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Performing postcolonial homophobia: A decolonial analysis of the 2013 public demonstrations against same-sex marriage in Haiti

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This article analyzes a public demonstration against same-sex marriage in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. The author provides a thick description of this performance led by Protestant Haitians, focusing on creative displays of evangelical Christian antigay sexual politics. While the author intends to represent the demonstration in ways that are recognizable to its organizers and participants, the author comes at this project through a concern about the public performance’s effects on Haitians with same-sex desires, with whom the author has been conducting multi-sited ethnographic research since 2008. As the author contends, the demonstration was more than an enactment of “Haitian homophobia.” The author situates the contemporary conflicts and controversies about (homo)sexual politics in the context of French colonial and U.S. imperialist legacies, as performances of “postcolonial homophobia.” Postcolonial homophobia refers to the cumulative effects of historical and contemporary Western imperialist biopolitical interventions to discover, regulate, manage, control, govern, and/or liberate (homo)sexuality in postcolonial nations. Here, postcolonial homophobia is played out by two seemingly antithetical transnational social movements: evangelical Christianity and LGBTQI human rights. Debates about whether Haiti is too queer (the evangelical Christian discourse) or too homophobic (the LGBTQI rights discourse) ultimately work together to erase histories of imperialist intervention and promote American exceptionalism, which negatively impacts all Haitians.

Keywords: evangelical Christianity; Haiti; LGBTQI human rights; US imperialism; missionaries; postcolonial homophobia

Introduction

This article focuses on the public sphere in contemporary Haiti to analyze a large demonstration against same-sex marriage in the capital city of Port-au-Prince during the summer of 2013. I provide a thick description of this performance led by Protestant Haitians, focusing on a few of the creative displays of Christian antigay sexual politics. While I intend to represent the demonstration in ways that are recognizable to its organizers and participants, I admittedly come at this project sideways through a concern of the public performance’s...
effects on Haitians who have same-sex desires or who otherwise identify with one or more of the following terms in French, English, and Haitian Kreyòl: gay, masisi, makomè, men who have sex with men (MSM), hommes ayant des rapports sexuels avec des hommes (HARSAH), lesbian, lesbienne, madivin, madoda, yon famn ki prefere famn (a woman who prefers women), bisexual, biseks, miks, entènasyonal (international), homosexual, omoseksyèl, transgender, trani, trans, LGBT, and queer. I have been conducting multi-sited ethnographic research with these Haitians since 2008, focused on the possibilities and constraints for queer life in Haiti.

As I demonstrate in the subsequent sections, the effects of the Port-au-Prince demonstration are not as straightforward as they may seem. While it certainly had negative impact on queer Haitians, the diagnosis of “Haitian homophobia” as detrimental to same-sex desiring people is too simple a diagnosis of the problem. Instead I situate the conflicts and controversies about sexual politics in Haiti in the context of French colonial and U.S. imperialist legacies in Haiti, and read them as performances of “postcolonial homophobia.” Postcolonial homophobia is my term to refer to the cumulative effects of historical and contemporary Western imperialist biopolitical interventions to discover, regulate, manage, control, govern, and/or liberate (homo)sexuality and (trans)gender embodiments in postcolonial nations. It is propelled primarily through two transnational social movements with increasing influence in Haiti: evangelical Christianity and LGBTQI human rights. While these social movements appear to be antithetical, in Haiti and other postcolonial nations, they instead work together by promoting American exceptionalism, the ideology that the United States and its allies have the right solutions for (gendered and sexualized) predicaments. Thus, they ultimately have negative effects for all postcolonial subjects – queer and homophobic alike – because of the way they justify continued imperialist intervention.

Port-au-Prince protest against same-sex marriage

“Nou pa dakò! Nou pa dakò! Nou pa dakò!” (We don’t agree!) Thousands of passionate protestors filled the Avenue de la République in front of the Palais National d’Haiti in Port-au-Prince on July 19, 2013. As they chanted, the demonstrators fervently waved bibles and church pamphlets, Haitian flags, palm branches, and handwritten signs in the air that read “Viv La Fanmi” (long live the family), “ABA Maryaj Homosexiel” (down with homosexual marriage), and “Maryaj Gason ak Gason Fanm ak Fanm Se Malediks-yon” (marriage between a man and a man or a woman and a woman is a malediction). The public protest wound through the streets of the capital city on that scorching summer day, gathering momentum as it reached Champs de Mars, the location of many government buildings and the largest public park in the city that had recently – at the order of President Michel Martelly – been cleared of camps filled with people displaced by the 2010 earthquake.

