Opacity in Motion: Jacmel's Carnival Masks and Diasporic Carnivals in Montreal and Toronto

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Thesis in the Department of Art History

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

(Art History)

Concordia University Montreal, Quebec, Canada

April 2026

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

School of Graduate Studies

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Entitled: Opacity in Motion: Jacmel's Carnival Masks and Diasporic Carnivals in Montreal and Toronto

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Master of Arts (Art History)

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ABSTRACT

Opacity in Motion: Jacmel's Carnival Masks and Diasporic Carnivals in Montreal and Toronto

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In his book *Poetics of Relation,* Martinican essayist, poet and philosopher Edouard Glissant presents his thoughts on decolonization, culture and identity where universality should be understood as relations constructed upon diversity instead of unity. This premise opens the discussion on what Glissant calls the *theory of opacity*, a central concept in my research. Also known as the right to opacity, its aim is to protect cultural difference and to resist assimilative pressures of colonialism. In this thesis, I posit that carnival masks are the material embodiment of this right to opacity. I examine Haiti's Jacmel Carnival in recent years and consider how papier-mâché artist Didier Civil, through his narrative-driven practice, contributes to sustaining the collective memory and identity of Jacmelians. I explore the 2022 Jacmel Carnival « *Les Créations Didier Civil* » featuring COVID-19 virus as a carnivalesque theme. I also reflect on the contemporary relevance of carnival traditions within diasporic Caribbean communities in Montréal and Toronto, alongside Glissant's opacity to analyze how they navigate Canada's multicultural mosaic. My research methodology is Afrocentric, centring mostly Black and Caribbean scholars, writers, and historians. This thesis underscores the importance and depth of Jacmel's papier-mâché masks in the identity of its people and its impact in Haitian storytelling.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing."
Socrate

Completing this thesis was made possible by the privilege and opportunity I had to meet the right people along my journey toward academic growth and the sharpening of my critical thinking. I have met many wonderful and supportive individuals to whom I am deeply grateful, each of whom has enriched my experience in different ways.

I would like to thank Dr. Joana Joachim, my supervisor, for her support, her care, and most of all her guidance. She was exactly the right person to help me reach the finish line. She understood when I needed to slow down, but she also knew when I needed a boost and to *kenbe la*. Merci, Joana.

I want to thank Dr. Balbir K. Singh for accepting to be my second reader and for being a sounding board for my engagement with Édouard Glissant's theory of opacity. I also want to thank Dr. Nicola Pezolet for encouraging me to pursue higher education, as well as all the professors I had the privilege of studying under. Many thanks to all of you.

On a more personal note, I would like to wholeheartedly thank my loved ones—family, friends, significant other, and SSS&H. You have been my motivation when I felt I had no more strength to continue. Thank you for reminding me, each in your own way, to keep going until the work was done.

DEDICATION

To all those who were told their stories did not matter: know that you were never meant to be erased, hidden or silenced.

Sé pou ou Erta.

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INTRODUCTION

The African continent has been the place of origin, the nexus of countless peoples whose descendants established new nations across the globe—countries that today have their own distinct identities, cultures and realities.[1] Among them is the Republic of Haiti, a former colony that, in 1804, became the world's first free Black republic and the second independent nation in the Western Hemisphere after the United States.[2] Although former Caribbean colonies share a history marked by violence and multiple forms of oppression, its nations evolved along distinct trajectories and cannot be defined or simplified through the gaze of colonial legacies. In his important work *Poetics of Relation,* Martinican essayist, poet and philosopher Edouard Glissant (1928-2011) (Figure 1), articulates a vision on decolonization, culture and identity where universality should be understood as relations emerging from diversity instead of unity. This premise opens the discussion on what Glissant calls the poetics of relations and, most crucially, the theory of opacity which is the starting point of my research.[3] Also known as the right to opacity, this theory speaks to the strategies employed by Black peoples to protect cultural diversity and to resist colonialism. I posit in this thesis that Jacmel's carnival papier-mâché masks can be read as a physical materialization of the right to opacity.

