

Rasenblaj, Same-Sex Desire, and the Archive in Haiti

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“Any historical narrative is a bundle of silences.”

— Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995, 3)

“The famous novelist of Haïti, Bonnard Posy, told me ‘If I were you, I would not write this book. Boy, you are going to be in trouble!’”

— Jean Élie Gilles (2016)

“Diogène was perfect type “of good Haïtian.” His only defect was is homosexuality, but he, himself, steadfastly believed that this could not hinder nor prevent him from leading a well ordered social life, of producing valuable work...he was a defiant man.”

— Jean Élie Gilles (1995, 12)

“Like good theory, performance is a blur of meaning, language, and a bit of pain. Whirling past, faster than I can catch up. Testing me, often refitting me, pulling away and moving, toward me. I’m almost there with it. I hold on. I keep my hands on the performance and my eyes on the theory.”

— D. Soyini Madison, 1999, 108

The Black Jacobins (1963) is one of many political biographies penned by C.L.R. James. On one level, the text is read as a simple biography of Toussaint L’Ouverture and the theatres of the Haitian revolt. On another level, I encounter James’s biographies as theories of political activism and archives of “other” histories of the colonial project—specifically, the performance of political leadership in which the readers witness revolutionary enactments, drawn from the keen insight and sharp comprehension of the use of power to promote social change. James is more fascinated with leaders who are with the masses—leaders whose energy is drawn from the proletariat toward political action—instead of leaders who take on the mantle of a savior and dictator. *The Black Jacobins* is documenting Toussaint L’Ouverture’s leadership with the masses through which they (L’Ouverture and his fellow revolutionaries) devise and perform tactics of revolt. “*Out of the closet*” on *Death’s deliverance* or “*In the foot steps of Diogène*” (1995) written by Jacmelian scholar and educator Jean Élie Gilles, is a story of one such political leader in Haiti, who happens to be gay. Through the examination of leadership and community-building Gilles, like James, acts as an archivist who labors to document and make known silenced and subjugated stories and histories muffled by Western hegemonic discourses about Haiti. This essay critically engages Gilles’s text through the Haitian concept of *rasanblaj*—a convening of diverse and divergent discourses to create a dialogic performance between the text, the author, and the readers. *Rasanblaj* allows generative themes to emerge and are then interrogated to produce conjectural claims, in this case, about same-sex desire in Haiti. Gilles’s literal use of a concept of the archive in the novel disrupts a reading of the archive as just a reflection of reality and posits the archive as an instrument of power for the nuanced and fluid movements of forgetting, remembering and imagining.

Though penned in Haiti, the book was self-published in 1995 and printed by Caxton Printers in Caldwell, Idaho. Gilles wrote the book in French with an English translation by Nancy Nelson. *Diogène* is part of a trilogy of books written by Gilles between 1987—91: *Dialogue des Soupirs*, (1989) and *Jacmel sa contribution a l'histoire d'Haiti* (1991). A year after the deposition of Jean-Claude Duvalier and at the precipice of the elections and ratification of the new constitution of Haiti, Gilles spent three years in hiding fearing for his life. As a high school teacher, he was accused of espousing anti-government sentiments by students who were children of the Tontons Macoutes¹. While underground in Haiti, Gilles took solace in composing his thoughts. “In writing,” he claims, “I was documenting my life and the activities of Jacmel, the city of my birth...I wasn’t sure if I would survive and I wanted to leave something” (2016). Gilles, believing in his imminent death, was preoccupied with documenting muted narratives.

The text is a *mélange*. An assemblage of fact with fiction, reportage, and auto-ethnography, the book presents what Gordon (2002) and Thiong’o (2007) posit as characteristics of Africana oraculture. Africana oraculture are texts not bound by Western constructions of specific genres but rather cut across them; a nonlinear chronotope is privileged to foreground the past and to engage critically with the future. The narrative, the personal story, that which reflects everyday life, is a theory. It speaks as much to the performance of the written word as it does to the performance and fluidity of identity. Taylor attests:

by considering scenarios as well as narratives, we expand our ability to rigorously analyze the live and the scripted, the citational practices that characterize both, how traditions get constituted and contested, the various trajectories and influences that might appear in one but not the other. (2003, 32-33)

