



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Bodies in the System

Vanessa Agard-Jones

Small Axe, Volume 17, Number 3, November 2013 (No. 42), pp. 182-192 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/532736>

# Bodies in the System

**Vanessa Agard-Jones**

The day that I received word that Michel-Rolph Trouillot had died, I was midway through transcribing an interview from my latest research trip to Martinique. On the digital file that I was listening to that afternoon, my former mechanic, Marc, and I were having a wide-ranging conversation about pesticides, about food, about hormones and aging. We talked about prostate cancer, about manhood, and about his workout and diet regimen. We talked more about pesticides. We talked about his body. We talked about what he does to manage its unpredictability, and what he does to remain, at least theoretically, in control of it. Normally, at the end of each transcription session, I dash off a couple of quick notes, capturing the key thematic elements emerging out of each exchange. But on that day in July, with the news of Trouillot's death fresh in my head, I could write about nothing but Trouillot.

I was never fortunate enough to have been Trouillot's student, but my own work has been indelibly marked by his scholarship. In my notes that day, I wondered what Trouillot would have made of my conversations with Marc and of my interest in gendered experiences in Martinique. I wondered what he would have thought about Marc's body and of its relationship to the global systems that he worked so hard to localize. What would Trouillot have said a body like Marc's could tell us about colonial power? What silences would he have imagined Marc's body to reveal? What pasts might he have argued it bears evidence of? What could the uncontrollable elements of Marc's body—the wrinkles that he detests, the fatty pockets that he cannot seem to shake, the colon polyps that he fears are harbingers for cancer—show us about the limits of human agency? I wondered, too, what Trouillot would have thought about our conversation about pesticides and about Marc's fears about what they were doing to his body. In the interview, Marc and I had gotten down to the minutiae of

his choices between organic and conventional produce at the supermarket, yet even as we scaled inward to his body's most mundane functions, by proxy we were also scaling outward to talk about farming in Martinique, about policy parity in France, and about the circulation of agricultural products in the global economy. Via Marc's body, and via our conversations about what it would mean to make it healthy, our conversation jumped scales from the local to the regional and to the global. And as I penned my notes about that interview after a painstaking day of transcription, I was reminded that I was prepared to recognize this multiscalar richness only because of my readings of Trouillot. Though his was not a project of thinking bodies in systems, Trouillot's attention to Caribbean historical particularity in his inquiries about the world critically enabled my own thinking about Marc's body and its relationship to global power.

Throughout the 1980s, Trouillot wrote extensively about systems. Studying commodity chains and transnational labor processes and the people who toiled within them, he mobilized his anthropological training to pose fundamental questions about "the local" that rarely appeared on the radar of the decade's ascendant world-systems analysts—instead, those scholars focused on writing metanarratives about the structure of global forms of domination.<sup>1</sup> While Immanuel Wallerstein, for example, argued that it was only at the scale of the world that we could properly apprehend "the system," Trouillot countered that we could look from a radically opposite scale—that of the village—to approach the same questions.<sup>2</sup> In considering the points of articulation between and among scales of analysis, Trouillot's theorization of how small places (like Dominica or Haiti) matter in the world, and further—of how seemingly marginal people (like peasants) might be central to social analysis, remains an urgent political project. Trouillot sought to understand how the world was connected, but he refused to do so from a single perch, and made his inquiries not only with the most powerful but also with the least. He called into question methods that focused upon readily visible manifestations of inequality, and rather than giving rapturous analytical attention to the centers of power, he focused on its objects, and on its margins.<sup>3</sup> Trouillot's approach was deceptively straightforward: he asked of each process that he sought to understand, "What else is there to know? Is there more? Is there anything else that matters?"<sup>4</sup> Via this method, he created a body of work that was mindful not only of the limits of what we might understand but also of the different angles from which we might be able to see. He demanded not only that we do research *in* small places but also that we look *from* them—a shift from looking *at* a small unit to looking *from* its place in the world. This was the crux of his writing about the "microlevel" and was part of his signal contribution to debates in the social sciences about scale and about our units of analysis.