A former government commissioner, Jean Renal Senatus, described his participation in the event during a televised interview for the major news outlet Le Nouvelliste (2013):

\[\text{Nou ap mache pou nou di non sou zafè imoralite. Lit nou te komanse mennen depi lontan an n’ap kontinye mennen l’. Jodia anpil kesyon, anpil pwojè pwopozisyon y’ap fé pou ta gen}\]
maryaj omoseksyèl anndan peyi a. Nou vin jwenn fòs nou avèk fòs legliz evanjelik yo, vodouyi-zan yo, framason yo ki sou teren an ki di maryaj gason ak gason inakseptab, maryaj fanm ak famn inakseptab.

We are marching today to say no to this affair of immorality. The struggle that we started fighting long ago continues. Today many inquiries, many proposals are being made so there will be homosexual marriage in the country. We came to join our forces with the forces of the Evangelical Church, Vodou practitioners, and Freemasons in the country that declare marriage between a man and a man is unacceptable, marriage between a woman and a woman is unacceptable.

While some participants expressed the virulent anger that one might expect to be integral to this struggle over sexual politics, the overall tone of the demonstration was joyous. The public performance invited participation from passersby who would join in the revelry as trucks and vans rigged with speaker systems blasted popular Christian songs in Haitian Kreyòl. Evangelical pastors facilitated engagement through the black religious tradition of call and response. One of these men, for instance, made an impassioned street sermon on a megaphone about the gospel supporting monogamous, heterosexual marriage. He invited those around to come in closer and started the chant, “Yon fi!” (“One girl”) to which the crowd would respond, “Yon gason!” (“One man”). After every third or fourth response, he would declare, “Se sa Bondye vle!” (“That is what God wants”). Another orchestrated a variation on “Nou pa dakò!” (“We disagree!”) where he would shout the statement, and the crowd would alternate with the response “Masisi!” (a pejorative term for a male homosexual) and “Madivin!” (a pejorative term for a female homosexual). Then they would all end with the spirited rolling chant, “Nou pa dakò!”

A group of men in suits and ties led an altered adoration in Haitian church music for the occasion as they danced down the street in the middle of the crowd. They sung:


This masisi who is lagging behind, this masisi who is lagging behind, who is lagging behind, he lags so much, he lags, he lags, this masisi who is lagging behind. This madivin who is lagging behind, this madivin who is lagging behind, who is lagging behind, she lags so much, she lags, this madivin who is lagging behind. He leads forth, He leads forth, He leads forth, He leads forth, Jesus leads forth; He leads forth, he leads forth, he leads forth, he leads forth, Jesus leads forth.

The parallel structure of the verses set up masisi/madivin and Jesus in opposition. The rhyming Kreyòl verbs trennen and mennen have temporal connotations that provide insight into how the protestors consider each of these figures. “Trennen” generally means lagging, dragging, dawdling, lingering, or dawdling. It is associated with being underdeveloped, whether by choice in the form of parès (laziness/sloth) or through an unchangeable condition that disables one’s cognitive functions. “Trennen,” therefore, signals an outlier to chrononormativity, someone who is slow or behind. By contrast, “mennen” signals an action in the present that gestures towards a better future. The song can be interpreted to mean that masisi/madivin are dragging Haiti backwards in time and
that they are part of – if not key to – the nation’s underdevelopment that can only be transcended through the future promised by Jesus.

These verbs undoubtedly project moral connotations. Those who “trennen” by choice are perceived to be immoral and often engaging in nefarious or illicit activities. The vakabon (vagabond, scoundrel, or delinquent) is a social figure whose activities are described with this verb. He is a “bad boy” who rejects domestic arrangements in favor of wandering the street. The use of “trennen” associates masisi/madivin with this figure and conjures up images of men (primarily) and women (to a lesser degree) who reject their families to slink through the shadows to find opportunities for homosex. Their threat to the family is also encapsulated in another term sometimes used interchangeably in Haiti with masisi, pederas (pederast), as people imagine grown men preying on male children.

The queerness of the position of masisi/madivin in this performance is also evident in the politics of verticality in the staging and movement. In front of the singers, a smaller group of men in jeans and t-shirts ambled on all fours, like animals, playing the role of masisi/madivin. Considering the lyrics, their actions could even be described as trennen sou vant-yo (creeping or slithering). In the great chain of being that undergirds contemporary Christianity, this closeness to the earth signals a kind of animality placed in further distance from God than the human. This performance of creeping confirms what the self-identified gay men and masisi from the majority poor have told me over the years: society considers ti masisi the lowest of the low. The singers, by contrast, embodied humanity by remaining upright. Their contradistinction was further emphasized by the way that they reached upward toward heaven while exalting Jesus.

