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Erin Durban-Albrecht

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**THE LEGACY OF ASSOTTO SAINT: TRACING TRANSNATIONAL  
HISTORY FROM THE GAY HAITIAN DIASPORA**

*Erin Durban-Albrecht*  
*University of Arizona*

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**INTRODUCTION**

This essay uses Michel-Rolph Trouillot's notion of *power and the production of history* as a starting point to explore the ways that Assotto Saint (1957-1994), a gay Haitian American who was once a well-known player in the Black gay and AIDS activist cultural movements in the United States, is remembered and written about in contemporary venues.<sup>1</sup> I argue that the politics of remembrance pertaining to Saint's cultural work and activism has significant consequences for our understanding of late twentieth century social and cultural movements in the United States as well as gay Haitian history. I explore the fact that Saint's work has fallen out of popularity since his death in 1994, except in limited identitarian, mostly literary venues. The silences surrounding his work that I describe in this essay are peculiar considering that Saint not only had important social connections with artists who are well-known today, but also, unlike artists with less access to financial resources, he left behind a huge archive of materials housed in the Black Gay and Lesbian Collections at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture as well as a rich and prolific corpus of published work. By offering a re-reading of these archival materials and placing them in their socio-historical contexts, I also make a restorative gesture to commit Assotto Saint's legacy to public memory. Through investigating the life, activism, and cultural work of this self-proclaimed diva of the Haitian diaspora, this essay ultimately attempts to offer a dynamic understanding of the movements Saint took part in as well as a re-reading of the dominant narratives about Haiti and gay sexuality.

I begin with a biographical sketch of Assotto Saint to highlight the connections between events in his life and major historical occurrences in Haiti and the United States. The subsequent section provides an overview of the range of his cultural work in terms of medium, genre, and theme.

I also emphasize Saint's efforts as an institution builder for the Black gay cultural movement as well as the broader AIDS activist cultural movement. This overview builds a foundation that allows us to understand why Assotto Saint has not received the same kind of posthumous recognition as his contemporaries. His work has been recognized, primarily by circulating his essay "Haiti: A Memory Journey" in recent anthologies of Caribbean writing; this, however, has also in some ways reduced the complexity of the transnational critiques fiercely presented by this historical figure in his lifetime. In the final sections of the paper, I describe what is at stake in the "practice" of remembering Assotto Saint with all his complexities, thus rectifying the essentializing and silences that have surrounded his literary contributions and activism.

### THE LIFE AND DEATH OF ASSOTTO SAINT

*i was born on all angels day  
 but throughout my life  
 i've been a bitch out of hell/  
 don't nobody show up at my funeral  
 to call me nice or some shit like that/  
 save it for turncoat cocksuckers  
 who on their deathbeds  
 open their mouths wide to claim god/  
 —Assotto Saint, "Devils in America"*

Assotto Saint died of AIDS-related complications in New York City on June 29, 1994. The week of Saint's death, the city swelled with queers: drag queens, gays, lesbians, transgender people, and AIDS activists among others. Drawn by an act of celebration—the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Stonewall Riot in Greenwich Village—and of mourning and frustration—a decade and a half of the ongoing AIDS crisis—the gathering of queers in New York City coincided with Saint's death in the uncanny way that so many of his major life events paralleled the social and political changes of his time. The poet, playwright, performer, and activist was born in Les Cayes, Haiti as Yves François Lubin on October 2, 1957, the same week that the infamously repressive, US-backed dictator François "Papa Doc" Duvalier was elected president. Saint's first trip to the United States, visiting his mother, who left him in the care of an aunt five years earlier, coincided with the advent of the US gay liberation movement; fittingly, Saint spent the earlier part of that 1969 summer indulging his sexual desires with an older boy in Les Cayes.

After a decade of living in New York City, Assotto Saint met the man who would become his life-partner, Jan Urban Holmgren, a Swedish American Airlines flight attendant who was Saint's senior by eighteen years. Jan's 1993 obituary, written by Saint, stated: "Jan & Yves fell in love on November 9, 1980; the same week that the Reagan-Bush-SHIT government was first elected to the White House with its right-wing politics of greed, prejudice, & stupidity" (1996, p. 19). When Saint finally decided to become a US citizen in 1986, after holding out for democratic elections in Haiti after the fall of the Duvalier regime, only to be disappointed by Haiti's policy against voting from the diaspora, the moment was offered up in critique of the enduring Republican administration in the United States. Saint wrote in the autobiographical piece "The Impossible Black Homosexual (OR Fifty Ways to Become One)," that he is the "one who on the day he naturalized as an american citizen/ sat naked on the current president's picture/ & after he was finished/ called the performance 'bushshit'" (1996, p. 172).