The initial goal of this project was to publish an interview with the author, highlighting *Diogène*'s significance as a novel written by a Haitian who pays profound attention to same sex desire. The island has produced many international literary figures, yet outside of the much cited and referenced poet and performance artist Assotto Saint born Yves François Lubin (1989, 1991, 1994), Gilles joins a select few who address same sex desire candidly. Novelists Kettly Mars (2005) and Leo de Rome (2011) are contemporary writers who place same-sex passion among men as the lens of their queries into the contemporary fabric of Haitian society.

Over the course of multiple conversations with Gilles and multiple engagements with the novel, several themes emerged, again and again. The importance of *Diogène* to Haitian literature generally, and queer Haitian cultural politics specifically, became more apparent. Dialogic performance is, according to performance theorist Dwight Conquergood, a collaborative endeavor that opens up discourse where “one speaks to and with,” not of literary works (in this case) (10). Haitian scholar Gina Athena Ulysse prefers the word *rasanblaj*. The Haitian Kreyòl conception is understood through my critical gathering of the work’s excerpts and their textual analyses, interviews with the author, an interrogation of contemporary Haitian cultural politics, and an excavation of the Haitian historical archive about sexuality. This convergence exposes “epistemic conflicts & embodied nightmares/embodied conflicts & epistemic nightmares” (Ulysse 2015). In other words, to discuss same-sex desire in Haiti in this format is to eventually challenge societal views and understandings of same-sex desire in Western and European-influenced cultures and

¹ Dictators François and Jean-Claude Duvalier’s henchmen.

confront the nightmares they induce (Beasley 2008, 2016; Johnson 2001). My critical *rasanblaj* around “*Out of the closet*” proposes a framework to interpret the profound manifestations of Haitian identity and rejected sexual practices that the novel unites. Moreover, my cross-pollinations of African Diaspora and feminist traditions alongside performance theories not only privilege experiential ways of knowing and being (Nelson 1989, Gordon 2000), but also match how Gilles crafts a protagonist who lives at the intersections of his society’s layered discourses about the Haitian body. My critical discussion of the novel as an archive of Haitian identity performance considers the absences, traces, and possibilities of diverse realities in the dominant narrative. Therefore my juxtaposition of the author’s text with his personal narrative invites an ongoing interrogation of the tangible and the invisible, the articulated and the silenced. In doing so through the lens of performance, this essay highlights the generative nature of *Diogène* that unravels the silences as well as the work’s significance for future scholarship in queer and sexuality studies generally, and in queer Haitian studies and culture specifically. In addition to excerpts from *Diogène*, three distinct cumulative themes that emerged from the interviews with Gilles about the novel will be explored—recuperating same-sex love, unmuting silences, identity transgressions—and consideration of the archive will conclude.

The Story

Diogène was perfect type “of good Haitian.” His only defect was his homosexuality, but he, himself, steadfastly believed that this could not hinder nor prevent him from leading a well ordered social life, of producing valuable work...he was a defiant man (Gilles 1995, 218)

Set at the turn of the twentieth century before Catholicism becomes prominent in Haiti and traditional spiritualism is pervasive, the protagonist, Diogène Caseron, a child of Gede,² is born of wealthy parents in the Southeastern Haitian town of Jacmel. He and his family reside in the beautiful estate L’Oubli Ville [The Forgotten City], where he is given private instruction. On his tenth birthday, he is found by the gardener “snuggled tenderly in the arms of [the gardener’s son] Jean, in the act of touching his peaked penis outside of his pants” (196). The gardener dares not reveal such to Diogène’s parents but disciplines his son, Jean. Despite the corporal punishment inflicted on Jean, he and Diogène “often reenacted that which was forbidden” (197). Shortly after that, it is decided by Diogène’s parents that he should attend the College Saint Martial, where he would be under the strict instruction of the Fathers, who would “permit him to the better to confront future problems with a Christian heart...” (201). While cleaning the library at school, Diogène discovers *Your youth, how to make the best use of it?* In the book is a chapter on homosexuality titled “Is one born homosexual or becomes one?” It is the first time that he has a language to his sexual desires, yet Diogène begins to ponder if his same-sex desire is innate or learned. The time at the boarding school is sexually liberating and active, and he falls in love with a fellow student, Smith, who confesses:

² Gede is an ancestral Vodou trickster spirit who presides over the domains of death and regeneration.