1 As he later wrote, "Local dynamics and global power are indeed what best distinguish this historical turn from preceding ones in anthropology. . . . Historical anthropologists today deal with global history in local contexts." See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Making Sense: The Fields in Which We Work," in *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 121.

2 David Palumbo-Liu, Bruce Robbins, Nirvana Takouhi, eds., *Immanuel Wallerstein and the Problem of the World: System, Scale, Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

3 Trouillot became most famous for this approach in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (New York: Beacon, 1997).

4 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Peasants and Capital: Dominica in the World Economy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 182.

In this essay, I mine Trouillot's earliest thinking about systems, scale, and social analysis for insights about what we can make of Caribbean bodies in systems of global power. Extending his work on the village, the nation, and the world, I suggest that Trouillot's interventions might be productively pushed forward if we take seriously the body and its constituent parts as another dimension of analysis to which we might turn. From this vantage, we gain another perspective on the global and in the process learn more about the village and the nation as well. Trouillot himself refused any easy verticality to his categories, opting instead for an engagement with multiscalar dilations and contractions among them. He kept at the forefront of his interpretive work their porosity, issuing a call for "reformulating the question of the unit of analysis . . . in terms of the articulation of analytical levels," and arguing that this work would "force us to turn to the interpenetration of processes of various kinds and extents rather than emphasizing the essence of the units to be studied and their empirical boundaries."<sup>5</sup> Contemporary issues in the region require our attention not just to smaller units and reconfigured vantage points but also to the ways that we might trouble the categories with which Trouillot was already engaged. For example, what questions might we ask about the ways that nonsovereign territories trouble his understanding of the "nation?" What are the multiple ways we might apprehend the world, or various iterations of globality, beyond the units that he himself most frequently used? Rather than the body, Trouillot took a central interest in human agency, showing world-systems analyses to be insufficiently attuned to the possibilities for individual and collective action in the face of global power. Drawing from recent work in feminist science studies and from my own fieldwork with gender-transgressing people in Martinique, in this essay I ask how the body and the quasi-human agents that constitute it might function as an important scalar intertext in our ongoing efforts to demonstrate the centrality of the Caribbean to contemporary debates about power, politics, and the postcolonial.

### Recalibrating Categories

The deliberate shifting of the empirical boundaries by the researcher, on historical, socio-economic, or cultural grounds, may produce at times a more viable unit, even if such a unit does not match perfectly preconceived notions of what a village . . . should be.

—Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Peasants and Capital*

Trouillot laid the groundwork for a career-long interest in categories in his first book released in English: *Peasants and Capital: Dominica in the World Economy* (1988). Published to glowing reviews in the *New West Indian Guide*, the *American Anthropologist*, the *American Ethnologist*, and the *Journal of Economic History*, Trouillot's colleagues called *Peasants and Capital* "unusually intelligent and thought-provoking," a "tour-de-force," and a "splendid and comprehensive achievement."<sup>6</sup> Even

5 Ibid., 17.

6 Reviews of *Peasants and Capital: Dominica in the World Economy* by Michel-Rolph Trouillot: Jay R. Mandle, *Journal of Economic History* 48, no. 4 (1988): 962–63; David Nugent, *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 2 (1989): 405–6; William Roseberry, *New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 62, nos. 3–4 (1988): 165–67. See also Marilyn Silverman, *American Anthropologist* 91, no. 1 (1989): 211.

given its initial popularity, by the time of Trouillot's death it was perhaps the least read of his works. The book has been out of print since its first run in 1988 and is usually passed over as just an "early" demonstration of his later thinking about global forms, deemed a less-developed version of what he came to argue about the relationships among ordinary Caribbean people, their communities, and the world. While the title of this essay is cribbed from Trouillot's 1982 article "Motion in the System," my thinking here is most indebted to this monograph and to its extended treatment of the resonance of a single ethnographic story beyond its received geographic boundaries. In *Peasants and Capital* Trouillot made what was perhaps his first case for what he called microlevel analyses, arguing that "the microlevel appears to be the angle from which one most appropriately highlights . . . individual contributions (or partial sums thereof) to the historical process."<sup>7</sup> According to Trouillot, microlevel analyses were just what world-systems theorists were missing: a sense of the agentic capacities of ordinary people, even in the face of tremendous and persistent inequalities. Attending to the microlevel for Trouillot meant asking, "Is there life beyond neocolonialism? Can we make sense of what dominated people say and do in their daily lives without keeping silent about their forced integration in the international order and yet without reducing their lives to the fact of that integration?"<sup>8</sup> This reckoning with agency, while at the same time remaining mindful of the forces operating within the international order, was an important part of how Trouillot sought to recalibrate categories for social analysis.