The public performance created a clear sense of “us” and “them,” and invited onlookers to identify with the sturdy men who stood for Haiti’s progress. Their creative display drew people of all ages from the sidewalks who clapped along with the song and joined in its later verses. Another stretch of marchers sang, “Masisi pap pase. Ane a m’ deside pou m’ sèvi Bondye. Madivin pap pase. Nou pote viktwa, madivin pap pase.” (Masisi will not come through/win. This year I am decided that I will serve the Lord. Madivin will not win. We have the victory, madivin will not win.) The “nou” in this verse reinforces the we/us who are marching toward victory, producing a sense of affinity and affiliation across different segments of the Haitian population. It aligned with the chant “Nou pa dakò!” (We disagree!) to unite a symphony of sound – clapping, cheering, chanting, singing – on the streets of the capital city to voice opposition to same-sex marriage in Haiti.

The transnational travels of homophobia

Yet same-sex marriage has never been allowed in Haiti, and while the threat seemed real to Haitian politicians, there was no formal proposal in place to legalize it at the time of the protest. Haitian and international media included many references to a proposed or impending bill for state consideration, which prompted many official discussions of such an event. But obtaining the ability to legally marry was not a priority nor serious political strategy for LGBT or “M-community” (masisi/makome/madivin/miks) advocacy or activist organizations in Haiti. These organizations were more focused on expanding the Constitutional protections in Haiti guaranteeing the freedom of expression to specifically provide
protections against homophobic and transphobic discrimination. Many organizers speculated that the march was a response to comments that the president of the activist group Kouraj, Charlot Jeudy, had made on a popular radio program in late May. He responded to a question from the host about whether he thought Haiti was close to accepting same-sex marriage: “Marriage is love, the love of two human beings. Marriage is a right. How do you deprive people of that right? On what basis? I think that this hypocrisy must end!” (‘Interview’ 2013). The interview was recirculated online with the bold headline in French “Haitian homosexuals want to get married,” to which Kouraj posted a link on their social media sites (‘Les Homosexuels’ 2013). Other Kouraj posts included news about the legalization of same-sex marriage in France on May 18, 2013 and information about the first wedding held a few weeks later. Could these sources have catalyzed the protest in Port-au-Prince and another large public performance against same-sex marriage that took place on the main boulevard of the southern coastal city of Jacmel on July 28? It is certainly possible, but I offer another explanation for the demonstrations connected to the legacies of U.S. imperialism in Haiti. This legacy is currently being played out in contests over sexual politics between evangelical Christianity introduced by the American Occupation from 1915–34 and global LGBTQI human rights that began to make an impact in the country after the 2010 earthquake.

In Haiti, queers were not the only ones with eyes towards the global contests over same-sex marriage in early 2013; Christian religious leaders watched in anticipation as well. On the day before the announcement of the United States Supreme Court’s decisions in two cases pertaining to legal recognition of same-sex marriages, the recently formed Coalition Haïtienne des organisations religieuses et morales (Haitian Coalition of Religious and Moral Organizations, CHO) held a press conference denouncing the widespread acceptance of homosexuality in France and the United States and declaring its intentions to hold a march against same-sex marriage in Haiti on July 19. As the CHO president Pentecostal Pastor Gérard Forge explained, their opposition to same-sex marriage in particular and homosexuality in general stemmed from religious conviction and conservative interpretations of the Bible. He stated: “Fundamentally speaking, God does not agree [with the practice of homosexuality] … because of the misery he brought to Sodom and Gomorrah. Thus, because we do not want to know the same misfortunes, we are obliged to take a position” (“MetroNews” 2013). The story of the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah has had particular traction in the wake of the earthquake in Haiti, and it has been useful for evangelical networks in Haiti – out of which CHO was formed – to conduct various campaigns to address what they perceive to be social ills affecting the moral fabric of Haitian society, including sex work, rëstavék (indentured child labor), and the practice of homosexuality. The public declaration of “Nou pa dakò!” and march against same-sex marriage with signs proclaiming “ABA Sodòm ak Gomò Viv La Famille” (down with Sodom and Gomorrah, long live the family) was such an endeavor.

The marches against same-sex marriage in Port-au-Prince and Jacmel in summer 2013 were more than just instances of local cultural politics or religious homophobia with devastating consequences for queer Haitians. As a beginning line of inquiry, we can ask why did the CHO position themselves against the more libertine attitudes towards homosexuality in France and the United States in particular? Certainly these two countries happen to be places where highly publicized contests over same-sex marriage were taking place in
2013, but so were many others where same-sex marriage was legalized around the same time – like Brazil, Uruguay, and New Zealand. Yet the CHO representatives only mentioned France and the United States in their press conference, which has more to do with Haiti’s enduring historical relationships with those countries in particular as a former French colony and as a laboratory for U.S. imperialism for the last century. As much as the CHO was donning a postcolonial nationalist position against the supposed widespread acceptance of homosexuality in France and the United States – and perhaps against the ways that rights for homosexuals in the limited form of legalized same-sex marriage had “gone global” and reached its tendrils into Haiti – consider for a moment the ways that their protests resembled public demonstrations against same-sex marriage in those countries earlier in 2013.

