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Introduction

Nou Mache Ansanm (We Walk Together): Queer Haitian Performance and Affiliation

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I. *Nou Mache Ansanm*

This special issue emerges from a symposium at Duke University in fall 2015, “*Nou Mache Ansanm (We Walk Together): Performance, Gender, and Sexuality in Haiti*,” which brought scholars, artists, and activists together to generate a dialogue around performance in relationship to Haitian genders, sexualities, and queer lifeworlds. We convened at Duke in the days leading up to Fet Gede, Haiti’s days that honor the dead. In Vodou, the Afro-syncretic religion of Haiti forged in resistance to colonial annihilation, the Gede are the bawdy, dancing spirits of the ancestral dead. The symposium responded to the invitation of the Gedes to press on social taboos by dwelling in risqué gendered and sexualized expression. They were our guiding spirits to explore and celebrate embodied experience, the proximity of life to death, the necessary yet playful labor of remembering, and the need to expose truth for the sake of justice.

Inspired by the energy of the symposium, the co-editors decided a special issue would be a useful route to collectively imagine ways of doing critical black, feminist, trans*, and queer scholarship that takes seriously both the quotidian and the creative aspects of Haitian bodily life. Like the propulsive hip-driven dances of the Gedes, Haitian “queer” cannot be contained by constrictive nomenclatures or definitions. Here, we invoke “queer” as a framework of gathering and provocation, one that on Haitian terms opens up toward unanticipated futures that are rooted in and routed through Vodou’s spiraling trajectories, the Haitian Revolution’s full-bodied rebellions, and the everyday imaginative tactics non-conforming Haitians use to resist and rework confining social norms. Following the late Performance Studies theorist José Esteban Muñoz’s (2009) formulation of queerness as “that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough” (1), the Haitian revolutionary spirits speak to us through these longings and desires for a fuller world as well.

The working principle for this special issue is the Haitian concept of *mache ansanm*, which translates literally as “walk together.” This central organizing concept indicates a

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number of potentials, all of which we hold together here in convergence and tension. Practitioners of Vodou refer to the ways particular *lwa* (spirits) “walk with” devotees and vision each person’s ancestral legacies walking with them. Haitian subjectivities are consistently enlarged and relational as the *lwa mache avek nou* (spirits walk with us/you all). Our work here fundamentally recognizes ancestral and divine accompaniment. Experimental filmmaker and researcher Maya Deren, who in 1953 published about her encounters with Vodou, uses *mache ansanm* to explain relation with a difference. Deren was attentive to the ways in which each *lwa* maintains a number of different and specific qualities or paths, but despite these variations, there is something common that holds them as one. “The separate figures have been integrated around a principle, as its modifications, variations, or multiple aspects, just as individual ancestral loa [*sic*], who share a similar character, become grouped together as personal variations on a principal theme. They are said to ‘marcher ensemble,’ [*sic*] to ‘walk together’” ([1953], 60). Divergent complexities work/walk together as a family or nation (*nanchon*). *Mache ansanm* can also be interpreted as a practical strategy for protection, collectively claiming and occupying space. But walking together need not only be defensive. Feminist Caribbean literary scholar Omi-se’ke Natasha Tinsley (2011) approaches the concept as a mode of being together when *nou byen* (we are feeling good): “forging commonality not through gender, sexuality, or other identities but through walking together, through shared activity, experience, and support” (417). This special issue aims to bring together these dynamics of *mache ansanm*: ancestral relation; divine presence; an ensemble of variations; a practical action for protection, care, endurance, and support; and a non-identitarian mode of collectivity.

Mache ansanm, then, becomes an intersectional and interactive site to think through what constitutes queer world-making in Haiti. As we recognize the ancestral and divine entities that accompany dynamic Haitian modes of being and becoming, we also register the ways in which transnational friendships and collaborations that extend from personal intimacy, economic support, and other expressions of solidarity are central to survival for gender and sexually non-conforming Haitians. These affiliations too are at the foundation of our, the editors’, survival as creative scholar-activists who do our work with a conception of “alongside-ness” or “beside-ness”; that *nou mache ansanm*/we walk together with our collaborators, interlocutors, peers, and friends. *Nou* is the Kreyòl pronoun that means both “we” and “you all.” This reflexive collectivity is key for *nou mache ansanm* to operate as theory, philosophy, and imperative.

II. Transnational solidarities

We gathered again in Port-au-Prince in summer 2016, incorporated into a moment of convergence. On June 16th, Haitian LGBTI activists, artists, and health workers staged a memorial in response to the massacre of 43 queer people of color at Pulse nightclub in Orlando the weekend before. A collaborative effort between several organizations, the memorial took place in the courtyard of Fondation SEROVIE and Femmes En Action Contre La Stigmatisation Et La Discrimination Sexuelle (FACSDIS) that collectively provide education, health resources, and emergency services for “men who have sex with men” (MSM), same-sex and -gender loving women, transgender people, and sex workers. Those in attendance reflected on the intertwined violences that gender non-conforming, same-sex and

-gender loving, and sexually liberated people of color encounter on an ongoing basis in a world that does not want them to exist. At least one Haitian American – Jason Josephat – died at Pulse, a person whose life felt intimately connected to those who had fallen to homophobic and transphobic violence in Haiti over the past several years.