Divided into three sections—nation, world, and village—*Peasants and Capital* brought into focus the social and economic life of Wesley, a banana-producing village in northeastern Dominica. With each part loosely keyed to a different disciplinary approach, the book's section on "the nation" offered a historical treatment of the consolidation of the Dominican polity, its section on "the world" employed a political economic lens to describe the relationship between Dominica's banana producers and the overseas corporate interests to which they were beholden, and its section on "the village" drew from Trouillot's dissertation fieldwork to undertake a careful ethnographic analysis of community-level dynamics in Wesley. A committed interdisciplinarian, Trouillot understood Wesley to be a place very much of, and sited within, the world economy, and he refused the isolationist model of ethnographic research that remained popular in certain quarters at the time. In his attention to processes of production, consumption, and accumulation and to what they could tell us about colonial power, Trouillot insisted that we keep individuals and communities—even those in out of the way places like Wesley—squarely within our sights.

Trouillot's intervention was at once theoretical and methodological: wearing the hat of the anthropologist, he challenged world-systems theorists to embrace a "change in the terms of the analysis itself, an opening of its objects and strategies which enables it to deal more directly with various dimensions of human agency, especially individual agency."<sup>9</sup> Refusing the schematic ways this scholarship bypassed the lives and experiences of ordinary people, he showed how ethnographic research might reveal the cracks in the system, and might point toward possibilities for

7 Trouillot, *Peasants and Capital*, 17. The quotation used as an epigraph at the start of this section is found on 19.

8 *Ibid.*, 181.

9 *Ibid.*, 17.

change. Looking to his own disciplinary training, he challenged anthropologists to abandon the arbitrary temporal and spatial isolation of the communities that they studied, insisting that history and political economy had something important to offer to their understanding of human lives. “Bridging domains posed as irreducible,” Trouillot managed to mobilize explicitly historical, ethnographic, and political economic perspectives as he articulated different views of a single place, and of the lives of the people who lived there.<sup>10</sup> In *Peasants and Capital* Trouillot took the village as the place from which he could ask his questions, as well as the site from which he traced national, regional, and global processes at work at the scale of the everyday.

While he wrote compellingly about global capital, about nations, village communities, and even about individual agency, Trouillot only rarely wrote about bodies—in fact, he studiously avoided an engagement with his own, as well as those of his interlocutors. William Roseberry, in his review of *Peasants and Capital* for the *New West Indian Guide*, lamented the lack of “the author’s presence as ethnographer” in the text and noted that as readers we learn little about Trouillot’s learning process, or about his experiences in the field.<sup>11</sup> In an era when feminist and postmodern ethnographers were making compelling arguments about ways we might acknowledge the embodied nature of the ethnographic endeavor, Trouillot scaled down his units of analysis but never quite made it to the human form. As a vantage point, the body seemed to have been too small for Trouillot and, perhaps, also too individualized for his tastes. But Caribbean feminists have been formidable advocates for attention to individual bodies, as they have shown how gendered and sexualized forms of exclusion operate in and through bodily difference. For example, M. Jacqui Alexander’s seminal work on law, citizenship, and same-sex desire in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas demonstrates how the postcolonial state has used and continues to use marginalized bodies to shore up its own legitimacy.<sup>12</sup> Deborah A. Thomas has shown how national discourses about crisis in Jamaica have been mapped onto black women’s bodies.<sup>13</sup> Patricia Mohammed’s reflections on indigenous feminist theorizing in the region has highlighted how the gendered body emerges as a key point of contention in Caribbean theorizing about postcolonial forms of equality and freedom.<sup>14</sup> Their interventions remind us that Trouillot’s interest in individual agency left untheorized a key scalar site at which we might understand a central iteration of global power. If we could extend Trouillot’s work down to that analytical level, how could his generative roadmap for recalibrating categories help us approach the body?