The most impressive displays against same-sex marriage took place in France. In anticipation of a political move by President François Hollande and his Socialist Party for “Le Mariage Pour Tous” (Marriage for All), a coalition with unofficial ties to the Roman Catholic Church formed in early fall 2012 under the sign “La Manif Pour Tous” (Protest for Everyone). Their platform stood against same-sex marriage; parenting by same-sex couples – including access to joint adoption, certain reproductive technologies, and surrogacy; and any instruction in gender studies in schools to combat sexism and harmful stereotypes. When the Socialist Party finally introduced a bill to the National Assembly in November 2012 that would allow same-sex couples to marry and adopt children, La Manif Pour Tous organized public opposition to the bill. Their first demonstration on January 13, 2013 converged at the Eiffel Tower in the Parisian Champ des Mars and drew an estimated half million people, an unusually high turnout even in a country like France where protests are a national pastime. Protesters carried banners, signs, flags, and balloons – many with an outline of an ostensibly heterosexually parented nuclear family – in what has become the movement’s trademark colors of white, pink, and blue. The sanctioned slogans for La Manif Pour Tous included: “One Father + One Mother, It’s Elementary!,” “No to the Legal Project ‘Marriage for All’;” “Marriage-o-phile, Not Homophobe;” and “Paternity, Maternity, Equality.” One of the few signs that incorporated English text, “Made in Papa + Maman,” adorned babies along the route. (I am quite sure that the organizers did not think of the ironically queer implications of this message.) Two weeks later, the 100,000-person march with celebrities and state representatives in support of the bill barely garnered any media attention compared to the colorful, critical mass at La Manif Pour Tous. The La Manif Pour Tous coalition had sparked a wide-reaching social movement around the issues of same-sex marriage and queer reproduction that mobilized more people than had been out in the streets since the debates around education reforms three decades before.

The initial demonstration’s popularity led to subsequent La Manif Pour Tous marches on March 24, April 21, and May 26, the last of which the coalition staged on Mother’s Day, a week after the law went into effect making France the fourteenth country where same-sex marriage is legal at a federal level. These demonstrations made international headlines as tensions mounted and protestors used more extreme measures to display their opposition to same-sex marriage. While La Manif Pour Tous maintained a significant public presence and created opportunities for people with a variety of perspectives and creative inclinations to express opposition to the bill, its spokespeople distanced themselves from right-wing
extremists, protestors who embraced more radical tactics that prompted police responses – such as the use of spray hoses, tear gas, and mass arrests – as well as from those who physically and verbally assaulted people perceived to be LGBTQ. They strategically drew a firm distinction between themselves as people who are for traditional marriage and families, but not anti-gay per se, and those “homophobes” who commit acts of violence.

In the United States, conservative movements similarly converged around a “pro-family” and “pro-marriage” platform leading up to the Supreme Court of the United States’ (SCOTUS) decisions. The National Organization for Marriage (NOM) – a nonprofit organization founded in 2007 with the purpose of introducing the Proposition 8 ballot measure in California to oppose same-sex marriages—spearheaded a coalition of religious and religiously-affiliated “pro-family” organizations to demonstrate in front of The Supreme Court Building while the SCOTUS Justices heard oral arguments in Hollingsworth v. Perry, the case to decide the fate of Proposition 8. The demonstrations included a March for Marriage on March 26, 2013, an event that drew several thousand people and that NOM organizers hope to be an annual occurrence like the March for Life against the practice of abortion. Many of the speakers at the March for Marriage rally, including the co-founder and president of NOM, actually placed their actions in a lineage of resistance to state mandates allowing for any form of access to abortion services. Opposition to abortion is of a notable difference between the U.S. movement and La Manif Pour Tous.

The event started with a rally on The National Mall and went past the Capitol on the way to The Supreme Court Building where it rubbed up against an equally large gathering of marriage equality supporters. The March for Marriage had striking similarities with La Manif Pour Tous, whose Washington, D.C. chapter co-sponsored the event. Marchers carried large banners and signs that read, “Every Child Deserves a Mom and Dad” and “A Los Niños Les Va Mejor Con Una Mamá y Un Papa” (kids do best with a mom and a dad). A representation of the heterosexually parented nuclear family with a mom and dad holding hands, with a child – one girl and one boy – on either side of the couple, appeared prominently on the signs in white. The pastel sea of pink and blue in France, however, was replaced with the bolder, patriotic colors of red (for women), white (for children), and blue (for men) to accompany the U.S. flags.