What emerged was a collective seeking to counterbalance violence with love and remembering. We worked together to create an altar to honor the lives of those queer people of color in the United States, Haiti, and beyond whom we have lost to systematic violence. One by one, people offered their thoughts, prayers, memories, and rallying cries. Yonel Charles, an activist, educator, and performing artist featured in this special issue, sang to pay respect to our dead. He started by humming the melody of “Amazing Grace,” which conjured for us President Barack Obama’s rendition of the song at a memorial in June one year before, to honor those nine black Americans killed at the Charleston AME church massacre and the deep pain from persistent anti-black violence in the United States. Charles’s song transitioned from “Amazing Grace” to a Haitian folk song for those who have fallen: *Wongol-o, w’ale ... Kilè w’ap vini we’m anko, w’ale ...* The song about the return of Haiti’s mythical bird of hope beseeches the departed: “When will I see you again? Please make sure you return to us. The country continues to collapse, but the day will rise tomorrow, and I will start anew.” We all joined in to call on the spirits together, to carefully usher those who have transitioned to the next life and to bless us in our work to build a better world.

Now, as we sit down to write the introduction for this special issue, we are confronted by another instance of crisis and confluence. Hurricane Matthew just passed through Haiti, decimating the entire southern region and wreaking significant damage in other areas like Port-au-Prince and Jacmel. As we witness the complete destruction of Grand’Anse, Haiti’s last truly fertile region – the home of one of our contributors, Jean-Sebastien Duvilaire – we are left to reckon with the simultaneous ecological, political, and spiritual dimensions of the crisis. As news travels to and through us in a swirl of media reports, phone calls, emails, Facebook posts, WhatsApp messages, and Tweets, we wonder: Where does the conception of “queer Haiti” fit into all this?

In the week preceding Hurricane Matthew, public homophobia surged once again. Fondasyon Konesans Ak Libète (FOKAL), a major Haitian cultural institution, was planning on hosting *MassiMadi*, an Afro-Caribbean LGBT film festival. FOKAL received menacing threats from government officials and Christian fundamentalists, and decided to shut down the center to protect their workers and those involved in the event. Their doors remained closed for several weeks. Meanwhile, LGBTI activists and their allies circulated a petition that called to acknowledge society as an “ensemble” – a collection of people with differences who must find ways to work together. This cultural clash over sexual politics and the nation is only the most recent event in cyclical outbreaks of homophobia in Haiti, as Erin L. Durban-Albrecht illustrates in an article about postcolonial homophobia in this issue and elsewhere (2015). That these two storms followed one after the other underscores the urgency we feel in our work as co-editors and indicates the necessity of ongoing and long-term projects that address the precarity of Haitian life in relation to creative modes of living.

This all is to say that as diverse cultural imaginaries and movements infuse nonnormative and anti-normative Haitian self-making, constant instability and structural, verbal,

physical, psychological violence also undergird everyday life. We cite these repetitions of violence, destruction, protest, and support to highlight the ways in which these occurrences do not make Haiti exceptional; rather, they make Haiti relational. Shedding light on the very ordinariness of crisis, these moments demonstrate the regularity in which people must come together in the face of devastation to rebuild their worlds, again and again.¹ These scenes animate our work and move alongside us as we write, emphasizing the ways in which any notion of “queer Haiti,” “a Haitian queer,” or “queering” in a Haitian context in the present must take into account the historical dimensions of Euro-American imperialism, intersecting forms of structural violence, environmental degradation, transnational links to queers of color in the United States, interconnectedness of artistic practices and social justice movements throughout the hemispheric Americas, and the circulation of black diasporic cultural production.

III. Queer Haitian Studies: a small (but growing) place

Our introductory paragraph locates how the call of the Gedes motivates our undertaking. However, in a Vodou ceremony, Gedes are the last to appear, to process, and to guide congregants with Ancestral wisdom. We would then be remiss if we disrupted Vodou protocol. When a community gathers, official communication with the spirits, the ancestors, one’s elders and peers commence with pouring libation. We salute and pour scripted libation to the incarnations of gate-opening Legba, the guardian of the crossroads, who preceded the Gedes in grooming us to animate Queer Haitian Studies as a contesting and contested site of active reflection and dialogue, acknowledgement, access, and adaptation.

We can mark the emergence of this field in Myriam J. A. Chancy’s *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women* (1997), an early study in which the author offers a queer interpretation of one of the characters in Haitian diasporic author Edwidge Danticat’s bestselling novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994).² Equally germane to this endeavor is Omise’ke Natasha Tinsley’s scholarship (2010).³ Tinsley writes from the sea’s watery depths and its life-sustaining intimacies to conceive of queerness in a Black Atlantic context. Tinsley’s important cross-field intervention, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic,” (2008) articulates the space of the Middle Passage as an originary space for black queerness – a passage that instituted a mode of relating body-to-body, of finding humanity in the dehumanizing space of the slavehold. Her more recent work (2011) follows a black feminist lineage that urges us to recognize the spiritual as epistemological.⁴ Thinking with Ezili, a family of *lwa* who diversely manifest the divine feminine, Tinsley proposes feminist and queer theorizing through spirit and the messy alliances queer subjects form in order to make a life. On the subject of alliances, Queer Haitian Studies has been made possible by the academic labors of Haitian feminists who have long been theorizing sex, gender, sexuality, and power – see, for instance, the special section of *Meridians: feminism, race, and transnationalism* curated by Gina Athena Ulysse (2011).