Dio, dear, I have desired for a long time to make love to you, but you know that in Haïti, it is necessary to conform to the social hypocrisy and not demonstrate this sexual tendency; I feel better—making love with a man than with a woman (210).

The relationship ends at the conclusion of their studies and Diogène departs for university to study art, music and agronomy. At the age of 22, with three doctorates in the arts and his diploma in agronomy, Diogène returns to Jacmel and works for l’Agronomat de Jacmel.

He is considered a "perfect Haitian" by many in the city, because he is highly educated, cultured, well-travelled, and more importantly, he returns to Jacmel to participate in public service. Diogène promotes egalitarian, ethical and ecologically sustainable policies that should make the city systems run more efficiently. For this he gains favor with the peasants of Jacmel. However, with the elites and civil servants, things turn dismal as they reject his proposal for superior standards and transparency as well as his campaign against deforestation. With the help of Smith, his lover/friend from college years, and Jean, the son of the gardener who is now married with five children, Diogène lodges a campaign to support his political issues. Because of the heightened disapproval of his anti-deforestation policies, Diogène resigns from public service. He convinces his parents to use their wealth to establish a free school for the poor of Jacmel. They in turn attempt to convince him to marry for the sake of inheritance and family legacy. With the help of Smith, who is now a well-known engineer-architect in Port-au-Prince, plans for the construction of the school begins. According to Diogène, “Smith lived alone. A hardened celibate with confused flesh,...who lived in beautiful villa named, ‘on the side of heart’” (243). They rekindle a sexual relationship.

The school opens in the community of Chevalier (today Cyvadier) and becomes the jewel of Jacmel with certificates and support from Europe, the USA, and Canada. Again the elites of Jacmel become jealous of Diogène’s success and attempt to expose Diogène’s homosexuality but fail. In response Diogène claims, “I wish I were dead because I do not know why the Haitians are unable to understand and love each other” (213). After the death of his parents, Diogène succumbs to their wishes and marries Catherine, a former student. They have five children.

Upon Diogène’s death, Catherine discovers his trove of written personal, mementos, an archive of his sexual history. The bundle of neatly arranged artifacts consists of poetry, journals, stories and poems. Catherine publishes them as a memoir and stories.

Unravel the Bundle of Silence

Meaning is always in-between structures, at the interstices of systems, institutions, State and law. Dwight Congquergood (Madison 2010, 1)

“I wrote this text to bring into social discussion the topic of homosexuality in Haiti, where it is still ‘*l’amour qui ne dit pas son nom*’ [the love that does not dare to say its name],” says Gilles in one of four exhaustive interviews about his book. In his admission, the narrative is not only about Diogène and his sexual journey, but is “a history of Jacmel so the young people will remember the cultural festivals and rituals.” The novel acknowledges key political figures such as Boliver and Ambrosie with not-so-subtle references to the Duvalier regime. Gilles introduces (and

reminds) readers of the pageantry of Agape of Easter Sundays, the masked balls of Mardi Gras, the opera concerts, and other the majestic cultural events that gave Jacmel the title "artistic capital of Haiti." Two critics in Haiti, Ady Jean Gardy and Dominique Batrville, reviewed the book when it was first published. While pleased at the critical attention given to the book in Haiti, Gilles noted, "their analysis was from the perspective of heterosexuals" and privileged the internal struggles with his sexuality instead of Diogène's acceptance of it (2016).

Several book signings were held in Pétiion-Ville and Jacmel. According to Gilles, the audience in Pétiion-Ville was receptive. In Jacmel, the home of the author and the setting of the book, Gilles recalls rejection mostly from gay men. One famous artist attempted to sue Gilles because he thought the book was about him, while others preferred such narratives to remain in silent, as most of the gay men in Jacmel, that Gilles knew, were married. He disclosed, "some closeted gays [in Jacmel] who are married to women asked their children to not read the book written by 'the *masisi* called Jean Élie Gilles'" (2016). To help future generations cope with the pain and suffering of being closeted, Gilles dared to share what most of his local contemporaries wished to keep hidden in order to protect their undercover practices.