The citational practices at work are difficult to miss, and yet at least in one way, the March for Marriage had more in common with the July 19 demonstration in Port-au-Prince. Whereas La Manif Pour Tous purposefully underplayed its connections to The Church and cast its actions in secular terms because of the hegemony of laïcité (separation of church and state) in France, Christian religiosity was excessively apparent at the March for Marriage – from the line-up of sponsors, the religious rhetoric of the speakers, the number of people wearing clerical clothing, and the backdrop of contemporary Christian music. Segments of the march sang hymns, and as they approached The Supreme Court Building, they knelt upon the ground to pray. However, the activists they met there were not just those prancing gleefully around in rainbow booty shorts blasting disco and electronica greeting the new arrivals with “Hey, hey! Ho, ho! Homophobia has got to go!” They also came face-to-face with a large crowd with members of the same Christian religions – Catholic, Protestant, and Mormon – represented in the March for Marriage, as well as people from other faith communities who had just come from a marriage equality event
called “A Prayer for Love and Justice.” This kind of counter demonstration was not present in Port-au-Prince or Jacmel, although same-sex desiring Haitians and their allies – the vast majority of whom are also Christians – were organizing in other ways.

**Homophobia as a civilizational discourse**

There are, in fact, many entrances for an extended comparative reading of the manifestations against same-sex marriage in Haiti, France, and the United States, though that reading exceeds the scope of this article. However, one more dimension of the demonstrations deserves attention here: media coverage. While the March for Marriage did not garner much media coverage outside of national Christian networks and LGBTQ rights’ watchdog sites, the French and Haitian manifestations made headlines internationally. What emerges from these archives is the use of coded civilizational discourse in descriptions of the events. The French manifestations were unexpected because French culture is perceived to have liberal – i.e., “civilized” – attitudes towards sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular. The manifestations in Haiti, while noted to be a rare if not unprecedented occurrence, were less surprising than the ones in France. They were attributed to a general antagonism of Haitian culture towards homosexuality, which compared to France would be considered “uncivilized,” although that specific term was never used. Civilizational discourses have an implied racial meaning; in this instance of situating representations of former colonizer and colony side-by-side, French tolerance is associated with whiteness and Haitian intolerance with blackness. Homophobia, then, was operating as a racialized discourse.¹

These racialized civilizational discourses emerge particularly in representations of instances of violence connected to the demonstrations. In both France and Haiti, a rash of violent incidents targeting people perceived to be homosexual, LGBT, or otherwise queer followed in the wake of the public demonstrations, as documented by human rights groups in both places. As much as French culture might be perceived to be sympathetic to the struggles of homosexuals, however, these particular instances of violence were slow to emerge in mainstream reporting about the clashes over same-sex marriage. This temporal lag is indicative of the ways that France is constructed as a space where homophobia does not exist. While the first La Manif Pour Tous demonstration took place just after the New Year, coverage of the incidents did not come into prominence until early April. The impetus for this coverage was a self-portrait of a seemingly well-to-do white man, Wilfred de Bruijn, taken after he was assaulted in Paris while walking arm and arm with his boyfriend. The photo of his bruised and bloodied face went viral after he posted it on Facebook with the caption, “Sorry to show you this. It’s the face of Homophobia” (Facebook, Inc. 2013). This representation of social violence was very individualized – de Bruijn embodying the effects of homophobia as a singular event. In interviews, de Bruijn simultaneously mentions that violence of this kind happens with some regularity, yet that it seems inimical to the values of France. In other words, he struggled with reconciling his experiences with homophobic violence with the general feeling that France is not homophobic.

This was not the case in Haiti, where news of the violence spread even more rapidly than information about the “rare” demonstration in Port-au-Prince. Haitian and international media sources reported with gruesome detail that protestors had killed two assumed-to-be
homosexual men after leaving the march against same-sex marriage (e.g., “Death Threats” 2013; “Two Accused” 2013), and the news spread like wildfire on social media. In the week following the demonstration, I received emails and text messages from people in the Dominican Republic, the United States, Canada, the Netherlands, Jamaica, and Germany wanting to know what happened because they had heard that gay Haitians were being slaughtered in the streets. A Dominican-American scholar sent me a press release condemning the violence that was signed by nearly 20 Haitian and Dominican organizations. I fervently emailed and called the key Haitian organizers with whom I had been working as a researcher for the past five years. Everyone with whom I talked was unharmed, and no one knew any details about the specific incident that had been picked up in the media, although they noted its believability since there had been an increasingly hostile climate towards masisi, madivin, and other queer people in Haiti since CHO had announced its intentions to hold an event. Then, a week after the march, The Miami Herald reported that the spokesman for the Haitian National Police declared that although men perceived to be homosexual had been harassed, no one had been killed (Charles 2013). While some media sources like The Washington Post deleted their articles from the digital archive, many stories about the imagined event remain online to this day (e.g., Littauer 2013; Walters 2013).