The modicum of extant scholarly literature about queerness in Haitian contexts tends to be organized around two broad topics: queerness in Vodou and queer Haitian cultural work.⁵ Jana Evans Braziel’s *Artists, Performers, and Black Masculinity in the Haitian Diaspora* (2008) extensively engages queer cultural production in the diaspora with a chapter for each of the following queer artists: infamous street artist Jean-Michel Basquiat of

Haitian and Puerto Rican parentage; Haitian-American drag king Dred (a.k.a. Mildréd Gerestant); and gay Haitian-born poet and performance artist Assotto Saint. Of these three, Dred has received the most attention within U.S. queer theory.⁶ Assotto Saint's work, especially compared to his contemporaries Essex Hemphill and Marlon Riggs, had been relatively neglected in queer theory (Durban-Albrecht 2013).⁷ However, there is increased academic interest in his work as shown by Andia Augustin-Billy's "Ayiti pa lakay ankò: Assotto Saint's Search for Home" (2016) in *The Journal of Haitian Studies* and Ryan Joyce's contribution to this issue. Contemporary Haitian-American pomosexual (postmodern homosexual) poet and playwright Lenelle Moïse, also a contributor here, has been gaining more visibility in feminist scholarship and Haitian Studies scholarship.⁸ All of these analyses of Haitian queer cultural production have focused on diasporic Haitians.

There is a significant amount of published work addressing the queer aspects of Vodou as well as the prevalence of queer Vodou practitioners. Particularly path-making is Elizabeth McAlister's incisive essay "Love, Sex and Gender Embodied: the Spirits of Haitian Vodou" (2000), an early provocation toward the rich gendered and sexual possibilities Vodou divinities and service to them inspires, and her analysis of the intersections of sexuality and Vodou-derived performance practices in *Rara! Vodou, Power and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora* (2002).⁹ An ethnographic documentary by French anthropologist Anne Lescot and Haitian filmmaker Laurence Magloire, "Des hommes et des dieux/Of Men and Gods" (2002), was the first in-depth exploration of *masisi* in Vodou. This groundbreaking film remains one of the most widespread representations of queerness in a Haitian context, owing in large part to its popularity in anthropological circles and partial online availability. It moreover receives regular citation by scholars in Haitian Studies as well as queer Caribbeanists who theorize queerness in Haitian and pan-Caribbean contexts.¹⁰ In this issue we revisit "Of Men and Gods" with the filmmakers as they mark the fifteenth anniversary of the film.

The same year this film was released, Roberto Strongman's "Syncretic Religion and Dissident Sexualities" (2002) was published, critiquing U.S.-based LGBTQI human rights organizations—specifically the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC)—for "emplotting Latin America [and the Caribbean] as culturally backwards in comparison to what is presented as the more enlightened and progressive United States" (177). Strongman shows that Vodou in Haiti, Santería in Cuba, and Candomblé in Brazil are spaces in the Hemispheric Americas where queers of color flourish, and that these stand in contrast to the various oppressive forces in the United States—racism, xenophobia, and homophobia—that violently target queers of color. Strongman remarks that these Afro-syncretic religions moreover "dispel the notion that people of color are homophobic," one of the guiding assumptions of mainstream movements for rights (188–9). Strongman here foretells the way that the global LGBTQI would take up Haiti as a project after the earthquake, a defining feature of the current landscape of LGBTQI existence in the country.¹¹

Additionally, our project is inspired by recent energies around queer Caribbean lives and aesthetics in academic, scholarly, and artistic spaces, and here we aim to develop a Haiti-specific dialogue that can coexist alongside such initiatives. Jafari S. Allen's genealogy of Black/Queer/Diaspora (2012) offers a crucial transdisciplinary topography that charts work in Black Queer Studies and queer of color critique.¹² Like other queer of color scholars, Allen recognizes intellectual production in both academic and nonacademic

modes, stressing the necessarily “interlocking discourses and practices” of academic theory and of “nonacademic intellectuals” like cultural workers, artists, writers and organizers, all of which contribute to the fashioning of black queer diaspora projects. Similarly, online platforms such as “Theorizing Homophobias in the Caribbean: Complexities of Place, Desire and Belonging” (2012) collected and organized by Rosamond King and Angelique V. Nixon, and *small axe project*’s “Caribbean Queer Visualities” (2015 – ongoing) offer open-ended proposals for thinking queerly on Caribbean terms. Multi-modal exchange is something we have worked to emphasize in this issue, and *Women & Performance* affords us a venue to open up this abundant and restless terrain across printed and digital realms. This issue is our call for others to join us in conversation, one that recognizes the labors that constitute, interrogate, desire, dance, and boldly walk towards a queer Haiti

IV. Naming and walking with “queer”

During ceremonies, Vodou practitioners name. Opening with invocations to Legba and ending with Gede celebrations, they remember and repeat a genealogy that lists ancestral and human bodies, and enlivens the knowledge, stories, and practices that nonbelievers trivialize and silence. Naming contributing participants of that continuum resuscitates them. “Men [or humans] with names never truly die. It is only the nameless and faceless who vanish like smoke into the early morning air” (Danticat 1998, 280). As with Ancestral Haitians who named themselves so as to divest their bodies and those of future generations of their colonial status as chattel, marginalized Haitians must continuously name themselves to combat epistemological violence.