Trouillot’s treatment of Wesley offers one possibility. Thinking of the village as both a unit of analysis and a site for deconstruction, Trouillot argued that its boundaries were always in flux, maintaining, “We cannot take the village as a given entity, despite its unique name. . . . Rather, we will keep on redefining the entity itself, as the description goes along. . . . Wesley had to become

10 Ibid., 16.

11 Roseberry, review of *Peasants and Capital*, 167.

12 M. Jacqui Alexander, “Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality, and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas,” *Feminist Review*, no. 48 (Autumn 1994): 5–23.

13 Deborah A. Thomas, “Public Bodies: Virginity Testing, Redemption Songs, and Racial Respect in Jamaica,” *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 11, no. 1 (2006): 1–31.

14 Patricia Mohammed, “Towards Indigenous Feminist Theorizing in the Caribbean,” *Feminist Review*, no. 59 (Summer 1998): 6–33.

Wesley and its past transformations continue to contribute to its present identity.”<sup>15</sup> Trouillot insisted that Wesley was not a static place but a product of historical processes. He showed Wesley to be a site of convergence for the multiply scaled questions to which he attended. For him the place was a nexus, a conjuncture, and a site from which we might read an ever-evolving genealogy of power. Like Wesley’s recalibrated village, I see the body as something to be read as both a palimpsest and as a thing in a state of permanent becoming. In my own work, I am interested not only in bodies but also in their disarticulation. Following feminist materialist scholars such as Donna Haraway who argue that we should understand bodies to be assemblages rather than singular entities, I think of bodies as multiply constituted things, as blendings of companion species and inorganic material, containing multiple forms of agency and bearing the traces of multiple forms of power.<sup>16</sup> Haraway writes that “organisms are ecosystems of genomes, consortia, communities, partly digested dinners, mortal boundary formations,” urging us to pay attention to the agentive workings of parts of the body and not just to the body on the whole.<sup>17</sup> If the body is a product of social relations, as queer disability rights activist Edward Ndopu has argued, it is also a product of assemblage: a melding together of blood, bones, flesh, chemicals, chromosomes, cells, and spirit.<sup>18</sup> A Trouillotian and feminist materialist recalibration of the body is just the approach for the kind of scale-jumping that helps us think Caribbean bodies in systems, moving us from the innards of embodiment to the space of global capital.

## Bodies, Systems, and Signs of Encounter

There exist today, throughout the world, billions of objects and living beings whose very presence testifies to the links between the apparently remote place where they are found and the rest of the world. Part of the ethnographic enterprise is to identify them as signs of that encounter.

—Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Peasants and Capital*

In *Peasants and Capital* Trouillot argued that “thousands of small objects repeatedly verify the encounter between the peasantry and the larger order,” calling these objects “signs of encounter, [and] elements of mediation.”<sup>19</sup> For Wesley’s residents, he understood those small objects to be commodities like milk, salt, kerosene, flour, canned food, newspapers, sugar, and oil. Looking at any one of these objects was an opportunity to see Wesleyans beyond Wesley, and to ask questions about their historical and contemporary relationship to processes of globalization. In my interview with Marc that I reference at the opening of this essay, we too were talking about small objects

15 Trouillot, *Peasants and Capital*, 184.

16 There is a vibrant literature—and debate—in both the social sciences and the humanities about whether we can ascribe agency to objects. While some focus on how things mediate social relationships, others argue that objects, like humans, have agentive properties themselves. See Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and Bruno Latour, “Objects Too Have Agency,” in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

17 Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 31. A recent article by Michael Pollan on our bodies’ microbiomes makes a similar point. See “Some of My Best Friends Are Germs,” *New York Times Magazine*, 15 May 2013.

18 Tweet by Edward Ndopu, 3 December 2012, [twitter.com/Edward\\_Ndopu/status/275774557699321856](https://twitter.com/Edward_Ndopu/status/275774557699321856).

