp. 74–75). Roumain's Haiti is in the world, but also away from it. The villagers inhabit spaces made of hills, woods, and valleys – spaces that demand interpretation, and are not immediately and easily appropriated in capitalist regimes.

What lies beneath the surface is more important than what you can see; and the fortunes of a village will be repaired not with better wages or more ownership of the means of production, but with communal cooperative labour and subsistence farming. What drives the novel more profoundly than debates about wages, or a strike, or proletarian solidarity (though those are there), is its consideration of people's relationships to the land, understood not in terms of private property but as productive of plants, animals, and water. In this sense it expands the context of

[2] See Munro (2010) for this debate.

monoculture capitalism to include the spaces that are not central to it, but support it with migrant labour and its reproduction. The notion of world-ecology is useful here, as an extension and reconsideration of world-economies, to include and incorporate attention to environmental and ecological costs and transformations wrought by capitalism (Niblett 2014). As described by Jason Moore, world-ecology is "a perspective that joins the accumulation of capital and the production of nature in dialectical unity" (Moore 2011, p. 2, cited in Niblett 2014). As the novel unfolds, the characters ponder possible answers to the question of who can master the dew. Perhaps by working the earth and one day seeing "your ripe fields spread before you." But that status is always at risk: "we betray the soil and receive his punishment: drought and poverty and isolation" (Roumain [1947] 1978, p. 45). The dramatic tension of the novel lies in this search for a viable version of nature as a source of both spiritual and material sustenance. In Moore's terms, the accumulation of capital necessitates the production of a tamed and controlled version of nature, as in the irrigation canal that contains and guides the flow of water. But at the same time, and this is Roumain's contribution, nature for the villagers exceeds its role as capitalism's assistant; it is also unruly and spiritual, not subject to control.

Caribbean Ecologies

Caribbean specificities matter to this notion of the world-ecology. As Sylvia Wynter has suggested, the provision ground and the plantation have historically shaped people's relationship to land in slave-owning societies (Wynter 1971). Masters gave slaves small plots, provision grounds for them to grow food. Working on Sundays or in the evenings, enslaved people produced plantains, yams, beans, and corn, which fed them and earned them some income from selling the surplus. The long history of provision grounds is, as Wynter points out, double-edged – since it was both an obligation to the masters and assisted in the reproduction of slavery, and at the same time could be a source of independence and income. After emancipation these plots became significant alternatives to wage labour, one that many former slaves took up. Existing practices of cultivating subsistence crops and forming extensive market networks gave formerly enslaved people an option that allowed them to reject wage labour in sugar while feeding themselves and those who continued on plantations. As historian John Parry argued long ago, Caribbean history needs to privilege "the story of yams, cassava and salt fish, no less than that of sugar and tobacco" (Parry 1955, p. 1, cited in de Loughrey 2011, p. 62). I draw here from Elizabeth de Loughrey who has theorised provision grounds and whose work engages (more fully than this space allows) that of Edouard Glissant and Erna Brodber in its exploration of the complex relationship between monoculture capitalism and ecological perspectives. Both Glissant and Brodber propose rewriting Caribbean narratives that have been so dominated by large plantations, struggles over land, and a bleak or barren sense of Caribbean lives. They have written alternatives in which labour is about sustenance rather than exploitation, and

people's relationship to the land is about care rather than possession. Plots of land (but also those of nationalist novels), reproduction, sexuality, freedom, and rootedness are all in play.

Masters of the Dew similarly revolves around plots and subsistence crops. Sugar is distant, problematic, and unattainable; but the beans and yams stock the nostalgic scenes of past abundance and fill dreams of future prosperity. The characters sustain themselves with visions that assuage hunger. Manuel envisions

> banana trees swaying under the silky caress of the wind, ears beaded with corn, plots of sweet potatoes strewn over the fields, all this burnt earth changed to verdant colours. (Roumain [1947] 1978, p. 52)

When he becomes smitten with Anna, the village girl he meets upon his return, he seduces her with dreams of future harvests:

> "Can't you just see the clusters of millet, and those thieving blackbirds that we've got to chase away? Can't you see the ears of corn?"
> She closed her eyes. "Yes, I see"
> "Can't you see the banana trees bent with the weight of their bunches?"
> "Yes, yes"
> "Can you see the vegetables and the ripe fruit?"
> "Oui, oui!"
> "You see all that wealth?"
> She opened her eyes. "You've made me dream! All I see is poverty!"
> (*Ibid.,* pp. 88–89)