Our gender and sexually non-conforming Haitian collaborators’ phenomenal power to invoke, re-image, envision, and realize – especially under time of great duress – comprise a shield and weapon of which perhaps the global LGBTIQI should be wary. As such, we juxtapose “queer” with culturally grounded self-naming by same-sex loving Haitians to underscore how rebirth by (un) naming for despised and dispossessed Haitian bodies might affect slow indiscernible quantifiable change. However, the invocation has touched us and others who strive to critically acknowledge it and bridge it with “queer”.

We walk alongside Haitians for whom uses of the words *masisi* and *madivin* (pejorative terms akin to faggot and dyke in English) cause anxiety. Those words evoke toxic images of Haitianess and might feel violent. Those who defiantly reclaim *masisi* and *madivin* are simultaneously divesting the terms of their bite and imbuing them with activist power. We labor side by side with those who find suspect an application of the U.S. academic label “queer” on Haitian practices – gender, sexual, and otherwise. In this instance, “queer” privileges Western rhetoric that glosses the practices of gender and sexually fluid Haitians and is foreign to their modes of self-conception.

What does “queer” catalyze for the editors and deny to Haitians who have not creolized it in their list of terminologies? We move with and through “queer” to illustrate what Haitian practices can contribute to the wellness of those who straddle local and global sentience, as we *rasanble* (gather) critical perspectives about these ways of being, becoming, and navigating the world. These, we hope, will inspire audiences to actively support same-sex loving Haitians’ explorations of self-love and collective care. As we work along, beside,

and together with our comrades, we reject facile translations of Haitian bodies and pay homage to their discreet and opaque creation of home-spaces.

Gender and sexually fluid Haitians' efforts to self-name is nothing short of remarkable, considering how easily legible their antagonists profess they are. Popular festivities' songs qualify *masisi* and *madivin* as *chawonj*, nasty and putrid. They are "sweet" hypersexual tricksters simultaneously reviled for breaking heteronormative conventions and desired for being highly "skilled" by Haitians who appear to lead heterosexual lives (McAlister 2002, 75–6). *Madivin*, a short-hand for the Kreyòl *madivinèz*, also signifies the excessive otherworldly. Poet Lenelle Moïse associates the *madivin* to the French *ma divinesse* (my female divinity) to elevate same-sex love by women (Moïse 2014, 64–5). In this issue, Kantara Souffrant's examination of Moïse's poems re-routes the *madivin* to Vodou's feminine divine Ezili, an interconnecting source of power for transnational Haitian women. On the ground, this empowering practice is not assigned to the *madivin* and *masisi chawonj*. In Edouard Glissant's terms, their opacity and difference are reduced to transparent dishonest texts legible within the society's Western-influenced norms (1997, 190).

It is a resistance to detractors' transparent and troubling translations that Charlot Jeudy, leader of the Haitian activist organization Kouraj, insists on with his advocacy of the umbrella term *Kominote M* or "M Community." In print and mass media, community and public speeches, Jeudy self-identifies as *masisi* and trumpets how he and *madivin*, *madoda*, and *miks* thrive to confront Haitians' fear about alternative modes of being and living. To re-inscribe what *M* folks invoke, his naming presses audiences to reflect upon ways that same-sex loving Haitians are "honest bodies." In apposition to the concept theorized by Patricia Hills Collins, members of the M Community "strive to treat the physical aspects of being as interactive and synergistic," begin to "interrogate [their] individual consciousness" and "reject dominant scripts of Black [Haitian] gender ideology by fully accepting their own bodies 'as is'" (Collins 2004, 283). By putting his body on the line in an unprecedented public manner, Jeudy instructs that his community fosters honest bodies and grounded politics that re-imagine affirming ways of being Haitian (283).

Jeudy is not alone in this fight, as this issue's contributors demonstrate. Yet ethnographic research with gender creative and same-sex desiring Haitians uncovers that speaking the *M* words inside and outside of the community is much like uttering the *N* word in the United States. Only members of the community are permitted to speak them respectfully to convey brotherly and sisterly love, with all the verbal and non-verbal cues that come with transforming toxic terms into ones of endearment and solidarity. Unlike their local and foreign allies who may have the social and financial capital to shield themselves from homophobic and transphobic attacks, less affluent Haitians cope incessantly with the ways in which the *M* words rekindle verbal violence that degenerates quickly into physical attack. For example, if one hears the catcall or whisper *masisi* from a stranger, qualifiers such as *sal* (dirty), *ko kase* (limp body), *malerez* (downtrodden), *a boyo*¹³ (unfashionable), *djol krochi* (slack jawed) are not far behind. This is a cue to exit the scene as quickly as possible. When unharmed, one is still exposed. *M* words zoom in too closely on sexuality and erase other facets of identity. Some respect Charlot Jeudy's courage for using a mode of performance José Muñoz has termed "disidentification" (Muñoz 1999, 31). Still, they walk with identifications that air out fantasies of their sexual practices and remind them how much they are always under surveillance.