How incredibly appropriate, then, that the death of this outrageous, outspoken, fearlessly queer poet would correspond with Stonewall 25, a moment in which queers would reflect on decades of gay liberation and queer radicalism as well as the increasing homonormativization of gayness and the AIDS service industry. As with many AIDS activists, Assotto Saint did not go quietly, wishing his funeral to be open-casket as testament to the war ravaging gay Black bodies in the United States.<sup>2</sup> His death, just like his life, exemplified the social, political, and cultural movements of the time. Yet, in the litany of funerals of people with AIDS (PWAs) who were part of gay liberation, AIDS activism, and Black/gay cultural movements, Saint's Haitian diasporic flair marked him in unique ways. In the anthology *Voices Rising: Celebrating 20 Years of Black Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender Writing* (2007), Dorothy Randall Grey paid homage to Assotto Saint "in his Haitian divaness, arranging his own funeral, dictating whom he did and did not want to have reading poetry at his service" (Randall Gray 2007, p. xviii). While some of gay New York missed Saint's death amongst the festivities, his legacy was seared into the memories of those mostly gay Black poets that survived him; the years after 1994 abounded with dedications to this Haitian diva and self-described bitch who, in addition to participating in the cultural movements of his time, nurtured other writers and artists and was a significant institution builder.

## CAREER OVERVIEW

By the time he died at the age of 36, Assotto Saint had an impressive oeuvre of written work, plays, audio recordings, and films. His cultural

work was aimed at US audiences and was, therefore, almost exclusively in English. Saint's archives suggest that he did not pursue Haitian venues as outlets for his cultural work, and explanations of Haitian references in his pieces seem to confirm that he did not create this work with even a diasporic audience in mind. Rather, the majority of his work was geared towards gay audiences. Saint benefitted from gay presses and other cultural institutions that developed in the wake of Stonewall (see Picano 2007), but at the same time, he worked to increase the representation of Black gay men in these existing forums and construct new ones as part of a broader movement of Black gay cultural workers.

Saint's written work spanned genres such as poetry, memoir, short stories, and political essays. In his lifetime Saint could boast two self-published books of poetry, *Stations* (1989) and *Wishing for Wings* (1994). His written work also appeared in the following anthologies: *Tongues United* (1987), *Other Countries: Black Gay Voices* (1987), *Gay and Lesbian Poetry in Our Time* (1988), *Brother to Brother* (1991), *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS* (1993), *Jugular Defences: An AIDS Anthology* (1994), and *The Name of Love: Classic Gay Love Poems* (1995). A handful of magazines and articles featured Saint's work such as *Amethyst*, *Brooklyn Review*, *Changing Men*, *Christopher Street*, *Guys*, *Outweek*, *The Portable Lower East Side*, *PWA Coalition Newslines*, *RFD*, and *Vital Signs*. Assotto Saint also compiled his own anthologies of Black gay writing: *The Road Before Us: 100 Black Gay Poets* (1991), winner of the Lambda Literary Award, and *Here to Dare: 10 Gay Black Poets* (1992). Much of this work was published posthumously in *Spells of a Voodoo Doll: The Poems, Fiction, Essays, and Plays of Assotto Saint* (1996) by his friend and literary executor, Michele Karlsburg.

Saint's work transgresses media boundaries. His early interest in the performative and aesthetic aspects of Catholic mass in his hometown of Les Cayes grew into a love of theater and performance. He participated in school productions at Jamaica High School in Queens, where he graduated in 1974. From 1973 to 1980, Saint performed with the Martha Graham Dance Company before an injury prevented his further participation. During the 1980s, he performed at some of the city's hot spots such as 8BC, Limbo, Lounge, La Mama, and Tracks. Saint also founded the Metamorphosis Theater with his partner where they staged *Risin' to the Love We Need* (1981), *New Love Song* (1989), *Nuclear Lovers*, and *Black Fag*. The two collaborated on the last of these, but Saint's artistic vision guided the majority of the plays. With Saint as the lead singer, the couple also formed a band alternatively called Xotica and Galiens. Xotica's anthem, "Forever Gay," which Jana Evans Braziel described as "inflected with the Brit techno-pop style of the late 1980s" (2008, p. 86), was featured

on the LP *Feeding the Flame: Songs By Men to End AIDS* (1992). Galiens was a band entirely composed of immigrants to the United States, a name devised by Saint that contracted “gay” and “aliens.” Galiens would later become the name of the small press founded by Saint. Saint additionally participated in several queer film projects in the 1980s including *Loisada Lust* (1985), collaboratively directed by Uzi Parnes and Ela Troyana and co-starring Carmelita Tropicana. And while he did not make the cut in Marlon Riggs’ infamous *Tongues Untied* (1989), Saint was in *No Regret* (1992), his later documentary about AIDS that made an argument for seropositivity disclosure.

In his short decade and a half of cultural production, Assotto Saint’s work moved from awkwardly “out and proud” in the early and mid-1980s to possessing a clarity, self-consciousness, and playful seriousness as the death toll from AIDS mounted and after he tested positive for HIV in 1987. This is not to reinforce the maturity narratives that, as Douglas Crimp (1988) notes, characterizes much AIDS activist cultural work, but rather to mark the major shift in Saint’s work that paralleled shifts in the cultural movements of the time. He clearly perceived his work as an essential part of these movements; as he states in “Why I Write”:

Right from the start, my writings, and especially my plays... became what I call a necessary theater. I was cognizant of the wants and needs of our emerging community; my writings needed to serve its visibility and empowerment. Most revolutions—be they political, social, spiritual, or economic—are usually complemented by one in literature. (Saint 1996, p. 3)

Elsewhere in his writing, Saint elucidated that AIDS did not politicize him, but rather his politicization was a product of being a gay Haitian immigrant and a Black man in the United States; AIDS was just one dimension of his marginalization, a structure of death and dying that moved along other fault lines of social injustice and racialized oppression. In this way, his writing is akin to that of Joseph Beam and Essex Hemphill and other poets, authors, performers, painters, photographers, and videographers of color who used their art to simultaneously theorize sexual and racial subjectivities and move toward the eradication of multiple forms of oppression, or at least counter their immediate effects.