19 Trouillot, *Peasants and Capital*, 200, 199. The quotation used as an epigraph at the start of this section is found on 198.

that could be read as signs of encounter: we talked about food, fad diets, wrinkle creams, and pesticides. In Martinique, I examine how people understand the small—even microscopic—objects that are ingested into and that meld with their bodies, and in particular I have been focused on the circulation of a hormone-altering pesticide called *chlordécone* (“kepone,” in English). To understand this pesticide, Trouillot’s approach to world-systems and his labile and generative units of analysis have been instructive.

On this year’s *mercredi des Cendres*, the final day of Carnival in Martinique, throngs of people flocked to the streets of Fort-de-France. Dressed in the traditional mourners’ colors of black and white, they massed for the ceremonial burning and funeral for Vaval, the huge papier-mâché effigy that represents the spirit of Carnival on the island. On Ash Wednesday, when the focus of the celebration shifts to Vaval’s effigy, it also shifts to the big debates of the day. The creators, through forms of exaggerated parody, craft each year’s Vaval as a window onto the issues circulating through popular conversations on the island, and this year’s was no exception. The 2013 Vaval functioned as a site on which we might take seriously Trouillot’s insistence that our analytic attention to scale be at once material, temporal, and geographic, while also crossing from and between micro- and macrolevel perspectives for analysis. This year’s Vaval brought us to the body, but also to the community, the territory, the “nation,” and the world, highlighting the links between and the relationships of power among them.

Martinique’s 2013 Carnival season coincided with a lively and extended debate in France over the legal status of same-sex relationships. After months of argument both within government circles and without, on *mardi Gras* France’s lower house of parliament passed a bill intended to legalize same-sex marriage and to allow same-sex couples to adopt children.<sup>20</sup> The next day, Martinique’s *France-Antilles* announced Vaval’s funeral, under a headline that played on the slogan of the pro-gay-marriage lobby (“Mariage pour tous”): “Marié pour tous, Vaval est mort” (“Married for All, Vaval Is Dead”):

Cette année, le peuple a finalement découvert au lieu d’un homme, une espèce de “Macoumé” . . . Sa majesté Vaval, le roi de la masturbation, de la sodomie et de l’uranisme qui . . . laisse une longue lignée d’enfants procréés médicalement par assistance.<sup>21</sup>

(This year, the people finally found instead of a man, a type of “Macoumé”[:] . . . His majesty Vaval, the king of masturbation, of sodomy, and of Uranism, who . . . leaves a long line of children created through medically assisted reproduction.)

*Makoumè* is a Créole colloquialism (sometimes spelled *makomé* or *macoumé*) that translates, roughly, as “faggot” or “sissy” in English. In anglophone Caribbean slang, the closest equivalent is “battybwoy.”<sup>22</sup> While this is an insult flung at gender-transgressing men throughout the year, the

20 This was all spearheaded by the efforts of a deputy from French Guyana named Christiane Taubira. It culminated in May 2013’s “LOI n° 2013–404 du 17 mai 2013 ouvrant le mariage aux couples de personnes de même sexe.”

21 Jean-Luc Médouze, “Marié pour tous, Vaval est mort,” *France Antilles*, 13 February 2013, [www.martinique.franceantilles.mobi/actualite/culture/carnaval-de-martinique-2013/marie-par-tous-avaval-est-mort-13-02-2013-193212\\_198.php](http://www.martinique.franceantilles.mobi/actualite/culture/carnaval-de-martinique-2013/marie-par-tous-avaval-est-mort-13-02-2013-193212_198.php) (translation mine).

22 See Christian Flaugh, “Crossings and Complexities of Gender in Guadeloupe and Martinique: Reflections on French Caribbean Expressions,” *L’Esprit Créateur* 53, no. 1 (2013): 45–59, for an apt description. Most people who are called



figure is given a particular visibility during Carnival, when cisgendered men dress up in parody of *travestis makoumès* during the various *défilés* that are part of the celebration. This year's Vaval, as his funeral announcement suggested, was a twelve-foot tall makoumè or, rather, a pair of makoumès, walking arm in arm down the aisle to marry.