As a result, the community invents its own coded language to evade such ridicule and rejection. These shifting self-devised and re-inscribed terms direct attention to their ingenuity, complexity and humor. They tell of their current realities. Gender and sexually non-conforming Haitians activate creative linguistic maneuvers to destabilize assumptive representations that they are transparent and predictable.

Any warning to carefully mobilize the concept “queer” in relation to Haiti contains a reminder to diminish rather than increase the gaps that scholarly analyses of the Haitian experience have generated. Respectful of their allies’ place-making practices, the editors use “queer” both to avoid potential misfires that might come with outsiders wielding emic terminologies, and to honor the non-normative performances that counter investments some may have in a fixed construct of Haitianness. In fact, “queer” here emerges from all that Haitians term *dwòl*.¹⁴ The Kreyòl word connotes something odd and off-kilter and is gaining momentum as a euphemism indicating the embodied manners in which bodies disrupt societal norms. Our uses of queer/*dwòl* is the locally rooted counterpart to E. Patrick Johnson’s “quare”: it converges with its Black communities’ remembering practices of queer subjectivities (2005, 124–157). These denaturalize Western, popularly and state-sanctioned norms and forward inclusive others in their stead.

In Vodou terms, “queer” conjures what Maya Deren ([1953] 2004) calls the potent “and” that bridges the divide between us. “Queer” is the “and” of our transnational alliance, “the relationship which makes all parts meaningful” (41). As we are invited to witness knowledge production and practice, and until our allies on the ground devise other empowering terminologies to speak about their activist and non-conforming ways, our translation of *dwòl* to “queer” enables articulation between allies, between sides. “Queer” facilitates a two-way communication that gifts all members of this exchange capacious mobility and intent. We – editors, contributors, collaborators, readers, and other interested parties – glide, pivot, rotate, go around each other as our collective body articulates and/or dis-articulates projections of the Haitian subject. The performance equation that “queer” produces eschews binarisms and directs attention to a world of interconnections, possibilities, and change, where disequilibrium of the established order prevails, where non-conforming performances of Haitianness shift, slide, and are mutually empowering with changes in the cultural, historical, and political landscapes.

V. Issue contents

Gedes, the epitome of alluring *vagabon* or *vagabonn*¹⁵, entice, if not excite, onlookers with hypnotic circular pelvic thrusts, and bouncing buttocks known as *gouyad*. Their *banda* dance unites genders and transgresses sexual norms. A *banda*’s circular movements engender coalescence between human and ancestral realms: performers that “*taye banda*” show their “*fè bagay*” (“doing the deed” or fornication) moves. *Taye* (to cut) is also synonymous with the sexual act. The grinning death figures who straddle phallic canes and rum bottles, rub hot peppers on their genitals, and trespass into participants’ personal spaces to simulate copulation are dissident to what Haitians conceive as propriety while they enact how succession begins. Haitians learn to respect the process of teetering between life and death. They stumble and do not fall. To be sure, *banda* performers catapult themselves in space, plummet toward the ground but always tilt vertically and stabilize themselves.¹⁶

Regardless of the obstacles, every being has or must seize the right to live fully as they journey to the Gedes' realm, transition through the *lwa*, begin anew in spirit, and replenish Haiti's fount of knowledge. How better to celebrate one's death than to fully embody and flaunt one's rebirth?¹⁷

"*Nou Mache Ansanm: Queer Haitian Performance and Affiliation*" features contributors who appreciate their interlocutors' exemplary ability to nourish the ancestral knowledge circle, especially given that they suffer much discrimination and attempt to plough through the heavy weight of stigmatization for being read as hypersexual and norm-breaking Gede surrogates. Gender non-conforming and sexually expressive Haitians stumble through: slanders that they attracted the 2010 earthquake to Haiti, psychic and bodily injuries during homophobic flare-ups, dismay that their brethren in enlightened America died horribly seeking out pleasure and companionship at an Orlando nightclub, and the ravages of Hurricane Matthew that decimated the little they possessed. In the United States, Assotto Saint waded through the tide of hatred brought by HIV/AIDS and anti-Haitian sentiments. Similar to Yonel Charles who regulates his flow of tears as he sings to his fallen kin's memories, Charlot Jeudy whose anger teems under a calm composure as he faces ignorant journalists who conflate his community's sexual practice with pederasty, and Josué Azor's photographic subjects (in this issue) who cling together as they walk to a party where they can express themselves unquestioned and unobserved, queer Haitians only bend, perhaps falter, but they pick themselves up and continue the journey only stronger. This praxis is anathema to discourses of resilience that have been recycled about Haitians. Distancing ourselves from that inert equation, we assemble works that focus attention on queer Haitians' banda-like *fòs* (force) – the amalgam of strength, stamina, humor, and grace that powers Haitians. Gedes respect these ecstatic folks who embody "stumble and recover" fortitude in their navigation of life's riches and pains, after each stumble growing ever more fierce in their playful humor and critical vitality.