Assotto Saint gladly took on the role of institution-builder in the gay Black cultural movement, one that is commonly narrated as peripheral but is actually central to the AIDS activist cultural movement in the United States. One project specifically indebted to Saint’s efforts in this regard is *Voices Rising*, which “mark[ed] the twentieth anniversary

of Other Countries, a powerful, far-reaching, and deliberate legacy of community expression that began when Daniel Garrett invoked James Baldwin's line, "Our history is each other," to convene black gay men to a writing workshop on June 14, 1986—the same New York summer that gave birth to *Gay Men of African Descent*" (Randall Gray 2007, p. xi). Other Countries was a writing collective "created at a powerful historic moment at which feminism, GLBT people of color organizing, and HIV intertwined to unhinge closets and untie tongues, and rooted in a re-examination of the Harlem Renaissance's queerness and the lessons of black feminist expression... Other Countries was catalyzed from the immediate lineage of the Blackheart Collective and Joseph Beam's anthology *In the Life*" (Randall Gray 2007, p. xiv). *Voices Rising* paid tribute to Saint for his multiple contributions to Other Countries and Black gay writing in general. They honored his work as a philanthropist who bequeathed money to the organization, as a path breaking cultural worker, and as one of the founders—someone who built institutions and created opportunities for gay Black poets and performers in the United States to connect with each other and find an audience.

Of Saint's many notable contemporaries who did the same for these intersecting cultural movements—Marlon Riggs, Essex Hemphill, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and Joseph Beam to name a few—Assotto Saint is exceptional for his absence in popular memory as an integral part of these movements. Despite his collaborative work with most of the aforementioned people, as well as the doors he opened into the literary world for Black gay men in particular, there is also a curious lack of contemporary engagement with Saint's oeuvre by cultural critics, activists, and academics. Douglas Steward's article in the *African American Review*, "Saint's Progeny: Assotto Saint, Gay Black Poets, and Poetic Agency in the Field of the Queer Symbolic" (1999), and Jana Evan Braziel's "Honey, Honey, Miss Thing: Assotto Saint's Drag Queen Blues—Queening the Homeland, Queer-Fisting the Diaspora" in her book *Artists, Performers, and Black Masculinity in the Haitian Diaspora* (2008), stand apart for their sustained engagement with Saint's work. One of his pieces has also been reprinted in anthologies such as Edwidge Danticat's *The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora in the United States* (2001) and Thomas Glave's *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles* (2008) discussed in the final section of this essay.

### **ASSOTTO SAINT AND THE BLACK GAY CULTURAL MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES**

*Lately I have been accused of not practicing the goal I preach of 'truth*

*at all costs.” That by using the pen name Assotto Saint, instead of my birth-given name, Yves F. Lubin, I am protecting my family from being shamed from my outrageousness and by my openly gay black writings... I have never denied, lied, or invoked ‘the right to privacy’ regarding my two names... I chose the pseudonym Saint when I started writing in 1980 to recreate myself... By 1972, I had already come out to every member of my family, our friends, and the New York Haitian community and media. Assotto is the Creole pronunciation of a fascinating-sounding drum in the voodoo religion. At one time I had taken to spelling Assotto with one “t” but superstitiously added back the other “t” when my CD4 t-cell count dropped down to nine. Saint is derived from Toussaint L’Overture, one of my heroes. By using the nom de guerre of Saint, I also wanted to add a sacrilegious twist to my life by grandly sanctifying the low-life bitch that I am.*

—Assotto Saint, “Addendum”

In the 1980s and early 1990s, Assotto Saint was *centrally* located within the Black gay cultural movement in terms of what he was publishing and with whom he was collaborating. He was also geographically located in the epicenter of the Black queer arts scene at that time, New York City. Inspired by feminist women of color, particularly Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde, a cohort of young, Black gay men decided that they were going to work together to challenge the exclusionary aspects of the post-Stonewall white gay culture industry. Most Black gay writing had limited circulation, even the Blackheart Collective’s journal, and the method of anthologies allowed for the advent of a new cultural movement. Joseph Beam, a Black gay leader of national prominence who played a significant role in gay and lesbian institution building in the late 1970s and 1980s, published the first anthology of black gay writing in 1986, *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*. Beam issued a call to black gay writers in this work: “Transmitting our stories by word of mouth does not possess archival permanence. Survival is visibility” (15). Beam also initiated another anthology project in the same vein, *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (1988) that was completed by Essex Hemphill after Beam’s death. Community newspapers, such as *Gay Community News* and *Outweek*, as well as the artists themselves posited a lineage between this Black gay cultural movement and the Harlem Renaissance. The cover of the *Gay Community News* in the first week of March 1987 read “From the Harlem Renaissance to the ‘80s Revolution: Poetry by Black Gay Men.” The headline inside declared Black gay poetry as an act of revolt, speaking back to mainstream society and the white supremacy of “white faggots” from the position of NO MAN. As one of the founding members of the Black gay writing collective, Saint



stepped forward to answer this call to make more spaces for Black gay writing through anthologies. Within this platform, he carried out two major editorial projects in the last years of his life, *The Road Before Us: 100 Gay Black Poets* (1991) and *Here to Dare: 10 Gay Black Poets* (1992). Saint and other writers such as Joseph Beam, Essex Hemphill, and Melvin Dixon formed an effective and articulate community of artists that grappled with the difficult questions of representation that emerged in the 1980s and together shaped a vibrant transnational movement of gay Black cultural production in the United States.