"The novel is a composite of all the stories of the men in my life growing up in Jacmel" (Gilles 2016). Reinforced by the Haitian author's lived experience, the work deserves critical attention because it attends to a plethora of societal and political issues that are even more relevant today—considering Haiti's widening homophobic public sphere (Durban-Albrecht 2015 and this issue). Diogène, Smith, and Jean represent dialectical tensions between national identity and individual sexual desire as well as tensions between family legacy, cultural allegiance, and economic success. Though the life of Diogène is foregrounded, Smith and Jean also represent important distinct life stories. Smith, who earlier in life performed bisexuality as a way of passing, was confronted in boarding school by Diogène about his sexuality. Diogène protests, "But you have always said that you detested homosexuals when you were speaking within a group" (210). Later in life as a successful developer in Port-Au-Prince, he "lives alone with a confused flesh" (243). But in contrast to Diogène who is committed to Haiti, Smith admits, "I am rich and I deserve it because I'm an honest worker. I don't care about the past, and about the people of Haiti, I care even less" (246). Although Smith desires men more than women, he privileges economic stability over fulfilled sexual desires and national belonging.

Jean, the son of the gardener and with whom Diogène participates in an ongoing conjugal relationship, marries and has five children. Jean, the common man and Diogène's lifelong lover who lives on Diogène's family property with his large family, becomes the head of the depot of the Agronomat. Being Diogène's employee adds a respectable veneer to the couple's closeness. Also, as a dedicated and upstanding man of the people, Jean's presence validates elite Diogène's public service pursuits. The stories of Diogène, Smith, and Jean represent a sliver of the multiple ways in which gay male identity is performed in Haiti.

The following sections of this essay examine three overarching themes that emerged from interviews with Gilles, Haitian cultural politics, and my engagement with the text: gender transgression and religion, intersectionality, and neoliberalism as contemporary colonialism. Phenomenological in nature, the themes make theoretical claims of same-sex desire and gender

identity performance within Haitian cultural politics. Performance signifies the dialectical tensions and the unstable nature of sexuality, culture, and identity; such variables are always in process, always in development.

Gender Transgression

“Religion and sexuality have always been twin sisters in a hateful relationship. Between those two there is always *‘un bras de fer’* [crossing swords],” says Gilles who complicates the role of religion in Haitian society regarding same-sex desire. Paradoxically, it is within the confines of Catholic catechism that Diogène is liberated sexually. Being educated within Haiti’s Catholic school system, Diogène is introduced to a host of gay and lesbian couples (mostly international embassy workers) through receptions at the home of head priests. “The Catholic religion accepts homosexuality as long as it stays in its closet,” Gilles explains to me. He continues:

Catholics are acknowledged in this book for the compassion that used to be part of that religion when I was growing up. “Thou shall not judge!” was part of our mentality and, because of that; we never had any problem with homosexuals who were priests, who were our teachers, neighbors, and friends. (2016).³

Vodou, Haiti’s Afro-syncretic religion also does much work under the cover of Catholicism. The author pens Diogène’s sexual audacity, fluidity and affiliation with lower class life as a Gede propensity. One might also read in Diogène’s physical description (blue eyes, a tender mouth, a long face, slim feminine stature), the Vodou *lwa*/spirit’s Catholic façade St. Gerard. Through the origin story of Diogène as an incarnation of Gede Nibo, Gilles configures Vodou as a religion that does not explicitly judge alternative sexual desire “but embraces it” (2016), perhaps due to the fact that Haiti is one of the few Caribbean islands without anti-homosexuality laws.⁴ Diogène demonstrates how, like Gede, he is able to straddle sexual borders. Vodou is usually mentioned through the prism of Gede and is configured as the religion that does not judge same-sex desire “but embraces it” (2016). Gilles laments that, Diogène, who is happy being with men, marries not because his lovers marry, he marries because he is lonely and/or perhaps he needs an heir to his family’s wealth. Though Gilles adroitly asserts the role of patriarch in Haitian society and its possible links to economic precarity, a simple interpretation might suggest that traditional gender roles persist. Yet the story’s development also advances how transgressive non-normative familial configuration operates in Haiti. Jean who lives on a Caseron property and works for Diogène remains Diogène’s beloved kin, alongside the protagonist’s wife and children, whose lives the author depicts in only a few sentences. Diogène’s alliances encourage multiple readings of the possibilities of family and community. True to both African diasporic familial networks and queer family-building, the concept of family is not limited to blood-related kin. According to Gordon (2002), the definition of “family,” particularly in African diaspora