A conventional read of this year's Vaval might focus on the materiality of the effigies' figures: their exaggerated parody of masculine and feminine markers, their beards and makeup, the visible penises in their panties, their nail polish and high heels. A conventional read might highlight that the characters wore briefs that said "Koupé" on one side, and "Fyon" on the other, revealing the dense semiotic field within which they circulated: in Créole, *koupé-fyon* means, quite literally, to fuck in the ass. Aurally, the words sound similar to the names (Jean-François) Copé and (François) Fillon, anti-gay-marriage politicians from France's conservative political party, the Union pour une mouvement populaire, who waged a public political battle in 2012. Finally, the word *koupé* ("to cut," in Créole) sat on the makoumès' crotches, enacting these figures' symbolic neutering.<sup>23</sup> In one of the effigies' hands was a bottle of champagne, branded with the apocalyptic slogan "La fin d'un monde" (the end of a world), and his partner held a champagne glass labeled "Klordécone." A conventional read might focus on the fact that Martinique is the largest importer of champagne in the Western hemisphere, a fact that inspires many to conclude that the island suffers from a crisis of *surconsommation* (overconsumption). Or it might focus on the temporal dimension of the bottle's apocalyptic language, and on the fact that ideas about same-sex marriage are central to debates about the end-times both in the *outré-mer* and in the *métropole*. But in my own reading of the 2013 Vaval figure, I focus on the champagne glass labeled "Klordécone" and on what that can tell us about the relationship of (Martinican) bodies to (world) systems.

In 2007 Martinican intellectuals Raphaël Confiant and Louis Boutrin published a scandalous exposé, *Chronique d'un empoisonnement annoncé* (*Chronicle of a Poisoning Foretold*), an account in which they charged that an organochlorine pesticide used on Martinique's and Guadeloupe's banana plantations had irreversibly poisoned the islands' soils and sources of potable water.<sup>24</sup> The pesticide in question, chlordécone, was originally produced in the United States, and it was used for decades in the Antilles to combat the ravages of the banana borer beetle, or the *charonçon du bananier*.<sup>25</sup> While chlordécone's usage was halted in the United States (and in most of Western Europe) in 1976, it took until the 1990s for the French government to rescind licenses for its use in

*makoumès* do not self-identify as such; rather, it is a charge levied at a range of men whose degrees of feminine presentation give others pause. Most Martinican men live in fear of being interpellated as makoumès, something that can happen should they display a passing limpness in the wrist, a mode of speaking that is coded as female, or a manner of dress that does not conform to the style of the times for heterosexual men. Many of the same-sex loving men with whom I have worked recount that as young boys they carefully monitored their own comportment for fear that an insufficiently masculine performance would provoke the charge.

23 I thank Pascale Lavenaire for her help in parsing these *jeux de mots*.

24 Louis Boutrin and Raphaël Confiant, *Chronique d'un empoisonnement annoncé: Le scandale du chlordécone aux Antilles françaises, 1972–2002* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007).

25 *Chlordécone* (Kepone) was first synthesized in 1951 and was later patented by Allied Signal Company. From 1958–75, Allied's factories in Delaware, Pennsylvania, and Virginia pumped out 3.6 million pounds of the active material, only stopping after a major spill in the James River prompted the FDA to rescind their license for production. The longer story of its continued use in Martinique is the subject of an article under preparation, tentatively titled, "Of Plantations and Pesticides: Sexual Politics in Martinique."

the Antilles. As in other instances when their overseas territories have been treated as exceptions to a broader French rule, French citizens of the mainland were deliberately protected from this class of chemicals but their counterparts in *l'outre mer* were not.<sup>26</sup>