While the Black gay cultural movement predated the cultural movement of AIDS activism by just a couple years, there was a necessary confluence in the early 1980s. Saint mentioned in an interview that as early as 1983 he was taking time out from both his creative work and his job at the New York City Health & Hospitals Corporation to care for friends who were diagnosed with HIV. By the late 1980s when Assotto Saint was diagnosed, the seropositivity rate in the Black gay arts community was so high that the movement necessarily transformed into one of AIDS activism, albeit not the one traditionally narrated from the high art world. David Deitcher's chapter in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America* (1999), "What Does Silence Equal Now?" wrestles with how to provide a master narrative at the height of the AIDS activist cultural movement from 1985 to 1992 and ultimately draws on Jan Zita Grover's introduction to *AIDS: The Artists' Response* (1989) in which she outlines the two generations of this movement.

The first generation bore witness to loss in memorializing works that were fundamentally declarative and descriptive: "Here was a life, this life is missed; here are its mourners." Accordingly, such works were dominated by the traditional genre of portraiture, be it in painting, photography, video, or, for that matter, in the individual panels of the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt... [T]he second-generation artists' responses emerged only after the political nature of the AIDS crisis became apparent. Corresponding with the mass mobilizations of AIDS activism, the second-generation response consisted of the "activist, largely collectivist work" that moved beyond expressions of loss to "make the social connections, touch the anger, and harness it to social purposes." (97)

Grover's narrative provides a general frame with which to read Saint's work as part of the Black gay and AIDS cultural movements. In 1986 and 1987, around the same time the Names Project was initiated, Saint's poetry became peppered with remembrances of lost friends and lovers. When

he began putting together his first anthology a few years later, Saint was acutely aware that the anthology served an archival function in the years of an epidemic when, as he said, “many of us black gay writers are dying much sooner than we anticipated” (1996, p. 6). While the temporal organization of “generations” may be a misnomer in Grover’s framework, considering that the artist group Gran Fury blasted Soho with their agitprop just a year after the Names Project, the description is broadly accurate in terms of thematic shifts within cultural responses to the HIV epidemic. The same shifts are evident in the Black gay cultural movement, and the anthologies described previously, including the one that inspired Marlon Riggs’ *Tongues Untied* (1989), straddle these two themes. In particular, a period of art heavily marked by mourning and individual and collective loss of gay Black men crested into a wave of anger at the government that so callously perpetrated what is best described as genocide.

Even though there are some similarities in this obviously broad theorization of the cultural movement of AIDS activism with the Black gay cultural movement, Saint’s writing, as well as the writing of other Black poets, is strikingly different than what is highlighted in the historical record of cultural responses to the epidemic from this same peak period. In *Facing It: AIDS Diaries and the Death of the Author* (1998), Ross Chambers posits that for many writers who were afflicted with HIV, writing acted as both a medium for mourning and as a prophylaxis to make death more bearable by committing oneself to the historical record (ix and 5). AIDS activist Michael Lynch’s quote, “To write history is to write against death,” (Silversides 223) is appropriate here; for a generation of artists confronted by the immediacy of the conditions of mortality, it is a fairly unsurprising response that has resonances in Joseph Beam’s call to Black artists even though he did not disclose that he was HIV positive, a fact that became known only after his death. The archival project and the seething cultural work that challenged the US government’s deadly non-response to the AIDS crisis are intertwined; under necropolitical regimes, particularly those in the United States that are bound to deeply entrenched histories of racism, remembering and memorializing the work of populations marked for destruction is a powerful political act.

The writing of the Black gay AIDS activists was also taking the pulse of the cultural movement in connection with these living legacies of oppression. Between 1992 and 1994, a series of books were published that reflected on the cultural movement of AIDS art activism. One of these, Andréa Vaucher’s *Muses from Chaos and Ash: AIDS, Artists and Art* (1993) provides particular insight in how the Black gay cultural movement has been situated within the larger response of cultural workers to the

AIDS crisis. Marlon Riggs and Essex Hemphill are the only two artists interviewed from this movement, and they are conspicuously the only artists in the entire book who talk about the racialized impacts of responses to AIDS and how the epidemic worked along other fault lines of oppression. Moreover, they called out “white faggots” (152) for their privileged self-absorption as well as their complicity in perpetuating racism.<sup>3</sup> The only time the twenty or so other artists invoke race is as a metaphor to describe their experiences as someone living with HIV. One poet wrote upon revealing to a lover that he is HIV positive: “He wanted to wear surgical gloves to touch me. He was terrified. He was terrified of my body. That was probably the most painful part of it. I felt like maybe I could have an inkling of what it felt like for blacks to be segregated” (52). Slavery, apartheid, segregation, genocide—all these words permeate the interviews of white artists about living with HIV. These “white faggots” draw on the racialized language of trauma in the United States within a highly problematic framework of empathy and an unethical lack of development in their analysis of racism as connected to the epidemic.