This earth is not simply land. It contains dreams and memories. It reveals its secrets to those who are willing to listen. The food that it has and might once again yield connects communities socially and spiritually. Sylvia Wynter has argued that colonialism and the exploitation of natural resources brought about "the reduction of Man to Labour and of Nature to Land." In this novel it is possible to see, as she suggests, the ways that "the land remained the Earth – and the Earth was a goddess. Man used the land to feed himself, and to offer first fruits to the Earth." Spirituality comes into play here. Délira, Manuel's mother, prays to a combination of gods. She invokes Jesus as well as the Haitian/African gods, nearly always to ask for deliverance from their condition. Manuel himself, though he asserts his opposition to calling on spirits to solve their problems, cannot resist participating in the drumming ceremony intended to call them and appease them. The gods in this novel are part of the natural world.

The world of *Masters of the Dew* is also steeped in sex and sexuality. Roumain eroticises the earth's capacity to provide nourishment. In Bienaimé's dream of abundance, members of the *coumbité* sing, and

> the song mounted to a spring hidden in the hollow of the hill's armpit, in the heavy odour of fern and moist malanga soaking in the shaded secret oozing of the water. . . . Perhaps a

> young Negresse in the neighbourhood . . . has just finished filling her calabashes. When she comes out of the stream, cool bracelets ripple from her legs. (*Ibid.,* p. 28)

As if the point has not been made clearly enough, Manuel and Anna consummate their relationship at the water's source. When he takes her to see the spring he has found, she immerses herself in it spiritually and sensually:

> she knelt down, wet a finger in the pool and made the sign of the cross. "I greet you holy water! And there, look again, it's everywhere! I see it," she said. She put her ear to the ground. "I hear it." (*Ibid.,* p. 118)

As Roumain tells the story, it is impossible to separate the water from the earth, the earth from the gods, the feeling and sound of water from sex. To be sure, the bodice-ripping tone in the writing and the objectification of women's bodies seems jarring to our sensibilities. But in creating a closed cycle of nature, sex, food, and water, might Roumain be invoking the possibility of an existence outside of the plantation's rigid separation of all these things? An alternative way of being that while never wholly outside of sugar corporations and capitalism, arises in its margins?

The earth signals to Manuel where the water is. He finds a fig tree, a sure sign: "its monstrous roots extended an authoritative hand over the ownership and secret of this corner of the earth" (*ibid.*, p. 108). But he realizes that they cannot access it without changes to the current social and political dynamics in the village. While land can be divided into individually held plots and, indeed, this is what caused the village feud in the first place, the water demands a different system of ownership: it must be shared and managed by everyone. The entire village must participate in building the irrigation system; individuals, or distinct factions, cannot do it on their own. Manuel understands that they must overcome their bitter feud, reconcile and agree to revive the *coumbité*, working together to create an infrastructure that will allow everyone access to water.

Considerations of Gender

Here, the women shape subsequent events, not as sexualised objects but as powerful negotiators and brokers. The women perform the ideal of collective action that Manuel imagines as necessary. Anna, who belongs to the opposing faction, stitches the broken bonds together with visits to each household, pleading for unity. Anna and Manuel's mother Délira know that they must work on the women, and let the women get to the men. As Manuel hoped, the women come to understand what water might mean. They dream in economic terms: they

> had begun to figure out the change and the profit that irrigation would bring, and how much corn the fields would produce, how much millet and provisions and what price they would bring to the market.

The household finances are under their control, and they recognise the potential consequences. Crops will bring money, money will buy clothing, clothing will allow them to live without shame: "As for the children, there's no use talking about them, they're living almost naked, and it's a sin and a shame" (*ibid.*, p. 129). They are successful, and the women become a relentless chorus demanding change: "the womenfolk had begun to make life impossible for them. They nagged their men mercilessly, buzzing about their ears with a thousand questions and innumerable complaints" (*ibid.*, p. 137). The men respond unevenly. The women wear some of them out, others see for themselves the potential benefit of overcoming the feud in order to work together. Others remain opposed, still seething and seeking vengeance, or resenting the potential power Manuel might accrue if he pulls off his scheme. With the resignation of an older generation, Manuel's father sleeps through the controversy (and much of the novel), waking up only occasionally to complain about his son and the changes he seems to be bringing about. In the end, the women repair the bonds that the men have broken. But they do so imperfectly, and Manuel is killed in his effort to save the community.