I examine Haitian artist Didier Civil to illustrate the importance of papier-mâché not only as an artistic practice, but also as a powerful identity signature of Jacmel's Carnival and its community. As I watched Civil, on different video interviews, describing the meticulous process of layering-soaked strips of paper—one upon another—until they gradually assume the desired form and harden into an opaque, vibrant mask capable of carrying powerful messages, or shield the identity of the messenger, I was struck by how closely this technique mirrors the formation of identity. Just as Civil's mask's opacity depends on multiple

[1] Mary-Claire King Campbell and Sarah A. Tishkoff, "The Evolution of Human Genetic and Phenotypic Variation in Africa," *Current Biology* 20, no. 4 (February 23, 2010): R166–73; The Australian Museum, "When and Where Did Our Species Originate?," n.d., https://australian.museum/learn/science/human-evolution/when-and-where-did-our-species-originate/.
[2] "Haiti - Countries - Office of the Historian." U.S. Department of State, n.d. https://history.state.gov/countries/haiti#:~:text=Summary,U.S.%20military%20intervention%20in%201915.
[3] Édouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189-194.

layers bound together with glue made out of sugar and starch, so too does a nation's opacity emerge from the dense layering of language, history, politics, religion, and realities glued by identity. These accumulated strata create a protective thickness that enables a people to resist and shield their identity from the penetrating, and inaccurate gaze of dominant forces such as colonialism or those in power such as the United State or the elites.

In Chapter 1, I explore the theory of opacity by showing how Jacmel's carnival papier-mâché masks embody this concept, using the creations of Jacmelian artist Didier Civil. Chapter 2 will focus on examining the many ways opacity manifests across Jacmel's Carnival. And, in chapter 3, I analyze the Canadian Black diasporic context by comparing and contrasting the dynamics of Caribbean carnival practices as they unfold in two distinct urban sites: Montréal and Toronto.

In addition to traditional academic primary and secondary sources, I have used various communication platforms such as videos, social media posts as well as independent blogs primarily to gather information about Civil and his body of work. In keeping with Black studies intellectual tradition, I use storytelling both as a methodology and as an analytical framework. Inspired by *la lodyans*—a Haitian literary genre rooted in practices of orality—I open each chapter with a story.[4] I extend this form of storytelling as a bridge between narratives from popular or personal contexts into the academic sphere.

In African cultures, masquerade is far more than entertainment; it constitutes one of the most vibrant performative narratives of collective memory and operates as a powerful, affirmative mode of engaged storytelling. For instance, in the West-African Senufo regions—especially within the Poro society—masks are central pillars in storytelling to initiate young men into adulthood, to preserve history through funerary rites, and to mediate between the invisible and visible world.[5] Traditions have transformed

[4] The *lodyans* is a narrative practice that shapes Haitian collective identity. It proposes responses to existing social conditions and highlights the urgency of describing social reality. It carries an ethnographic dimension. Maximilien Ricarson Dorcé, "La lodyans haïtienne et Maximilien Laroche: cheminement d'un patrimoine culturel immatériel haïtien," *Ethnologies* 43, no. 1 (2021): 130, https://doi.org/10.7202/1082162ar.

[5] Fodonon and Sandongo Poro masks belong to the Senufo cultural sphere of Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Burkina Faso, where masquerade underpins initiation, funerary ritual, and the passing of esoteric knowledge. Anita J. Glaze,

over time, transcended geographies, eras and temporalities, and are an integral part of Caribbean carnivals. These celebrations hold profound significance for Caribbean peoples across the world as a connective and collective force resisting erasure or simplification of our identities. The resilience of communities emerging from colonial rule were forged in the face of mass displacement, collective trauma, and geographic rupture. The memory of these pivotal histories continues to surface in carnival performances today, serving to preserve, recall, and transmit oral traditions and ancestral knowledge.

Within the Haitian context—and especially in Jacmel's Carnival—the act of masking and assuming an alternate persona creates a space where celebration, activism, liberation, artistic and creative audacity coexist. This performative transformation generates an opaque identity legible only to those who share its cultural codes. It is a politico-socio-artistic terrain worth exploring further, where *la libération de la parole et de la pensée* is enacted from behind a mask—whether literal or metaphorical.[6]

In his 1981 book *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant famously proclaimed: "We demand the right to opacity!" Yet, given the postcolonial legacy from which this assertion emerges, one might ask: who is granted the right to opacity in the first place? For Glissant, the answer is simple—everyone. As later chapters will show, Glissant frames opacity as a universal right, while giving particular weight to those whose identities have historically been subjected to colonial, racial, and patriarchal domination. In his work—and in contemporary scholarship that builds on it—opacity becomes for this thesis especially resonant in relation to the carnival masks of Jacmel. Here, opacity is examined through the lens of the colonized, the racialized, the performer, the artwork, the sacred, and the deliberate refusal of those who choose not to be legible or translatable to dominant powers.