This issue's academic and performance-centered essays, poems, visual arts, performance script, auto-ethnography, and reflections in dialogue with creative works celebrate Haitians' audacious and activist stance against manifold forms of aggression to their life-worlds. Here we offer framework, theory, and creative dialogic expressions of and for a Queer Haitian Studies. Throughout, we privilege Kreyòl terminology to maintain and retain the multiplicity of meanings each term-as-concept upholds. The Kreyòl offers what Gloria Wekker has termed "local conceptions of personhood," approaching Lyndon Gill's elaboration of this "artful listening practice" that can cultivate an erotic epistemology for black queer feminist Caribbean anthropology (Wekker 1997, 333; Gill 2012, 35).

The issue opens with Erin L. Durban Albrecht's essay, "Performing Postcolonial Homophobia: A Decolonial Analysis of the 2013 Public Demonstrations Against Same-Sex Marriage in Haiti." It provides the necessary historical and theoretical context for Haiti's contemporary landscape of public homophobia, Christian missionization, and "NGOization." Dissecting the terms of Western imperial biopolitical interventions, Durban-Albrecht traces the ways in which both evangelical Christian and global LGBTQI human rights organizations overdetermine Haitian life and propel what the author terms "postcolonial homophobia."

While Durban-Albrecht's contribution widens the discursive lens on Haitian politics of discretion, Ryan Joyce's essay examines the loud defiant claims of gay Haitian-American

poet, performer, and essayist Assotto Saint. In “‘Bitch Out of Hell’: The Queer Urban Marronage of Assotto Saint,” Joyce contributes to a growing body of critical work on Saint by reexamining his contributions to the HIV/AIDS movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s in New York City through the lens of marronage. Saint’s creative revolutionary movements, reflected through his poetry, essays, theater, and activism challenged entrenched state-sanctioned discrimination against queer black subjects while issuing a powerful critique of late twentieth-century American capitalism. Joyce’s reading of Saint as a transnational queer artist and activist who provocatively resisted the racist, anti-Haitian, heteronormative American response to the AIDS epidemic through the creation of queer black artist collectivities celebrates Saint’s queer urban marronage as one ancestral lineage of this project.

“Forging Lakou in the Grand Rue: A Polyphonic Reflection on a Collaborative Performance in Port-au-Prince,” a co-authored piece by Dasha A. Chapman, Yonel Charles, Jean-Sebastien Duvalaire, and Ann E. Mazzocca, approaches themes central to this issue: moving and working together across difference, recognizing the revolutionary *and* queer potential within the Vodou repertoire, and creating an affiliative call that produces dialogue. Straddling genres, this essay also bridges the issue’s conventional academic texts and the Ampersand section, which features critical creativities in the vein of Queer Haiti. As we propose queer as a gathering tactic for the dissenting and challenging work in this issue, we also notice how queer requires different modes of writing, and other modes of engaging critique. While Chapman, Charles, Duvalaire, and Mazzocca’s essay is one such offering, the following Ampersand section of the issue deliberately manifests a *queer nou* that is dialogic, reflective, creative, and auto-ethnographic.

We bring together a trio of contributions by queer diasporic Haitian women. First, two new poems by Lenelle Moïse: “Kissed There Myself” and “Rada Raincoat.” Moïse has influentially cherished the divine properties of *madivin/madivine* as a concept, most notably in her performance-poem “Madivine” (2014). However, as she articulated in her performance at the *Nou Mache Ansanm* symposium which riffed in “Kreyòl jazz” and invited us to “worship together, rebel together,” language and text “are always an approximation ... words are imperfect, exciting, manipulative”. Her poems here route through trans-diasporic icons and rituals to elicit the creative assemblage that fortifies non-conforming subjects across time and space. Next, Kantara Souffrant records her visceral and intimate engagements with Moïse, highlighting the affective stranglehold that Moïse’s inspired and defiant proclamation of shamelessness destroys. Finally, Sophonie Bazile gives us an auto-ethnographic memoir from the *Dykespora*, illuminating the ways in which migration brings one both to and away from oneself. Each writing from the *Diaspora*, this triad elaborates and complexifies a *madivin konesans* (woman-loving-women vital knowledge) that reckons with shame, sexuality, woman-ness, memory, and journeys to the self.

Selections from Josué Azor’s photographic series Noctambules – exhibited as *Noctambules: Queer Nightlife in Port-au-Prince* at the Fredric Jameson Gallery at Duke University from October 28, 2015 – January 22, 2016 in partnership with the *Nou Mache Ansanm* symposium – are featured here in conjunction with images from Azor’s newer projects. These visuals are presented along with an artist statement. Azor’s attraction to the life of the night evokes for us one queer term which fell out of favor at the turn of the century: *lougawou*.