Saint’s articulate poetry, prose, and performance art was in line with the Black gay cultural movement in terms of how the activist thrust of this movement worked as a “diagnostic” of this period, but Saint’s work is notably transnational in a way that the work of many of his contemporaries (Essex Hemphill’s, for example) was not. Saint’s poetry explicitly critiques the racism of the gay “community,” the AIDS activist movement, as well as the American government. His poignant and lucid commentary extends as well to the major events of this period including the *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision, the institution of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” the detention of Haitians in Guantanamo, the discourses of Magic Johnson’s “coming out,” US public health policies, and the Winnie Mandela trial. Saint made evident the connections between these events and others and urged action at a time when others were stuck in the stasis of only critique. “False Starts,” a poem moved forward through the refrain of “what’s the deal bill,” is exemplary of Saint’s use of a transnational frame in his edgy activist cultural work. The poem begins:

Racing away  
 From campaign promises back to bushshit policies  
 Watch him jiggle his fat ass while he jogs/  
 A man with obviously no big-stick dick  
 Slick willie starts to make me sick/  
 What’s the deal bill

Bending over so fast on gays in the military  
 To nunn the hunn who needs a laxative  
 & thinks that he not you should be in the white house/  
 stop playing political expediency games with civil rights/  
 (1996, p. 101)

Saint goes on to take President Clinton to task about his immigrant detention policies and the appointment of “a straight white woman from Oregon” as AIDS czar before letting him know that “several of us are keeping tabs on your false starts” (1996). Among all other connections that the Black gay cultural movement was making between racism and heteropatriarchy, Assotto Saint stands apart for keeping Haiti, and by extension the larger “geography” impacted by American imperialism, within the scope of the critique. Clearly, the cultural movement of AIDS activism was by and large silent when it came to the treatment of Haitians, not to mention the other unsavory characters of the Center for Disease Control “Four-H Club.”<sup>4</sup>

#### THE PERFORMANCE OF NORMATIVITY IN THE CULTURAL MOVEMENT OF AIDS ACTIVISM

*now i have a nightmare*  
 ☞ *it's a nightmare deeply rooted in the american dream*  
*my normal heart just ain't ticking as is/  
 i'm a timebomb*  
 —Assotto Saint, “New Love Song”

Placing Assotto Saint’s work at the center of the cultural movement of AIDS activism, to wrest it from the silent spaces beyond the periphery, teaches us about the movement as well as the politics of representation at work here. Although a history of the cultural movement of AIDS activism in the way that Michael Denning did for 1930s cultural movements in *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1997), remains to be written, I have invoked diverse historical and theoretical sources to attempt to understand the cultural/activist work of the 1980s and early 1990s, the period during which Assotto Saint was writing. Saint’s approach to his work and productions differed and were somehow separate from the cultural movement of AIDS activism that mostly continued to reinforce narratives privileging the whiteness of this vastly diverse movement; yet, despite a common platform, these remarkable differences between Saint and his artist/activist contemporaries illuminate in significant ways the ways that this movement was gendered, racialized,

nationalized, sexualized and classed. Exploring these divergences, in addition to the convergences, provides insight into the recent silences that have enveloped the work of this bold and brazen artist, the “bitch out of hell” who refused to take shit from anyone including the supposedly benevolent and tolerant US government that granted him citizenship.

Performance, in multiple senses, was an important part of the cultural movement of AIDS activism, and, as with the literary arm of this movement, the (dis)similarities of Assotto Saint’s work with his contemporaries can teach us about the politics of representation in the movement. This section reads Assotto Saint’s *New Love Song* (1989), performed at the Metamorphosis Theater, against three different forms of AIDS activist performance—the now classic AIDS plays from 1985, *As Is* and *The Normal Heart*; early ACT UP demonstrations; and Pomo Afro Homo’s *Fierce Love* (1991). In the first two instances, Saint critically engages the normativizing aspects of the performances, neither of which were guided by the vision of Black gay men. Pomo Afro Homo’s California-based but geographically traveling *Fierce Love*, on the other hand, was also part of queer Black cultural production during this time and gives us some potential insight to the contemporary silences that surround Saint’s AIDS activist cultural work.

Saint’s *New Love Song* is set July 4, 1986, a time when the nation was being constructed through *Bowers v. Hardwick*, the Supreme Court decision that upheld criminalization of queers though state sodomy laws, and government silences surrounding the deaths of “dispensable populations” (poor people, people of color, gay people, intravenous drug users, and immigrants). The four characters in the play attend the centennial celebration at the Statue of Liberty in New York City and share a collective understanding and response to the failures of America’s promises. In turn, each performs the denigration of gay Black [immigrant] men and then return together to work through the self-loathing of inhabiting these subjects’ positions in late 1980s America. These themes are similar to the work of the Black gay cultural movement, and, through the characters and the narrative arc of *New Love Song*, Saint narrated history with poignant critique.

