Saint, Assotto (1957-1994)

by Luca Prono

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Through his contributions to literary and popular culture, Haitian-born American poet, performance artist, musician, and editor and publisher Assotto Saint increased the visibility of black queer authors and themes during the 1980s and early 1990s. In addition, Saint was both one of the first black activists to disclose his HIV-positive status and one of the first poets to respond to the AIDS crisis in his work.

His legacy includes his own literary and theatrical work and his role as publisher and editor of other writers. His theatrical and multimedia productions made him one of the central figures in the black gay cultural arts movement of his time; and as the editor and publisher of several important literary anthologies, he helped to make queerness an important element within the black literary community.

Saint was born Yves François Lubin in Haiti on October 2, 1957. He was raised by his mother and did not meet his father until he was an adult. He recognized that he was attracted to men when he was seven years old, but did not realize that there was a gay community until he left Haiti and settled in New York.

While visiting his mother in the United States in 1970, he decided to relocate to New York. He enrolled in Queens College in a pre-med curriculum, but soon left to pursue his interests in dance and theater.

It was at this time that Lubin changed his name. The decision to adopt the name of Assotto Saint was an affirmation of the writer's Haitian roots. The word "assotto" identifies a particular type of drum used in voodoo rituals, while "Saint" is a reference to Toussaint L'Ouverture, the former slave who led the revolt against French colonial rule in Haiti at the end of the eighteenth century.

As he explained in the posthumous collection *Spells of a Voodoo Doll: The Poems, Fiction, Essays, and Plays of Assotto Saint* (1996), the choice of the word "Saint" also implied a sacrilegious sanctification of "the loud low-life bitch that I am." Jana Eva Braziel concludes that the name "Assotto Saint" acquires a political and revolutionary dimension in the context of Haitian history. At the same time, it provides a "diasporic gay revision" of such history by reversing the masculinity associated with Toussaint L'Ouverture through the author's own identification as a "loud low-life bitch."

Saint performed with the Martha Graham Dance Company for several years. In 1980, however, he fell in love with Jaan Urban Holmgren, a Swedish-born composer, with whom he began collaborating on a number of theatrical and musical projects.

With Holmgren, he founded the Metamorphosis Theatre, where he served as artistic director, and Xotika, an arts rock or "techno pop" band. Saint was the band's lead singer, while Holmgren wrote music for the band and for Saint's theater pieces. Xotika's dance song "Forever Gay" was released on the CD *Feeding the Flame* by Flying Fish Records in 1990.

At the Metamorphosis Theatre, Saint staged performance works about the lives of black gay men, such as *Risin' to the Love We Need*, *New Love Song*, *Black Fag*, and *Nuclear Lovers*. These works challenge Saint's

initial naïve impressions of the United States as a land of sexual freedom and offer alternative images of queerness to the more familiar ones associated with white middle-class homosexuals.

For example, the main character in *Risin' to the Love We Need* is an aging black drag queen who claims that the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s is as important to her as the gay liberation movement of the 1970s.

Also in the early 1980s Saint began writing and publishing poetry. His work was included in a number of anthologies, including *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (1986), edited by Joseph Beam, and *Gay and Lesbian Poetry in Our Time* (1988), edited by Carl Morse and Joan Larkin. He also published a chapbook, *Triple Trouble* (1987), in which he described himself as "a black queen / dancing with shadows at high noon / triple trouble that's brutal / chasing America's evil spirits away"; and two books of poetry, *Stations* (1989), a long poem about an interracial relationship, and *Wishing for Wings* (1994), a collection of poems.

In addition to publishing his own work, he also served as poetry editor for the anthology *Other Countries: Black Gay Voices* (1988) and founded Galiens Press to publish black gay poets. The name "Galiens" was coined to combine the words "Gay" and "Aliens." Among the volumes published by Galiens Press include the Lambda Literary Award-nominated anthology, *Here to Dare: A Collection of Ten Gay Black Poets* (1992), as well *The Road Before Us: 100 Gay Black Poets* (1991) and *Milking Black Bull: 11 Black Gay Poets* (1995).

In his essay "Why I Write," Saint stressed that his aim was to make black queer voices fully part of American life. Through his editing and publishing, he became the mentor of an entire generation of black gay writers such as Essex Hemphill, Marlon Riggs, and Melvin Dixon, and his influence lives on in the lives and work of such writers as Samuel Delaney, Carl Phillips, Kobena Mercer, Phillip Brian Harper, and Isaac Julien.

After Saint and Holmgren were diagnosed as HIV-positive, Saint threw himself into AIDS activism. He was aware of too many artists who went to their deaths in secrecy about their AIDS status and determined that he would be open about his struggle. He was one of five AIDS activists featured in Marlon Riggs' film *No Regrets (Non, Je Regrette Rien)* (1993).

Published at a time when the American government was still reluctant to fund AIDS research and prevention programs, Saint's collections of poems *Stations* and *Wishing for Wings* celebrated the solidarity among gay men in the face of the disease and contrasted this type of queer heroism with the indifference of politicians and decision-makers.

Saint conceived his work as a challenge to the social norms that required invisibility and silence from both black gay men and people with AIDS. His writing constantly reverses expectations regarding sex and gender and provocatively combines queerness and traditional Haitian folklore and mythology.

The artist never relinquished his Haitian cultural heritage. In spite of the widespread homophobia in the Haitian diasporic community, Saint felt linked to that community because of their common fights against the oppressive regime of the Haitian dictator Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier.

In addition to retaining close connections to his home country, Saint also fully participated in the social and political movements in the United States, demanding more effective measures against racial and sexual discrimination, and participating in demonstrations and protests against the government's ineffective response to the AIDS crisis.

Saint's work is motivated by the conviction that the personal is the political; as the author himself wrote in *Spells of a Voodoo Doll*: "[o]ur writings should very much be a public process that reflects private passions." His poetry starts from private and personal passions to confront the AIDS crisis openly, thus conceiving

poetic composition as an act of survival that breaks the silence surrounding people with AIDS even as it also disturbingly documents the physical and psychological ravages of the disease.

The death of Holmgren on March 29, 1993 profoundly affected Saint. In the three-part prose piece entitled "No More Metaphors" interwoven through the poems in *Wishing for Wings*, the writer concludes that no words can convey his despair over the death of his partner. However, as with most of Assotto's oeuvre, "No More Metaphors" can be easily reversed in meaning and be read, rather than simply an admission of despair, as a call to political activism, encouraging his readers to confront the virus in all its aspects, including the most devastating ones.

Assotto Saint died of AIDS-related complications on June 29, 1994. In the preface to the anthology *The Road before Us*, Saint had requested that, in protest of the indifference of American society to those dying of AIDS, that the American flag be burned at his funeral and its ashes scattered on his grave.

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About the Author

Luca Prono holds a Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Nottingham, where he taught courses in American culture and Film Studies. He has published articles on Pier Vittorio Tondelli, Italian Neo-Realism, and American Radical Literature, as well as on contemporary representations of homosexuality in Italian films.