³ For a closer examination of this idea, see Erin Durban-Albrecht “Performing Postcolonial Homophobia: A Decolonial Analysis of the 2013 Public Demonstrations Against Same-Sex Marriage in Haiti” in this issue.

⁴ However, the Haitian state found other ways to suppress activities and practices associated with homosexuality. President Jean-Claude Duvalier had all gay clubs closed in the early 1980s when Haitians were scapegoated as the incubators of AIDS, which led to the persecution of M-identified Haitians in all sectors of the society. Haiti’s constitution guarantees freedom of expression for all, yet leaves room for de-facto discrimination. Laws that condemn offenses against *public order*, *mores* and *decency are deployed against behavior read as homosexual*.

contexts, is configured around shared struggle and oppression and extends to the ancestors. “Community does not just stop with those who live around us, but also to those who precede us,” signifying the importance of the actions of the living and their influence on those who are to come: “I am because we are” (123). Gede is precisely the *lwa* who rules the domain of the ancestral dead and also protects the unborn, those to come. In the context of Vodou collectivity, Brown supports Gordon’s inclusive community formation as replicated in the structure of Vodou of which she asserts cannot exist outside of a family structure (2006). For example, the documentary film *Of Men and Gods* assembles a series of powerful examples indicative of an affirming and transgressive model of family in which *masisi* create their own kin networks in relationship to each other and to Ezili, their patron *lwa*. The male-women in the documentary are parents and sisters to one another, similar to the ways in which a Vodouist’s mentor becomes the person’s adopted mother/father and brethren for life.

Even more provocative is the novel’s critique of the popular rationale for the rejection of same-sex relationships: the perception that sex is for procreation to alleviate issues related to economic precarity in Haiti. The novel presents, and is endorsed by Gilles in his recalling of Haitian proverbs, that the production of children is tied to increasing one wealth, producing not more mouths to feed, but rather more hands to work.⁵ Smith and Diogène marry women, not as a rejection of their homosexual identity, but rather for economic reasons. Diogène marries to forward his family’s wealth, Smith to provide for his family, and Jean is married to commerce. The disparaging negativity and silence surrounding same-sex desire could be read as a discourse of economic precarity that supports continued heterosexual patriarchy and cloaks transgressive gender performance.

Intersections

Diogène is a privileged man who is not only “handsome, smart, elegant orderly but multilingual.” He received a solid education. I said that he has the “voice of the Prince of the young intellectuals of Jacmel” because; so many intellectuals are homosexuals but... so afraid to be themselves. It is so shocking, sometimes, to see that you have a lover that you adore, who is hot in bed, who is so devoted to all your needs behind closed doors take the position publicly against Homosexuality. (Gilles 2016)

In placing Diogène’s Gede propensity in the forefront, Gilles not only points to the fluid state of sexuality of which I refer earlier, but he also reminds us of the powerful political performance embedded in Vodou that hails an intersectional cultural politic. Seemingly paradoxical, Gede is a figure that is preoccupied and more commonly associated with the finality of death than the other qualities of truth, passion and caring. Diogène is also preoccupied with the