Why did this particular story have so much currency? Why were international audiences so eager to spread news that two “gay” men had been brutally murdered in Haiti? As one answer to that question, global LGBTQI human rights organizations have marked homophobia as one of the greatest social problems of our time, and they use stories such as this one to garner support for their mission of promoting rights for their designated key population of gender and sexual minorities. News about the “hate crimes” were circulated by the global LGBTQI with partnering programs in Haiti, Housing Works, Inc. (Boyuan 2013) and the Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice (“Heightened LGBT Violence” 2013). The latter included the story in a briefing about recent murders of homosexual men in Cameroon and Jamaica, which are – like Haiti – postcolonial states with predominantly black populations.

While many appreciate the zeal with which these human rights organizations perform this work to address homophobia whenever and wherever it occurs, the ways that their work ultimately produces postcolonial spaces – particularly those in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Middle East – as having exceptional problems with homophobia in a way that is somehow unrelated to the legacies of imperialism is cause for serious concern. I contend that even though their intentions may be altruistic – done with the hopes of making a more socially just world – the global LGBTQI’s work colludes with the Euro-American imperialist imperatives of erasing knowledge of colonial histories and their legacies and portraying black and brown populations as inherently and excessively violent. The popularity of the story from Haiti, then, stems from the fact that it aligned with these imperatives and produced Haiti, the Black Republic, as a site of unbridled violence, in this instance targeting homosexual men.

This was not the first time that the so-called problem of Haitian homophobia had been identified as a crisis vis-à-vis its imagined racial proximity to Jamaica, and it will certainly not be the last. Racial proximity takes precedence over geographic proximity in this instance because while the Caribbean countries are only separated by a strait of approximately 190 kilometers, Haiti shares an island with the Dominican Republic and is geographically closer
to Cuba. All these geographically proximate Caribbean nations have significant populations of African decedents with a lighter-skinned elite, but Jamaica and Haiti are popularly considered to be black nations rather than Creole/mestizo (racially mixed) ones like the Dominican Republic and Cuba. The history of mestizaje (miscegenation) is particularly important in terms of how the latter imagine their nations. As anthropologist Jafari S. Allen (2011) contends in the context of Cuba, mestizaje is a racial project that recenters white European heritage in Latin America and celebrates the destruction of blackness (48). Anti-black racism is likewise part of the Dominican Republic’s national history that celebrates its independence from Haiti, the Black Republic, rather than Spain. The Dominican Republic is also infamous for its history of state-sponsored projects to “whiten” the population, whether by encouraging immigration from Europe or expunging Haitian immigrants and their ancestors.

The slippage between Jamaica and Haiti is more about reproducing Euro-American imaginaries of black violence. Deborah A. Thomas (2011) has brilliantly unpacked the notion of exceptional violence in postcolonial Jamaica, and here I want to extend the analysis to the realm of sexual politics. Jamaica has come to signify “black homophobia” transnationally based on existing laws that criminalize same-sex sexuality as well as its anti-gay dance hall scene. There are certainly queer postcolonial publications reworking this narrative (e.g., Chin 1997; Ellis 2011), but this scholarship has far less impact than the wide-reaching machinery of the global LGBTQI. Thus, accounts of homophobia in Haiti often hinge on references to Jamaica. For instance, the graphic mini documentary “Haiti’s Scapegoats: Homophobia in the Aftermath of the 2010 Earthquake” (2012) introduces viewers to Haitian homophobia through Jamaica. While viewers look at an illustrated map of the region, the film narrates, “The Caribbean has a long history of homophobia. In Jamaica, being gay is a criminal offense. In Haiti, this is not the case. The law, in fact is quite progressive” (Dijckmeester-Bins 2012). The narrator here is referencing the fact that unlike Jamaican and many other former British colonies, Haiti does not have laws against sodomy or “buggery.” This narration seemingly sets up a contrast between Haiti and Jamaica, but it is quickly followed by a live interview – the only one in the whole film – with an American staff member of a Haitian LGBT organization saying that even if the laws are progressive, the “society as a whole” might not accept homosexuality or end discrimination against homosexuals (ibid.). This leaves viewers with the impression that the law (and the ways that it signals specific colonial inheritances) does not matter and that the two countries are more alike than different in terms of their (black) homophobic cultures.