Délira's prophecy has been fulfilled. The trope of dust is again invoked upon his death, as if she had seen it in the motes that coated everything and rendered it drab: "Today we are burying our beloved, and he's going off towards the grave, he's going off towards the dust" (*ibid.*, p. 157). The dust and the dew are opposing forces in the text. They align with other dualities, such as darkness/light, present/future, Cuba/Haiti, earth/water, and it is knowledge of them that brings power. Délira has proffered her knowledge from the novel's opening scenes, speaking mostly to herself. Anna has received that power from Manuel; she knows where the water is, but she also possesses it more literally as she is bearing his unborn child. The book closes with a scene between the two women as they realise this. While men work in the distance, women have become the masters. They have orchestrated the *coumbité*, and they will produce and reproduce: "She took the old woman's hand and pressed it gently to her belly where the new life was stirring" (*ibid.*, p. 188). Manuel has been buried in the earth but the baby has emerged out of the water. Manuel and his child are both, for the moment, hidden from view, but the future depends on the fusion and synthesis of the dualities that they have come to embody.

It would be pointless to argue that Roumain was an eco-feminist of the sort that emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s (d'Eaubonne 1974; Merchant 1982; Mies and Shiva 2010). The way that women have power in the book does not necessarily override the ways that women's bodies are sexualised and naturalised. The two perspectives coexist, perhaps uncomfortably for our sensibilities, but they draw on literary tropes and historical truths. Literature and art from this period traffics in the objectification of female bodies, and renders them metaphors for the nation, or 'successful' racial mixture, or as an elusive object of desire (Kutzinski 1993). Without ascribing intention to the ways he draws on this representational practice, we can acknowledge that they were a part of the literary tool-kit of the time.

But equally significant to observers of Caribbean rural settings was the recognition of the economic and social power of women as a longstanding feature of Haitian life. They controlled subsistence crop production and, importantly, marketing. Anthropologist Sidney Mintz has written about the ways that market women created and ran the internal economic system that was not just an alternative to export crops such as sugar and coffee, it was necessary and sustained them with provisions for workers (Mintz 2010; Moral 1959). These internal markets began during slavery and have persisted to this day as one of Haiti's longest working institutions. Moreover, in their journeys to weekly markets, women also formed social networks through which information flowed. They carried news, gossip, and knowledge along with their provisions, and these circulated mostly through their efforts. During the US occupation, they actively supported rebels and sabotaged the US Marines' efforts to get information. One of the earliest efforts of the occupying forces was in fact to gain access to, and the trust of, market women. They failed to do so, and the Haitian market women instead supported the insurgency that continually plagued the occupation (Bronfman 2016, Chapter 1). The point is not that Roumain was a feminist (though he may have been), but rather that perspectives grounded in Caribbean experience need to incorporate the social and cultural roles of women, and their connection to the subsistence economy.

Modernity and Its Predicaments

A reading of *Gouverneurs de la Rosée* that stresses the growth of subsistence crops, the role of women in social networks, and relationships to the land that move beyond economic spheres to spiritual and cultural ways of existing in the world risks projecting a representation of Haiti, and of the Caribbean more broadly, as out of time and out of modernity. But that is only if colonialism, imperialism, resistance, and revolution are imagined as outside of modernity. In the 1930s and '40s, when this novel was written, Haiti was experiencing the emergence, in the aftermath of the occupation, of expressions of radicalism, activism, and burgeoning democratic and inclusionary practices. It is possible to read Roumain's novel as a contribution to conversations of the day. Given both his and Haiti's trajectories, it is difficult to claim that this novel relies on Haitian detachment from modernity. Indeed, given twenty-first century struggles over access to water and the continuing inability to find peaceful solutions to our relationship to the earth's resources, one could read the novel as a prediction of the world's predicament eighty years into the future. Haiti looks, in this reading, less like an exception and more like a rule, particularly in light of the urgency of caring for and sharing resources in an equitable way. We neglect the ecological dimensions of books such as this one at our own peril.

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