⁵ The Haitian proverb “*Pitit se byen pòv malere*” (children are the wealth of poor people) speaks to the importance of procreation in Haitian culture. Deeper still, one might interpret this proverb to signify that the more the peasant have children, the more hands they have to help the family cultivate the land and tend to its livestock. What gets lost as it continues to be iterated, is what happens to the family when there are many children but no land and no livestock to care for, and provide sustenance to the family. In another proverb, a “mare” is a woman who cannot give birth. They will say of her “*se yon milèt wi li kale mouch chak mwa jwen*” [she is a mare, she gives birth to flies every month of June]. This proverb speaks about the woman will be rejected if she cannot procreate and therefore participate in intergenerational transfer of culture and mores.

truth as he negotiates the complex intersections of his sexuality, his political philosophy, and his patriotism toward Haiti. The intersectional politic is also ever present in Diogène's conflict with the elites concerning environmental concerns. At the height of the political struggles with the elites Diogène pens an editorial, an open letter to the citizens of the city. He claims his desire is to work and support the "intelligent and the illiterates" and the "peasant leaders" to create programs for the betterment of the environment. He elicits help to establish programs to eliminate the cutting of trees, to encourage tree planting, and to "endow the city with an irrigation system, better schools and even telephones for all citizens who he claims as his brothers and sisters/parents and children" (1995). He also rejects spousal abuse. He rescues Jean's sister from an abusive husband and thus makes a proclamation about the treatment of women in the city of Jacmel. And later in the novel, he becomes repulsed by greed, the byproduct of the extreme capitalism exhibited by the bourgeois of Jacmel. It is obsessive greed that becomes the reason for Diogène's ultimate disengagement with Smith. Diogène's subject position as a gay man allows him to keenly comprehend the interwoven discourses of marginality. Through Diogène, Gilles illustrates the intersectional systems and interlocking oppressive structures of Haitian society (Collins 2000, 2012, Crenshaw 1991). Diogène situates environmental concerns, an ethical city government, and the non-violent treatment of women as human rights and thus galvanizes and uses his political power to promote change and create community from which he garners gratification.

Goudougoudou

In the period post-earthquake, homosexuality became very prevalent in the camps around Port-au-Prince and in the provinces, because of the promiscuity of everyone sleeping in the tent cities. However, with all the unreported rapes of gay men by other aggressive closeted gays who are so manly, and the media noise about the rapes of young girls, the protestant churches and NGOs made an invasion of the tents, and the queer communities were very much put in contempt for deserving those rapes, since they are gays, while the rapes of young girls were given assistance and care. (Gilles 2016)

Above is Gilles' perspective on a question regarding the status of gay and lesbian communities after the earthquake of January 12, 2010. In the ratification of the constitution of 1987, all Haitians are guaranteed education and health care, but anti-discriminatory laws against the LGBTI community do not exist. Gilles confirms a shifting climate in Haiti regarding gay individuals:

You can get shunned out, spit on, beaten, laughed at, and killed, for being a homosexual. And when people call you "masisi koryas" or just "masisi," that hurts because it is like you are a different breed of "garbage" people need to get rid of. (Gilles 2016)

Gilles endeavors to address the pernicious convergence of multinational economic and global religion institutions' assaults on LGBTI communities. The Catholic Church, which passively accepted same-sex activity during this time, functioned as a conduit of the meshing of economics and international relations. In the novel, after much discussion with others, primarily family, Diogène's parents decide to send him to the Catholic school, not only because of the quality of education but because of the elite connections that could assure his economic success. Another glimpse of this relationship pertaining to international alliances is apparent when Diogène meets

ambassadors and other administrators of global organizations (NGOs) at social events of religious leaders. But more significantly, when Diogène confronts the elites about environmental and economic inequities, his pronouncements are in fact concerns about and against neoliberal policies imported from the developed countries, a different form of colonialism where economics, religious ideology, and cultural politics are entangled. Durban-Albrecht (2015) frames such discourses as postcolonial homophobia.