A brief history of U.S. moral imperialism in Haiti

To critically contend with these representations is not to say that antigay violence is not a problem in Haiti. Over the years of my research, I have witnessed many homophobic incidents and been told of many more, ranging from small slights to put people in their place to brutal murders. The problem is very real and creates a climate of fear that – for some LGBT or other queer Haitians – makes life in Haiti miserable, dangerous, or impossible. But it is imperative to understand the structural forces that shape these lives and provide a historical context for the large demonstrations against same-sex marriage in 2013. It is a different
story about “Haitian homophobia” that will likely never be picked up by the international media – one with immediate ties to 100 years of U.S. American military, political, economic, religious, and social interventions in Haiti. As I maintain, the conservative sexual politics underlying this homophobia are rooted in these U.S. imperialist projects.

This history is one of major religious demographic changes in Haiti that coincide with the advent of U.S. imperialism during the 1915–34 occupation. At the time that the Marines invaded, Haitians were overwhelmingly Catholic. Even though missionaries introduced Protestantism in the wake of Haitian independence from French colonialism, the highest estimate of Protestant Haitians in 1915 was 2% of the population. But by the turn of the century, an estimated 40% of Haitians were Protestant – primarily affiliated with Baptist and Pentecostal churches. There has only been an increase in the number of conversions to Protestantism in recent years, particularly after the earthquake. These changes have been highlighted in the literature of historians and religious studies scholars (Romain 1986; Jeanty 1989; Conway 1978; Lain 1998; Louis 1998; Butler 2005; Louis 2010; Ramsey 2011; Carelock 2012; Ménard-Saint Clair 2012; and Louis 2014), and it is widely acknowledged that American missionary work during the mid-twentieth century played a major role in producing them.

But what made U.S. missionaries so interested in Haiti during that time? As I have detailed more extensively elsewhere (2015), American representations of Haiti during and immediately after the 19-year period of the occupation generated an interest in U.S. Protestant missionary work in the country that had previously not existed. These nightmarish and racist depictions of Haiti focused on the practice of “voodoo” black magic connected with all manner of perversions – human sacrifice, zombie creation, profligate heterosexuality, and homosexuality. American representations of Haiti, in other words, portrayed the Black Republic as ruinously queer and in need of salvation. This portrayal helped to justify the U.S. military occupation of Haiti as an attempt to salvage a savage nation and introduced concerted efforts to evangelize the natives to save their souls.

Related to the contemporary demonstrations, the promotion of monogamous heterosexual marriage was a key strategy of Protestant missionary development in Haiti beginning in the mid-twentieth century. The institution of marriage was already closely linked with colonialist legacies because of the French Code Noir (1685) that legislated marriages and extramarital relationships to discourage miscegenation. After the American Occupation period, “premarital” and “extramarital” sexual relationships – known within Haiti as plasaj (multiple partnerings in non-legal unions) – became a source of fascination for American social scientists and a primary site of intervention for U.S. missionaries (e.g., Herskovits 1937, Comhaire-Sylvain 1958, Bastein 1961, Allman 1985). As anthropologist James Graham Leyburn (1941) described the issue: “Nowhere else in the Western World has there been so little actual marriage in proportion to the population as in Haiti” (187). Protestants sought to remedy this problem and reached out to the majority poor Haitians to promote marriage by, for instance, offering church services for wedding ceremonies at no cost. Thus missionaries slowly implemented these civilizational reforms in the sphere of racialized profligate sexuality to the point that monogamous, heterosexual marriage would become common sense, if not widely practiced.

While the “nativization” of Protestantism happened long ago, U.S. missionaries have continued to flock to Haiti. Some are compelled by a general sense of Christian
humanitarianism to help a place in need (DeTemple 2006), while others who are part of the more radical Spiritual Mapping Movement have targeted Haiti because its “demonic entrenchment” related to the practice of Vodou (McAlister 2012). My guess from years of casual conversation with the matching t-shirt-clad American missionaries who fill flights to the Toussaint L’Ouverture International Airport in Port-au-Prince is that most have no idea that they travel well-worn routes or that their missions are so intimately connected to U.S. statecraft. This recent wave, after all, is made possible in many ways by U.S. neoliberal policies over the past two decades that have strangled the capacity of the Haitian state and rendered Haiti the republic of nongovernmental organizations that “kill with kindness,” to use anthropologist Mark Schuller’s (2012) framing of the problem.