Seemingly human and nondescript by day, the *lougawou* in Haitian lore sheds its skin at midnight, sprouts wings, and preys on children. Vulnerable only if you can find and destroy its skin, the demonized creature is endowed with supernatural and metamorphous attributes that enable it to live among humans and spirits. It is the incarnation of freedom: shedding one's skin signifies ridding oneself of the vicissitudes of Haitian life, perpetuated by patriarchal structures (Danticat 1995, 32–49). Same-sex loving Haitian men self-identified as *lougawou*. Their liberating practices sheltered by the secrets of the night are what Azor previews in his photographs and his artist statement in this issue. If Azor chooses to be indiscreet, he does so having gained his community's trust and permission. In offering brief yet careful glimpses of *lougawou* life, he indexes a societal position that Jeffrey Q. McCune conceives as an "imaginative and physical space where blacks create, produce, and pronounce their own meanings outside of surveillance" (2014, 8). Charlot Jeudy and Azor, in conversation with this issue's contributors, ultimately expose a Haitian battleground bent on erasing feminine gender presentation and non-normative sexual behavior.

Widening the focus on the dynamics of self-actualization in Haiti, Mario LaMothe's oral history script, in dialogue with Azor's images, channels the voices of those on the frontlines who stave off the onslaught of homophobic violence as they nuance the physical and ideological frames of Haitianness. As performance ethnography, LaMothe's rendering of an episode of violence captured by Azor's images generates a *nou*, a collective we, that critiques and captures power with humor, love, and play.

The remaining contents of this issue are found exclusively online, as part of the *Women & Performance* digital archive of creative work. From Port-au-Prince we move to Jacmel for two visual-critical dialogues and one dialogic meditation. Jacmel is the veritable "cultural capital" of Haiti's southern coast, home to artists, intellectuals, and revolutionary travelers for two centuries. First, Kwynn Johnson imagines Haitian author René Dépestre's icon Hadriana laboring in the streets of Jacmel through her graphite on vellum drawing. Riffing on Johnson's visual evocations, Kristin Adele Okoli theorizes the potential of a working, walking Hadriana in light of a critical reading of the queer dimensions of both the character in the novel and of Johnson's aesthetic imagining of her. Next, we offer a selection of photographs from Leah Gordon's *Kanaval* series, her more than 15-year documentary project of Jacmel's unique Carnival tradition. Gordon's photographs of Carnival street theater's transgressive characters are paired with a commentary by Charlotte Hammond, who situates Gordon's images of cross-dressers in cultural, political, historical context. Finally, Jacmelian author and public intellectual Jean Elie Gilles' novel "*Out of the closet*" on *Death's deliverance* or "*In the foot steps of Diogène*" – from which we selected some excerpts – is the subject of Myron Beasley's rumination on same-sex desire and the archive in Haiti.

To conclude the issue, we present a short interview with filmmakers Laurence Magloire and Anne Lescot on the fifteenth anniversary of the release of their influential film "*Des Hommes et Dieux/Of Men and Gods*." Introduced by Katherine Smith, this moment of reflection is particularly apt in the context of the attacks spurred by the *MassiMadi* film festival in Port-au-Prince, yet rooted in the circumstances of the filmmaker's rebuilding efforts in the wake of Hurricane Matthew.

"*Des Hommes et Dieux/Of Men and Gods*" broke ground for the formation of a Queer Haitian Studies, and this issue marks various trajectories that activists, artists, and

academics have taken this field in a decade and a half. As Elizabeth McAlister commented at the Duke symposium, most of the work included here would not have been possible 10 years ago, which we understand as related to the growth of LGBTI and related social movements in Haiti as well as a to the diminishment of anti-Haitianism, anti-Black racism, homophobia, and transphobia in certain realms of academe. We now have many Haitian Studies colleagues who think about non-normative gender and sexuality in their work, whether or not they identify with the specific project of highlighting queer lives and world-building. For example, Mamyrah Dougé-Prosper's ethnographic research on Haitian social movements considers the perspectives of lesbian and madivin organizers and their relationship to broad-based work for social justice.

These pieces work collectively as an offering, to the possibility of a field of Queer Haitian Studies that we might help bring into being – though time has yet to tell. As we hope to convey, we are not the originators of such a field, but perhaps some of its most visible guardians and advocates with a deep investment in its future as it grows sideways (and that is to say queerly) through the academy. There are many others like us who have been working behind the scenes to create the conditions that ensure a future for Queer Haitian Studies as well, but they do it much more discretely. Haitian feminists – mostly women and some men – have been key to this work, and it would be impossible to account for all the ways this project is indebted to them. We respect their various reasons for doing this essential reproductive labor, labors of love, without public acknowledgement—including that they have expressed to us feeling personally or professionally vulnerable in ways that we do not (as Americans, U.S.-based scholars, white people, men). So we want to acknowledge that power differential and say that we understand our roles in relationship to this project as a different incarnation of the Catholic saints and the Vodou lwa who *mache ansanm*, though one is in “front” (and more visible) while the other is “behind.” We are more than willing to take the risk of being out front as we walk together – in intimate solidarity – with those actively working towards Haitian-centered and -inspired blacker, queerer, and more feminist futures. There are so many beautiful directions that project can take; through creating this issue and hosting various forums around it we have learned about exciting new scholarship and other kinds creative work that honors the lives, loves, and struggles of same-sex desiring and gender creative Haitians. With deep roots in the past, we look forward to that future.