The confluence between religious and economic aid organizations and its effect on contemporary Haitian politics, particularly among local gay communities, was entirely evident in the events after the January 12 earthquake. The importation of Protestant religious belief systems have disrupted the moment of what Gilles claims as, “a time of innocence and insouciance” in Haiti; a moment far different from the current extreme anti-gay rhetoric and violence. He recounts an example of current Protestant animus:

In Jacmel, for instance, some Protestant churches accused the "voodoo" practitioners and the gay people as responsible for the earthquake and, we saw a pastor who is now an elected Senator, coming down one day with his flocks in caravan in the streets of Saint-Cyr, to make a day of prayer against the sins of the homosexuals of Jacmel. When they arrived at the level of "Rue Petion" (Petion's street), - surnamed "The little France of Jacmel", because of a large number of gay men, closeted and out, living there - the hordes of Protestants from the church of Pasteur DP started yelling "A bas Masisi, vive Jesus!" (Down with homosexuals, long live Jesus Christ!). Many parents and friends of homosexuals, on that day had some of the well-known gay men in the neighborhood hide to protect them from doing some stupid reaction that could create a stir in the city. (Gilles 2016)

Such anti-gay sentiments are well documented (SEROvie and The International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, 2011; Durban-Albrecht 2015). In his novel, Gilles uniquely situates Diogène in discussions even then of the destructive neoliberal policies that impact the cultural landscape of Haitian culture and communities and thus speaks to its contemporary relevance.

The Traces

Gilles creates beautiful, physically fit, rich, multilingual, creative, and educated Diogène as a larger than life fictional Haitian that revives his actual counterparts from their superficial depictions in the Haitian imagination. According to Gilles, “No gay men in Haiti are all of those things, but look closely, it is more than those characteristics” (2016). To thoroughly examine the life of Diogène is to grasp the braided complexities of his sexuality, his political philosophy, and his love of nation. Traces of his abundant life remain, even as mature Diogène follows local patriarchal prescriptions and appears to conform. The final chapter of the book offers a vision of Diogène’s legacy. When upon his death, his wife Catherine discovers his trove of written personal mementos, an archive of his sexual history, she takes the bundle of neatly arranged artifacts which consists of poetry, journals, stories and poems and publishes them as a memoir. The stories both queer the “perfect Haitian” life and disseminate courage to other gender and sexually non-conforming Haitians.

Like a performance, the archive is always happening, never ending. “Always, always, the energy of the archive draws us forward, not to an end but to a coming that must always be deferred, to a beginning that is always about to begin (Harris 2007, 51).” Diogene’s archive was ready to speak again. Though Catherine initially struggles with the discovered materials, “She felt compassion invading her heart for all those with the same problem around the world and for whom, she decided to publish the diary which might help them” (314). She releases Diogene’s archive to affirm same-sex desiring individuals. The obsession with the archive in a number of fields could potentially be derived from our ambivalent relationship with the politics of knowledge production.⁶ In his analysis of power in the production of history, Haitian historical anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot suggests, “Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance” (1995, 2). C.L.R. James’s preoccupation with writing political biographies is drawn from his desire to write about political leaders who worked with the masses because he understood that the powerful, the dictators and royalty, are those who get remembered. The archives “are biased toward the important and powerful people of the society, tending to ignore the impotent and obscure” (Zinn 1977, 21). Our current digital moment, which has collapsed knowledge production, material culture, and other systems on which our scholarship rests, has increased our desire to preserve, capture, and hold on. The questions of who and what get remembered and by whom are even more paramount. “The archive...is an open-ended process of remembering, forgetting and imagining” (Harris 2007, 47). We can begin to address the silences of historical production through Gilles’ creative testimony.

The goal of this essay is to remember the novel, “*Out of the Closet on Death’s Deliverance or “In the Footsteps of Diogène”*”, as it contributes to the growing body of literature and theory about gay and lesbian culture in Haiti. Jean Élie Gilles’s novel foreshadows the current rebellion LGBTI and other queer Haitians are enabling and re-memembers the refracted ways in which sexualities and gender identities are performed within Haiti. Diogène’s life and story is especially relevant today considering that it encapsulates the struggles and upheavals gender and sexually fluid Haitians navigate to assert that they too are fully realized like the Haitian every person. Perhaps Diogène’s story is a metaphor for Haiti, a country prone to renewal and revolution as it tirelessly fights for what it believes.

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⁶ See Stryker and Currah’s august articulation of the fetishization of the “archive” in current academic research and production in *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2 (4).

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