In the process, American missionaries have introduced a new kind of religious homophobia to Haiti. I say “new” because Catholic homophobia – a legacy of French colonialism in Haiti – has long been in effect. This kind of homophobia operates like a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, meaning that same-sex desires and sexualities should never be publicly discussed, which the same-sex desiring Haitians I have interviewed navigate with practices of discretion. They do not discuss their sexual trysts, love affairs, or queer affiliations, and people do not press them for information. This kind of religious homophobia that thinly shrouds an open secret and only punishes those who make public proclamations clashes with Protestant homophobia that has come into prominence in recent years. Instead of shying away from public discussions of same-sex desires and sexualities, it operates through economies of enunciation and denunciation that confronts them head on. The Haitian declaration of “Nou pa dakò!” performs this by forcing a preemptive national “debate” about same-sex marriage and extends the critique to condemn homosexuality in general.

Haiti thus is similar to the case of Uganda in terms of U.S. influence determining the contours of contests over sexual politics. In Uganda, U.S. evangelical missionaries were behind the so-called “Kill the Gays Bill” that increased the legal penalty for certain same-sex sexual acts from life in prison to the death penalty and criminalized female same-sex sexuality for the first time. As detailed in Reverend Kapya Kaoma’s “Globalizing the Culture Wars: U.S. Conservatives, African Churches, and Homophobia” (2009), the bill was introduced to the Parliament soon after the Uganda-based Family Life Network sponsored the “Seminar on Exposing the Homosexuals’ Agenda” led by three Americans in the Christian anti-gay and ex-gay movements. Parliament passed the bill in late 2013, and the Uganda Anti-Homosexuality Act was signed into law by the president in early 2014. An international backlash ensued that included substantial pressure from human rights organizations and the United States that withdrew foreign aid from Uganda. The Ugandan non-profit Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG) is pursuing an unprecedented case within the United States federal courts charging one of the American missionaries who consulted on the bill, Scott Lively, with crimes against humanity.

Unlike this case in Uganda, the contest over sexual politics in Haiti takes a different shape not only because of the two countries’ divergent European colonial legacies (British and French respectively), but because there is little public knowledge about the history of U.S. moral imperialism and its influence on “Haitian homophobia.” The American influence on contemporary Haitian “culture wars” has been more than a century in the making. The two most circulated documents about homophobia in Haiti preceding the
demonstrations against same-sex marriage – a 2010 report by the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (2011) and the previously mentioned 2012 documentary “Haiti’s Scapegoats: Homophobia in the Aftermath of the 2010 Earthquake” – missed this important context. Because these projects were both based on short-term research about the lives of LGBT Haitians after the earthquake, they reiterated old narratives about “Haitian homophobia” stemming from the socially conservative culture of Catholicism. Thus, they inadvertently disappeared U.S. complicities beyond the influx of American evangelicals to Haiti during disaster relief efforts. This dynamic was replayed in the global LGBTQI’s representations of the 2013 demonstrations against same-sex marriage.

Conclusion

I maintain that solidarity work must first acknowledge these complicities, the deep American roots of “Haitian homophobia,” and not reinforce colonialist and imperialist dynamics. Thus, as a white, U.S. American citizen mache ansanm (walking together) with queer Haitians, I offer this brief and circuitous history of postcolonial homophobia in Haiti as a different way to understand the 2013 demonstrations against same-sex marriage in Port-au-Prince. As mentioned in the introduction, postcolonial homophobia refers to the cumulative effects of historical and contemporary Western imperialist biopolitical interventions to discover, regulate, manage, control, govern, and/or liberate (homo)sexuality and (trans)gender embodiments in postcolonial nations. Here I have sketched out a general landscape of postcolonial homophobia and how it is perpetrated by evangelical Christians and the global LGBTQI.

Therefore, I hope for this article to trouble the claim that Haiti is either too queer (as the protesters and their missionary predecessors declared) or too homophobic (as the global LGBTQI and their partnering Haitian organizations responded). This goes for Jamaica and Uganda, as well as the many other postcolonial nations triangulated between these two movements bound up with the spread of U.S. imperialism. Both of these positions within the global culture wars work to generate more foreign intervention rather than less, which is ultimately detrimental to same-sex desiring postcolonial peoples as well as their heterosexual counterparts. As declared by my colleagues in the recent anthologies Homophobias: Lust and Loathing across Time and Space (Murray 2009) and Global Homophobia: States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression (Weiss and Bosia 2013), we continue to need much more nuanced representations of “homophobia” and scholarly accounts of how these sexual politics play out in the everyday lives of postcolonial people.

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Note on contributor

Note
1. Queer postcolonial scholarship has illuminated how these racialized discourses of homophobia are a product of contemporary imperialisms. See, for example: Hawley (2001); Massad (2007); Salih (2007); Puar (2007); Wahab (2012).

References


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