"Dialectics of Gender in Senufo Masquerades," *African Arts* 19, no. 3 (1986): 30–32. https://doi.org/10.2307/3336409. "Senufo Arts and Poro Initiation in Northern Côte d'Ivoire," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, accessed February 22, 2026, https://www.metmuseum.org/essays/senufo-arts-and-poro-initiation-in-northern-cote-divoire.

[6] Freedom of speech and thought

CHAPTER 1 - Embodiment of Glissant's Theory of Opacity

Sé Pa Pou Timoun: My First Mask of Opacity

«One summer when I was a child, still in kindergarten, my great-aunt took me with her to visit a relative. I use the term "relative", but he was not family.[7] I had never met or heard of that "uncle" before. He lived in a modest apartment building. He was tall, dark, lean and ageless – at least to the child that I was. Upon entering his apartment, I was hit by the subtle smell of aromatic burnt wood. I remember the room being bright with large windows and sparsely furnished with exotic plants and wooden objects such as a lamp, a fruit basket, and various wooden statues, as well as half a dozen paintings on the walls depicting faceless black or brown peasants colorfully dressed. The characters in these paintings were portrayed doing daily activities with men wearing straw hats and scarfs for women, working on the land, fishing on a boat in the sea or selling goods at local markets. I recall feeling so small in that big and unfamiliar space.

In a dimmer part of the flat, there were about a dozen anthropomorphic and theriomorphic masks on shelves and hanging on walls.[8] Although I cannot recall every detail, I remember there were about five or six pieces made of bright colorful lacquered papier-mâché representing hollow three-dimensional mystical animals, and imaginary characters such as a black mermaid with two tails, or a tiger that also looked like a bat because its features were so sharp– these were on a low-level shelf. The other masks were rugged, they looked heavy and made from aged dark wood and looked African inspired if not genuine African masks, with geometric forms representing eyes, noses, and mouths (Figure 2).[9] The last mask was very simple, made of thin tin and represented either a one-dimensional goat or perhaps a devil staring from the wall. The papier-mâché masks were vivid, while the wooden masks appeared more austere, but with

[7] This form of acknowledgment is seen as a sign of respect from a child to an adult and is perceived as a sense of pride and sign of authority from the parent because it demonstrates how well-raised their child is.
[8] Masks that have human features are defined as anthropomorphic and those with animal characteristics are referred to as theriomorphic. P. S. Wingert, "Mask," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, September 13, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/art/mask-face-covering.
[9] Although it isn't the same mask I saw at my uncle's, this mask from the Songye culture in the Democratic Republic of the Congo closely resembles the one I remember from that childhood day. Courtesy of Mr. Steve Ntambwe.

some colors enhancing either the eyes or mouths. There was so much sensorial stimulation in such an unfamiliar space. I was enthralled by the whole experience.[10] Clearly that space and the masks hanging were important – they mattered profoundly, not only to him but in ways that signaled something vital.

Though I could not articulate it at the time, I perceived something about these specific masks that I could not penetrate, an opacity that fascinated me. Of course, at that age, I did not know or understand the term opacity. However, I could feel something akin to an invisible wall preventing me from grasping or seeing something essential that these adults could. It was like I was the only one too short in that room to see above that intangible obstacle and become part of their secret. I instinctively felt the masks served a higher mission; they were alive. It felt like they were staring at me – they wanted to tell me a story. When I asked the "uncle" about them – he told me in creole: *Sé pa pou ti-moun* (These are not for kids). He claimed they had mystical and protective properties. He said these masks had powers that I was far too young to understand. I knew he spoke the truth. On our way back home, avoiding my gaze, my great-aunt instructed me not to mention that visit to anyone. I never saw that "uncle" again.

Years later, reflecting on that day, I wondered if there had been more to that "uncle", and his masks. Perhaps that "uncle" had belonged to a secret society where masks were symbols of belonging, or maybe he was an artist devoted to the expressive power of masks in rituals and celebrations. [11] But more hauntingly, perhaps he was a Haitian man, like countless other immigrants, bearing the scars of displacement—torn from his homeland by forces beyond his control, burdened by grief and yearning. Perhaps these masks were the materialization of a fractured identity, and a lifeline to his sanity. Perhaps they were sacred ties to the culture he had been forced to leave behind, unable to share with the Canadian-born child that I was—an

[10] As a young Haitian girl born and raised in Québec, who had barely begun school, the only masks I remember being exposed to were cheap plastic Halloween masks representing cartoon characters like Wonder Woman, Scooby Doo or animals such as rabbits, dogs or cats.