Saint also shed light on the normativizing aspects of AIDS activist performance as penned in the lines, *now i have a nightmare/ & it’s a nightmare deeply rooted in the american dream/ my normal heart just ain’t ticking as is/ i’m a timebomb* (1996, p. 312), which are meant to explode the representations of the mainstream AIDS plays *As Is* and *The Normal Heart*. In *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (1998), David Román explicates the representational politics of these two plays as well as their

place in the history of AIDS activist performance. Even though *As Is* and *The Normal Heart* are often cited as the *emergence* of AIDS activist theater, they are preceded by a number of plays from the early 1980s including *ONE* (1991) and *The A.I.D.S. Show* (1992), which themselves differed from most of the AIDS performance of the time that were staged specifically as fundraising events.<sup>5</sup> What made *As Is* and *The Normal Heart* different, according to Román, was that these plays came at a time when increasing media attention to AIDS, particularly the Ryan White story with a so-called “innocent victim” of HIV, created a wider audience that wanted to learn more.<sup>6</sup> Particularly in reference to *The Normal Heart*, Román asserts that the plays were palatable in that they “assimilated to the confines of mainstream theater production” though the portrayal of heroic characters and the reiteration of dominant narratives about HIV, including for instance that gay men should be less promiscuous (1998, p. 63). Saint, by contrast, celebrated non-monogamy, safe sex, and intimacy among gay men as important aspects of Black queer culture.

Aside from these plays, the most visible AIDS activist performances—ones that in many ways defined this cultural movement—are the direct action demonstrations of ACT UP, which Saint joined in the early 1990s. Since its inception in 1987, PWAs and their allies understood ACT UP as necessary activist art; the group even received a “Bessie” for its distinction in the performing arts from the *Village Voice* in fall 1988 (Weems, Wallis and Yenawine 1999, p. 105). A common tactic of ACT UP was “die-ins,” which various chapters kept up through the early 1990s despite the fact that the masses of bodies in prominent places no longer had the effect of making AIDS casualties visible.<sup>7</sup> What is troubling about these performances based on their representation in the archives of ACT UP—New York, the Associated Press, and the *New York Times*, is that they hinge on representational regimes that value whiteness. In the photos of ACT UP demonstrations from 1987 to 1992, usually staged in major metropolitan areas on the East Coast, almost all the bodies register as white. When racialized others become present in these archives, it is through once-removed photographic representation; white AIDS activists carry placards with black faces labeled “AIDS victims.” During this time, AIDS performances such as Saint’s *New Love Song*, demanded engagement with the devastating effects of racism, which is remarkably different than the AIDS activist cultural work that had mainstream cachet. Of further note, ACT UP did not significantly address the oppressive representations of Haitians as “disease carriers,” actions that were instead battles *primarily* waged over white, gay bodies, until 1993. However, Saint’s participation in these actions specifically invoked the stakes for Haitians in HIV discourses.

After being arrested for civil disobedience, Assotto Saint brought his activist performance to the courtroom. In his speech delivered to the Superior Court of the District of Columbia on April 28, 1993 shortly after his partner Jan's death, he stated:

My illegal yet constitutional action this past Monday morning, to which I unashamedly plead guilty, was done on behalf of all the HIV-positive Haitians, who have been granted political asylum in the United States, but are being detained unlawfully and immorally at Guantanamo Bay. (1996, p. 128)

Ever the critic, Assotto Saint also reflected on the noticeable absence of Larry Kramer, the playwright of *The Normal Heart* and founder of the Gay Men's Health Health Crisis who blatantly refused to address racism in his homonationalist texts and in the movement happening on the streets during the time that he became active with ACT UP in the early 1990s.

Saint's cultural work and activist performances may be read as a kind of Black gay nationalism, or at the very least in *New Love Song*, as an uncritical celebration of Black gay men in the style of identitarian politics; but ever the diva, he urged us to stay away from some of these understandings by throwing off the confines of what he viewed as limited foundations for activism. His brushes with the sort of rhetoric marked by these politics are difficult to avoid, though, and certainly his representations of gay Black men takes a very different form, for instance, than the celebrated work of Pomo Afro Homos' *Fierce Love* (1991), which worked against dominant representations of Blackness through characters who persistently elide essentialism. *Fierce Love*, which David Román contends was an exemplary piece of theater that utilized performance as a "viable means of intervening in the cultural politics of race, sexuality, and AIDS" (1998, p. 155). While the celebrated postmodern aspects of *Fierce Love* are largely absent from Saint's *New Love Song*, thereby making it less identifiable as an academically interesting site of resistance, after the advent of queer theory, these two performances should instead be linked through a Black gay cultural arts movement that formed similar critiques of dominant (racialized/sexualized/gendered) discourses of HIV/AIDS. For all their differences, *New Love Song* and *Fierce Love* posit an anti-racist politics of gender and sexuality that countered American necropolitical politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. They moreover performed a critical intervention into the normativity of the broader AIDS activist cultural movement from within.