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Notes

1. On the very ordinariness of crisis in the Haitian context see Trouillot (1990) and Bonilla (2013).
2. In *Framing Silence*, Chancy describes that the protagonist's aunt who lives in Haiti, Tante Atie, is involved in an erotic relationship with another woman, if not a sexual one (1997, 128–9). This re-reading of a character who is often sidelined in literary criticism provided a small but important opening to discuss themes of same-sex sexuality in Haitian cultural production. Moreover, in her subsequent novel-in-stories *The Dew Breaker* (2004), Edwidge Danticat featured a Haitian lesbian character living in the diaspora.
3. Tinsley's *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature* (2010) has a chapter about Ida Faubert's poetry which locates Faubert, the daughter of Haitian President Louis Étienne Félicité Lysius Salomon (1879–88), who lived much of her life in Paris, as the ancestor of queer diasporic women.
4. The black feminists, activists, and women of color feminists that Tinsley engages are central to our project here, particularly the work of Barbara Christian, M. Jacqui Alexander, and Gloria Wekker.
5. While same-sex sexuality in Haiti – especially connected to the religion of Vodou – has been a theme of anthropological scholarship since the time of the U.S. Occupation (1915–34), and as male same-sex sexuality became a topic of interest in medical and public health literature during the early years of the AIDS epidemic, neither of these were interested in queer life on its own terms.

6. Dred's work was taken up in Jack Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* (1998) and E. Patrick Johnson's *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (2003). Basquiat and his strategies of contending with white supremacist and homophobic cultures in the United States are the subject of a chapter of José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) that also includes passing mention of Assotto Saint.
7. This forgetting of Assotto Saint in U.S. queer theory is the topic of Durban-Albrecht's article, "The Legacy of Assotto Saint: Tracing Transnational History from the Gay Haitian Diaspora" (2013). However, there is an emerging interest in Saint's work. Douglas Steward (1999) considers Saint's contributions to gay black cultures in the United States before his death from AIDS in 1994, but Braziel was the first person to forefront the importance of his Haitianess in shaping his life and cultural work. Around the same time, Thomas Glave featured Assotto Saint's "Haiti: A Memory Journey" in his anthology, *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles* (2008). More recently, GerShun Avilez has discussed Assotto Saint in terms of black queer experimentation (2014).
8. Moïse's poem "because john doe is not a haitian name" was included in a special section of the journal *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* about women's responses to the 2010 earthquake. Haitian anthropologist Gina Athena Ulysse (2013) published an article about Moïse's solo-performance, "Womb-Words Thirsting," in relationship to her ongoing theorization of *rasanblaj*, Haitian approaches to assemblage.
9. See also: Dayan (1994); Brown (2001 [1991]); Strongman (2002, 2008); Conner and Sparks (2004); and Tinsley (2011).
10. See for instance: Strongman (2008); Dubois (2008); Tinsley (2011); and Hammond (2012).
11. See Durban-Albrecht (2015).
12. We also recognize the specifically Caribbean projects of Kamala Kempadoo (2004), M. Jacqui Alexander (2005), Myriam Chancy (2012, 1997), Lyndon Gill (2010, 2012), Maja Horn (2010), Jafari Allen (2011), Faith Smith (2011), Vanessa Agard-Jones (2012, 2013), Carole Boyce Davies (2013), Rosamond King (2014), and Angelique V. Nixon (2015) who trace a landscape of sexuality, sexual practices, and erotic autonomies as they emerge and refract in diverse Caribbean contexts. Rinaldo Walcott conceptualizes the Caribbean in terms of queer diaspora (2009, 2013), important for our work considering the substantial and influential Haitian diaspora and the diasporic trajectories of queer Haitian cultural production. Collections like Thomas Glave's *Our Caribbean: Words to Our Now* (2008) which gathers fiction from LGBT-identified authors, Kofi Omoniyi Sylvanus Campbell's *The Queer Caribbean Speaks: Interviews with Writers, Artists, and Activists* (2014), and Randy Connor's and David Sparks *Queering Spiritual Traditions* (2004) that incorporates viewpoints by spiritual practitioners, offer perspectives on queer that are firmly grounded in everyday lives and practices that are at once creative and spiritual. Additionally, and perhaps most formatively, we are indebted to José Esteban Muñoz for his crucial world-expanding scholarship (1999, 2009).
13. A *boyò* is a locally made pair of rubber sandal or shoes fashioned by the Haitian lower class out of discarded tires.
14. For more on *dwòl*, see LaMothe (2015).
15. Says Katherine Smith who associates the *vagabon* with Gede attributes: "The *vagabon* is celebrated for flaunting authority in a country saddled with a long history of authoritarianism, yet the same disregard for social norms makes the *vagabon* an object of fear" (Smith 2012, 131).
16. For Haitian choreographer Jeanguy Saintus, "*mwen bite m pa tonbe*" ("I stumble, I do not fall") is not simply a telling element of kinetic dances. The act of stumbling, living through disequilibrium, tackling adversities, and yet never hitting the ground animates Haitians' reality (LaMothe 2016). Saintus is in conversation with Guadeloupean dance artist Léna Blou whose creations evolve from the onomatopoeia "*Bigidi*." This is a worldview that encompasses how the French Caribbean body contends with natural, social, and historical disasters, is in permanent imbalance, always at the edge of the penultimate fall, yet never collapses (Blou 2005).
17. For more on the vitality and memory work of dancing Gede, see Chapman (2016).

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