[11] Laënnec Hurbon, Le barbare imaginaire (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1988), 273. ; Vodou secret society. Secret societies emerged in the years of slavery. They grew out of the clandestine practice of Vodou, which was banned by the European colonizers. Also known as chanpwèl, bizango, zobòp or vlenbendeng. Haiti Inter, accessed August 3, 2025, Haïti Inter, "Chanpwèl, Bizango, Zobop, Qu'est-ce Que C'est?," Haiti Inter, March 19, 2021, https://www.haitiinter.com/chanpwel-bizango-zobop-quest-ce-que-cest/.

outsider to his world even though it was also part of my heritage. I knew it was deeper than me being a little girl and him an adult. There was an opacity other than material that I would learn later to accept, and to respect.

Opacities of Two Realms: Glissant and Civil

This chapter examines the theory of opacity, emphasizing how papier-mâché masks showcased in Jacmel's carnivals act as a concrete manifestation of his theory by examining works by the renowned Haitian papier-mâché artisan and painter Didier Civil.[12] This chapter examines the role of masks in Jacmel, Haiti through the lens of Glissant's theory. I will argue that although the masks and carnival rituals of Jacmel function as vital responses to social, spiritual, political, and environmental exigencies, Édouard Glissant's theory of opacity provides a conceptual framework for understanding how these practices protect Haiti against those in power trying to suppress or erase local spiritual and cultural traditions. Haiti's historical journey to independence is key to understanding the political, spiritual, and social significance of carnivals and masks traditions. Opacity helps frame discussions on identity and to situate colonial legacies within contemporary Haitian realities.

When masks are presented within a carnivalesque context—particularly in former colonies such as Haiti—the opacity of the unfolding event becomes part of the mask itself in multiple dimensions. Jacmel carnival masks can be imagined as the material embodiments of opacity, offering both conceptual depth and sensory engagement—through sight, hearing, touch, and smell—as acts of resistance against structures of oppression. The captivating rhythms of chants, drums, and music—rising like a collective tribute and prayer to the ancestors and their spiritual realms, and interwoven with coded messages on everyday social issues that can be tools for political and popular disobedience—further illuminate the depth and relevance of Glissant's theory of opacity. In an article about Haitian carnivals, Gage Averill explains that these

[12] Didier Civil. *Didier Civil*. Artavita. Accessed December 9, 2025. https://www.artavita.com/artists/fc9d2bff-a6ee-4cc4-9e4b-b4e417d338d6.

exuberant celebrations serve as a dynamic political field.[13] He states that the Haitian carnival is a site of struggles over bodies, space, sounds and interpretation.[14] Over the years, various governments have attempted to weaponize carnival as a political tool serving elite propaganda—most notably during the dictatorships of François (Papa Doc) and Jean-Claude Duvalier (Baby Doc). Yet even under these violent regimes, music, satire, exuberant masks, and embodied performance became powerful means through which people critiqued authority. Carnivals turned into contested spaces where the elites sought to discipline and co-opt collective beliefs and popular energies, while the masses used the very same space to negotiate their power.[15] In line with Glissant's notion of opacity, carnivals exist within a space-time that resists containment and predictability, rejecting transparency and the forms of domination that accompany it.

Opacity further deepens the complex construction of Haitian identity and its relationship to itself, its history, and the world at large. Civil and his masks are a vibrant testimonial of the multiple layers supporting the physicality and symbolism of his papier-mâché masks. Linking tangible artifacts, like papier-mâché masks used in the performative storytelling of Jacmel's carnival, to the intangible philosophical framework of opacity enriches ongoing debates about identity, and culture as a result of colonial and postcolonial legacies within Black studies.

From Saint-Domingue to Haiti: The Path to Independence

To appreciate the significance of Haitian carnivals, understanding the complex history, and the birth of the Haitian nation is important. Explorer and navigator Christopher Columbus is credited for having "discovered" the island of Hispaniola in 1492.[16] Within a few years of his arrival, the Indigenous Taíno population was brought to the brink of extinction. Columbus had ushered with him a dawn of torture, destruction, starvation and fatal diseases.[17] Originally claimed by Spain, the island's western third was later

[13] Averill, Gage. "Anraje to Angaje: Carnival Politics and Music in Haiti." *Ethnomusicology* 38, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1994): 217. University of Illinois Press on behalf of the Society for Ethnomusicology.
[14] Ibid. 217-219;224
[15] Ibid.
[16] Cain Stoneking, "The Decline of the Tainos, 1492-1542: A Re-Vision," 2009,1.
[17] Ibid.

ceded to France. Before Haiti emerged as the first free Black Republic, it had to become fierce under the French colony of Saint-Domingue, the most violent plantation economy.