## REWRITING ASSOTTO SAINT & GAY HAITIAN HISTORY

Restoring Assotto Saint's legacy to collective memory within the fields of Haitian and queer studies not only complicates our understanding of the Black gay and AIDS activist cultural movements in the United States, it also threads together a vibrant gay Haitian history from the diaspora. Here I find it important to discuss the politics of representation in his most reproduced/reprinted text, "Haiti: A Memory Journey," and the consequences of these politics for a broader understanding of queer Haitian subjectivity. In particular, I emphasize how the positioning of his text as it first appeared in a prominent gay newspaper for the posthumous collection *Spells of a Voodoo Doll* had the effect of turning Saint's narrative into one that lined up with dominant narratives of immigration and racialized sexuality in the United States. Here we can see power at work in the production of gay Haitian history mediated through the editorial process that altered and editorialized a piece that served as *the* representative text about gay Haiti before the turn of the century.

"Haiti: A Memory Journey" was published in *The New York Native* on March 3, 1986 under the banner "A Heritage of Black Pride." The three-page article begins with Saint's reflection on Jean-Claude Duvalier's infamous exit from Haiti just the month before. He continued:

For years now, Haiti has not been a home but a cause for me. Many of my passions are still there. Although I did my best to distance myself from the homophobic Haitian community in New York, to bury painful emotions in my accumulated memories of childhood, I was politically concerned and committed to the fight for change in my country. It's not surprising that the three hardest yet exhilarating decisions I have faced had to do with balancing my Haitian roots and gay lifestyle. The first was leaving Haiti to live in the United States. The second was going back to meet my father for the first time. The third, tearing up my application to become a US citizen. (3)

"Haiti: A Memory Journey" goes on to provide what Saint calls his personal mythology, full of descriptions about each of these events that punctuate his life. The article in its original form was complete with photos that show Saint as a burgeoning *masisi* (a pejorative term in Haitian Kreyòl for an effeminate gay man) in Catholic garb in Haiti; then, two pages later, Saint and Jan are shown in their band Xotica, donning "New Wave" sunglasses and left-side earrings. Through his writing and accompanying photos, Saint represents his transformation from Catholic choirboy in Les Cayes, Haiti to cosmopolitan, feather boa-wrapped diva in New York.



The morphing of this text after *The New York Native* publication is interesting because, by tracing its transformation, we are able to glean insight into how Saint's work was mediated in a way that wrested him into alignment with identitarian politics. When "Haiti: A Memory Journey" was initially reprinted in Saint's posthumous collection *Spells of a Voodoo Doll*, only a third of the article made the editorial cut, dramatically reducing what was most likely an already-truncated version of Saint's piece. This decision had dramatic consequences in its collusion with the silencing practices of nuanced narratives of sexuality, race, and immigration, which probably would have earned, at the very least, a "snap" and something to the effect of an "Oh. No. You. Didn't!" from Saint.

Instead of doing the work that Saint intended—specifically elaborating the painful difficulty of queer Haitian diasporic subjectivity situated between the intense cultures and structures of racism and heteropatriarchy in the United States and the pervasive culture of homophobia of a Haiti perpetually marked by the violences of US imperialism—"Haiti: A Memory Journey" became a palatable liberal tract of personal triumphs over hardship. The text facilitates a greater possibility of a reading that falls in line with imperialist narratives that posit exceptional violence and homophobia in "traditional" Third World countries and the United States as both liberator (e.g. asylum law) and liberated alternative, a safe place for gender and sexual minority communities and an obvious destination for queer migrants.<sup>8</sup> After describing the trauma of being labeled a *masisi* child, Assotto said of his first trip to New York:

I remember the day I decided to stay in the US. A week before I was to go back to Haiti, my mother and I were taking a trip to Coney Island. Two effeminate guys in outrageous short shorts and high heels walked onto the train and sat in front of us. Noticing that I kept looking at them, my mother said to me that this was the way it was here. People could say and do whatever they wanted; a few weeks earlier thousands of homosexuals had marched for their rights.

Thousands! I was stunned. I kept fantasizing that there was a whole homosexual world out there I knew nothing of. I remember looking up in amazement as we walked beneath the elevated train, then telling mother that I didn't want to go back to Haiti. She warned me of snow, muggers, homesickness, racism, alien card, and that I would have to learn to speak English. She warned me that our lives wouldn't be a vacation. (1996, pp. 233-234)

Despite the fact that even after the editorial cut, “Haiti: A Memory Journey” retains hints of alternative narratives (e.g. Saint’s mother’s warnings about the less-than-ideal conditions of daily life in the United States for Haitians), the new emplotment, particularly the narrative conclusion of the reproduced text, is imbued with the teleology of immigrant narratives that Saint worked so thoughtfully to *counter* in most of what he produced. Haiti becomes associated primarily with homophobia, as a place in need of escape. The United States, by contrast, becomes refugee to the fleeing *masisi*, a place where he can truly be himself.