Of the two islands, Martinique has been the site of the most widespread use, contamination, and controversy about chlordécone. Like DDT, chlordécone is an internationally recognized carcinogen, and its presence in contaminated soils and foods has been linked to both male infertility and prostate cancer. According to the World Cancer Research Fund, Martinique has the highest rate of prostate cancer in the world, a statistic that many see as being linked to chemical pollution.<sup>27</sup> Further, chlordécone is understood to be an endocrine disruptor: a compound that generates estrogen-like hormones in the environment and consequently in people's bodies. Given this last effect, chlordécone has been the source of an emergent gender and sexual politics on the island, where local suspicions about the contamination's relationship to male effeminacy include new convictions about what some are calling a "genocide by sterilization" and a new hospital-based initiative to document intersex births.<sup>28</sup> While very little scientific research has been done on environmental contamination's relationship to human endocrine disruption, sociologist Celia Roberts evokes the kinds of fears that environmental estrogens inspire in academic and nonacademic discourses alike:

Globally today, there is something suspicious in the water, in the air and in the ground that is producing change in human and non-human biological systems. Chemicals that act like estrogens, the so-called "environmental estrogens," are repeatedly named as culprits. Reports of rising infertility in both sexes, of increasing incidence of reproductive cancers in humans, of reproductive system birth defects in children, of tiny penises in alligators, of "lesbian" gulls and intersexed fish, litter the pages of both scientific journals and the mass media.<sup>29</sup>

Thinking through the effects of endocrine-disrupting chemicals in human bodies, Roberts asks how feminist scholars might think about what these chemicals do without essentializing ideas about sex, gender, or reproduction.<sup>30</sup> In my own work, I am concerned with how we can take anxieties about environmental estrogens seriously while refusing a retrenchment into heteronormative fantasies about "normal" bodies. Since the publication of Confiant and Boutrin's work in 2007, the chlordécone scandal has prompted a fraught conversation in Martinique about the French state's

26 For example, in October 2002 France's Bureau of Consumer Affairs (the Direction générale de la concurrence, de la consommation et de la répression des fraudes) seized 1.5 tons of sweet potatoes exported from Martinique and incinerated them upon arrival at the port of Dunkerque. The cargo was determined to contain unacceptably high levels of chlordécone. This action has become iconic, because it served as a reminder that while root vegetables with that chemical load would never make their way to metropolitan French markets, they were being sold freely on Martinican soil. There had been no such incinerations on the island, and foods that were deemed unfit for human consumption in the metropole were allowed to circulate in *l'outre-mer* without penalty.

27 See the statistics at [www.wcrf.org/cancer\\_statistics/data\\_specific\\_cancers/prostate\\_cancer\\_statistics.php](http://www.wcrf.org/cancer_statistics/data_specific_cancers/prostate_cancer_statistics.php) (accessed 30 April 2013).

28 "Un génocide par stérilisation" is the title of one of the chapters of Confiant and Boutrin's *Chronique d'un empoisonnement annoncé*. *Intersex* is a general term used to describe a variety of conditions when a person's sexual or reproductive anatomy does not correspond with ideal-typical definitions of male and female. It is a condition that describes real biological variation and confirms that nature offers us an anatomical spectrum, rather than two clear-cut categories, when it comes to the biology of sexual differentiation. Intersex variations can be anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal. See Anne Fausto-Sterling, "The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough," *Sciences* 33, no. 2 (1993): 468–73.

29 Celia Roberts, "Drowning in a Sea of Estrogens: Sex Hormones, Sexual Reproduction, and Sex," *Sexualities* 6, no. 2 (2003): 196.

30 *Ibid.*, 197.

neglect of Antilleans' health, about the relationship of environmental contaminants to gender and sexual expression, and about the continued dominance of local white elites in the islands' agriculture industries. While the contamination activates residents' fears about the porosity of the body's boundaries, it also affords an important opportunity to think more flexibly about bodies, about what they are made of, and about what their biology might mean.

During my conversation with Marc, we were talking about just that. Long before the chlor-décone scandal made its public début at the 2013 Carnival, I had been listening to people have informal conversations about the pesticide and about what its circulation in their bodies has come to mean to them. While many of my interlocutors focused explicitly on the idea that chlordécone might be a feminizing substance by virtue of its estrogenic properties, Marc's fears of chemically induced prostate cancer was another example of the ways this environmental concern has become an issue for gender, sexual, and reproductive politics. As we talked, Marc said this:

On a la capacité—'fin—on a le droit de choisir. . . . Là, j'achète chez Leader; là, je prend bio. . . . Mais au final, j'ai pas le choix—pas de tout. Si c'est dans l'eau, si c'est dans la terre où je fais mon 'ti jardin, si c'est dans les corps des mamis, des papis qui font des petits . . . il n'y a rien à faire. Les trucs que j'en ai dans mon colon—les tumeurs—je fais mon mieux pour les soigner, c'est sûr, car je suis un homme, Vanessa—100 percent—et je ne veux jamais perdre ni 1 percent ni 2. Mais franchement—ça va faire une différence si j'achète une dachine bio? Là—je ne suis pas convaincu.<sup>31</sup>

(One has the capacity—I mean—one has the right to choose. . . . That, I buy at Leader [Leader Price is a low-cost grocery chain]; that, I buy organic. . . . But in the end, I don't have a choice—not at all. If it's in the water, if it's in the soil where I have my kitchen garden, if it's in the bodies of mommies and daddies who are having children, . . . there's nothing to be done. The things that I have in my colon—the tumors—I'm doing my best to take care of them, that's for sure, because I am a man, Vanessa—100 percent—and I never want to lose even 1 or 2 percent. But seriously—it's going to make a difference if I buy organic *dachine*? There—I'm not convinced.)

Marc's skepticism, as well as his resignation in the face of the widespread nature of the island's contamination, is apparent in his invocation of there being "rien à faire" (nothing to be done), even given the choices that he might make about where to buy his food or drink his water. As a sign of encounter between his body and the (French) state, as well as between his body and the world, the contaminants that Marc presumes to be the source of his colon polyps are both a reminder of the unfixed nature of his body, as well as of the limits of his agency when it comes to making it as healthy as he would wish. He articulates, though somewhat obliquely, how his choices are limited by powerful forces beyond his control, and any analysis of Marc's health (as well as that of his fellow Martinican residents) would be incomplete without an analysis of how their bodies are produced

31 *Dachine* (or *chou de chine*; dasheen) is a root vegetable similar to eddoe or taro and a staple on the traditional Martinican table. Like other "ground provision" in the region, it grows ubiquitously on the island and is therefore a cheap source of calories and a widely used staple starch in ordinary people's diets. Root vegetables like *dachine*, though, have recently become the object of a new kind of scrutiny: in the last five years people have begun to take seriously the warning that tubers are particularly dangerous accumulators of chemical contamination from the surrounding soil and have begun to heed advice to consume only organic roots and tubers. The translation of Marc's statements is mine.

through and via engagements with the local, regional, and global forms of power that have made the island's chlordécone contamination possible.

What chlordécone has done and continues to do is to call attention to the intimate ways Martinican bodies are connected to commodity chains, to uneven relations of colonial/postcolonial power, and thus to world systems. Taking a chlordécone molecule as a unit of analysis recalibrates the scale of ethnographic practice, bringing us not only to the body, but also to the chemicals circulating within and beyond it. Marc's body is an important site of (inter- and intra-) action, a site "on the ground" that encourages us to look *in* the ground—a position from which we might ask new, and more finely calibrated questions about how individual bodies and individual people come to be, in dynamic relationship to the worlds around them.<sup>32</sup> Trouillot's work encouraged a scaling outward to the world, but in doing so it also enabled our efforts to scale inward, recognizing the multiple levels at which our material entanglements—be they cellular, chemical, or commercial—might be connected to global politics. Trouillot's attention to scale offered us a new way toward thinking bodies in the system, and his work reminds us that bodies, too, matter in the world.

### Acknowledgments

As someone who was not a student of Trouillot's but who has benefited enormously from his work, I am grateful to have been invited by Yarimar Bonilla to contribute to this discussion. An early version of this essay was presented at "The Life and Work of Michel-Rolph Trouillot Symposium," New York University, 1 March 2013. Thanks to Aisha Khan and Katherine Smith for the invitation to participate, to my copanelists for their stimulating papers, and, in particular, to Mayanthi Fernando and Colin Dayan, who asked me questions that continue to push my thinking about bodies, chemicals, colonization, and Caribbean freedom.

32 On "intra-action," see Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs* 28, no. 3 (2003): 801–31.