The transatlantic slave trade benefitting French colonies saw 80% of its human cargo being shipped to Saint-Domingue.[18] It was the most prosperous colony. It was said to harvest the most brutal and inhuman treatment of its slaves to sustain its abundant productivity.[19] The mortality rate of enslaved people was the highest among all colonies because the goal was to obtain the maximum profit out of each captive, hence new shipment of kidnapped Africans from various kingdoms in Africa were needed on a regular basis.[20] Due to this need for profit at all costs Saint-Domingue population consisted of 89% slaves.[21] Furthermore, among the 40% slaves born in Africa, a majority were said to come from West Central Africa, labelled as the "Kongos" who were known for their military skills.[22] Along with other factors, these elements set the path to independence of the former colony and the creation of the Republic of Haiti in 1804, the first independent country in Americas after the United States in 1783.[23] "Ayiti" means "Land of high mountains" or "Mountain in the sea" and was borrowed from the Taíno language.[24] Naming the new country with another name than the one given by the French administration was a way to cut all ties with France and restore an historic justice for Haiti to the rest of the world.[25] Today, the country is plagued by enduring stigmas and ranks among the poorest countries in the world. However, what is often omitted from dominant narratives about Haiti is the fact that its ability to grow and for self-determination was systematically

[18] Domitille de Gavriloff, review of *Saint-Domingue, Colonie Monstre*, *L'Histoire*, May 2025, 36. https://www.lhistoire.fr/parution/mensuel-531.
[19] Ibid.
[20]Ibid., 36-37; David Patrick Geggus and Norman Fiering, The World of the Haitian Revolution (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 9–11.
[21] Domitille de Gavriloff, review of *Saint-Domingue, Colonie Monstre*, *L'Histoire*, May 2025, 38. https://www.lhistoire.fr/parution/mensuel-531.
[22] Ibid.; David Patrick Geggus and Norman Fiering, The World of the Haitian Revolution (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 8.
[23] According to its website: "The Office of the Historians is staffed by professional historians who are experts in the history of U.S. foreign policy and the Department of State and possess unparalleled research experience in classified and unclassified government records. The Office is directed by The Historian of the U.S. Department of State". The United States and the Haitian Revolution, 1791–1804; Manuel Covo, review of *1804 – La première république noire, L'Histoire*, May 2025,41;45. https://www.lhistoire.fr/parution/mensuel-531
[24] Ibid.
[25] Manuel Covo, review of *1804 – La première république noire, L'Histoire*, May 2025,41. https://www.lhistoire.fr/parution/mensuel-531

sabotaged and impeded from the outset of its independence. Acknowledging these aspects is essential to situate Haiti's identity and opacity in Glissant's discourse.

Glissant understood naming as part of a process of self-assertion, and thus for him geography was of the utmost importance.[26] He believed that geography was inextricable from identity, history and how these islands and places of displacement shaped how these emerging nations could redefine themselves and fight colonial erasure. Katherine McKittrick highlights this by accentuating the approaches in which naming a place becomes an act of "naming self and self-histories" for Glissant.[27] McKittrick explains naming as a state of emancipation that sheds an unescapable light on the existence of alternate geographies.[28] As a result, it creates a new analytical framework that challenges established conventional structures.[29]

Glissant and Cultural Identity Formation

Embracing Glissant's work within a Haitian cultural and artistic framework is critical not only because he repeatedly voiced his admiration for Haiti, but also because he positioned it within his writing as an important part of Caribbean history and relational poetics. He often compared the colonial histories of Martinique and Haiti and contrasted their radically different revolutionary and emancipatory outcomes. *Poetics of Relation* framed his radical theories on identity and community through lenses of creolization, relationality and opacity. His concepts challenged contemporary discourses on the immovability of self and identity as he believed them to be shaped by global cultural exchanges and entanglements with others. The beauty and originality of Glissant's thought on identity is that he did not reject it but rather transformed it