The problem of Saint’s piece being edited into a narrative that aligns with dominant narratives of sexuality and immigration is compounded by the fact that the altered piece, and its attendant silences, notably circulates as *the* Haitian queer narrative and has yet to be displaced from this role.<sup>9</sup> That this altered piece has become the narrative of queer Haitian immigrants to the US is further evinced in two anthologies published after Assotto Saint’s death; significantly, Caribbean-American writers edited both. In the first, *The Butterfly’s Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora in the United States* (2001) edited by Edwidge Danticat, Saint’s piece is the only one that foregrounds queer desires, sexualities, or identities.<sup>10</sup> The second, *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles* (2008), was edited by Thomas Glave. Saint had included Glave, an American author of Jamaican descent, in one of his anthologies—*The Road Before Us: 100 Gay Black Poets* (1991)—when Glave was a young, unknown writer, and they maintained a personal relationship afterwards. Of the thirty writers featured in *Our Caribbean*, Assotto Saint is the only one listed with “Haiti” next to his name. In both these groundbreaking anthologies, the editors chose “Haiti: A Memory Journey,” which, more than any other work produced by Saint, most approximates a personal narrative of experience that identitarian anthology readers so conspicuously consume. It is ironic that the silences surrounding Saint’s more radical bent become most evident in the only two publications in the 2000s that include reproductions of his writing. The legacy of a palatable queer Haitian in these assemblages of multicultural celebration is surely unfit for the sassy diva who often asserted his belonging to the more radical Black gay and AIDS activist cultural movements.

## CONCLUSION

When *Milking Black Bull* (1995) was published the year after Saint’s death, the book hailed *the* triumvirate of Black gay writers and institution builders of the 1980s and 1990s movement as Melvin Dixon, Essex Hemphill, and Assotto Saint. Whereas there is a plethora of scholarship

about the first two, there is still much that remains to be said about the accomplishments and cultural work of the gay Haitian “bitch out of hell.” This essay makes a restorative gesture to commit Saint’s work to public memory, or at least institutional academic memory, and to honor him as a significant figure in United States social and cultural movements at the end of the late twentieth century.

Returning to the archives of Assotto Saint’s means grappling with the impertinent ghost who was highly demanding of his friends, fellow artists, and audiences, not to mention the governments of two supposedly representative democracies. To say the least, Saint would most likely be angry that we did not venerate his contributions and commit them to memory and even more so since the intention of his work got silenced in the homonational identitarianism that took hold in 1990s mainstream politics. As I have argued here, tracing Saint’s impact and influence—who took up his work and how, how it diverged and converged with the movements of the time—provide significant insight into the politics of representation of the Black gay and AIDS activist cultural movements as well as contribute to contemporary understandings of gay Haitian history in Haiti and in the Diaspora.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> The phrase “power and the production of history” comes from Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995), which influences my reading of silences around Assotto Saint’s cultural work.
- <sup>2</sup> During the period with which this article is concerned, “gay Black” and “Black gay” reflected substantial political differences. The arrangement of the adjectives determined the privileged identity and were a great source of debate among artists, activists, and academics. While at various points, Assotto Saint demonstrated that he preferred “gay Black,” ultimately he did not have strong feeling about the arrangement.
- <sup>3</sup> This critique was primarily aimed at Robert Mapplethorpe, but as Essex

Hemphill stated, Mapplethorpe was a stand-in for the failure of the “lesbian and gay framework” to address racism.

- <sup>4</sup> The Center for Disease Control determined four risk groups for HIV. The groups—homosexuals, Haitians, hemophiliacs, and heroin addicts—took the brunt of the stigma for HIV before much was known about what it was or how it was transmitted. The association between HIV/AIDS and homosexuals and Haitians continues to linger.
- <sup>5</sup> Many cultural critiques of the AIDS activist cultural movement are wary of this form of commodification that was also at the center of such campaigns as *Art Against AIDS*.
- <sup>6</sup> Ryan White was a hemophiliac diagnosed with HIV in his early teens. As someone struggling with HIV who was not gay or Haitian, his story garnered national attention and changed the face of AIDS.
- <sup>7</sup> For more, watch “Why I’m Not Dying Anymore” in the DIVA TV archives on the ACT UP website. <http://www.actupny.org>
- <sup>8</sup> Scholarship that fleshes this out in other arenas includes Arnaldo Cruz and Martin F. Manalansan IV (2002); Bradley Epps, Keja Valens, and Bill Johnson González (2005); Eithne Luibhéid (2008); Eithne Luibhéid and Lionel Cantú (2005); Cindy Patton and Benigno Sánchez-Eppler (2000), and Jasbir Puar (2007).
- <sup>9</sup> During the past four years as I have done this research, “Haiti: A Memory Journey” is one of the few things that crop up in English online search engine results when using terms “gay” and “Haiti.” While this changed significantly after the earthquake in 2010, Assotto Saint’s text used to be in the company of mostly (sex) tourist sites, the 2005 Haitian Gays and Lesbians Alliance website (an archival remnant of the now defunct group), a few notes about Jean-Michel Basquiat, and information about Lenelle Moïse, a young self-identified “culturally-hyphenated pomosexual” feminist performance artist and poet in the United States.
- <sup>10</sup> It is important to mention that, from my perspective, Edwidge Danticat’s decision to include this piece reflects her interest and commitment in exploring queer issues. At least two of her major works have queer women as major characters: Tantie Atie in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) and Ka in *The Dew Breaker* (2004). For more about queer themes in Haitian women’s literature, see *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women* (1997) by Myriam J. A. Chancy.

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