[26] Devarya Srivastava, "Chapter 1. Thinking," in Sitting in the Room With Glissant (Genève: Graduate Institute Publications, 2023), 19.
[27] Ibid.; Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of* Struggle (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxii.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.

by differentiating identities into categories such as root, relation, and rhizomic.[30] He advocated for the idea that we can be together with others while being different from each other.[31]

To explain cultural identity formation, Glissant refers to the botanical imagery of the rhizome instead of the root because of its uniqueness and its natural instinct to suffocate and kill everything around it in order to thrive, whereas the rhizome is a tangled subterranean network that can develop through either soil or air.[32] Moreover, the rhizome can extend without any dominant rootstock asserting permanent control.[33] Hence, the concept of the rhizome preserves the idea of rootedness while opposing the dominance of a singular, authoritarian root.[34] Glissant defines the "poetics of relation" as a "rhizomatic thought" where each identity emerges because of a relation shaped through the "Other".[35] He posits the concept of "relation" as fundamental to understanding identity and culture. This concept is well demonstrated considering Haiti's genetic makeup and its history as it is a nation that built its culture and identity from its entanglements with several other mixes.[36] Suffering imposed by history is inseparable from the Caribbean experience, rooted in a colonial legacy of exploitation and dehumanization of slaves.[37] Yet, he also believed that out of this place, because of its interconnectedness and uniqueness, an emerging global consensus would come to

[30] Celia Britton, Scholar from Aberdeen and Member of the British Academy was a panelist on a series of conferences on Édouard Glissant titled: Cycle Édouard Glissant: réel et utopie. Britton is the author of *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance*. Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia. This particular conference was titled: Edouard Glissant : une philosophie de la relation. The event was held at the Bibliothèque publique d'information, Centre Pompidou, 2018. Bibliothèque publique d'information, "Édouard Glissant : Une Philosophie de La Relation," *YouTube video*, April 6, 2018,
[31] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 193.
[32] First developed by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in the 1970s and introduced in their seminal work *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980); Rhizome: Botany- a continuously growing horizontal underground stem which puts out lateral shoots and adventitious roots at intervals. Oxford Languages, Oxford Languages (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025), https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/.
[33] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 11.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Domitille de Gavriloff, review of *Saint-Domingue, Colonie Monstre*, *L'Histoire*, May 2025, 38. https://www.lhistoire.fr/parution/mensuel-531
[37] Aliocha Wald Lasowski. *Edouard Glissant* (Paris: PUF, 2021) 98.

fruition.[38] Inherently, identities do not exist and it is only through relations that they are formed and created.[39]

The theory of opacity, especially when used in the Caribbean context and its colonial legacy, aims to protect, to respect cultural diversity and to resist colonialism. For Glissant, identities—whether communal or national—are not fixed or impenetrable. Instead, he argues that they are shaped and enriched through ongoing exchanges. Memorial and cultural narratives evolve through diverse and dynamic interactions with the wider world.[40] For him, creole occurred because the "relation" or the forced cohabitation of distinct cultures in the colonial context was unavoidable.[41] Elements like slavery, plantations, tensions, violence and struggles were essential for the development of creole, which is at the core of Haitian identity and culture. The former colony's identity was also entangled with other European colonizers – each with their own language, religion, and culture – which later became a Haitian identity with its own language, religion and culture.[42]

This phenomenon can be explained by another concept: creolization. Glissant refers to it as the transformative result of mixing cultures, particularly in the Caribbean.[43] This concept is fundamentally different from assimilation and fusion, rather, it refers to the process by which a blended and transformative new essence emerges through dynamic exchange.[44] Scholars position the concept of creolization as first emerging from the study of languages in colonial contexts—particularly in the Americas—where people who spoke mutually unintelligible languages developed vernacular pidgins that eventually evolved into

[38] Ibid.87-89
[39] François Noudelman, French philosopher was the host of a panel discussion on a series of conferences on Édouard Glissant titled: Cycle Édouard Glissant : réel et utopie. Bibliothèque publique d'information, "Édouard Glissant : Une Philosophie de la Relation," *YouTube video*, April 6, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bjy__PN_ofw.
[40] Aliocha Wald Lasowski. *Edouard Glissant* (Paris: PUF, 2021) 130-131.
[41] Ibid.130.
[42]David Patrick Geggus and Norman Fiering, The World of the Haitian Revolution (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 6.
[43] Aliocha Wald Lasowski. *Edouard Glissant* (Paris: PUF, 2021) 131.
[44] Ibid. 132.

new creole languages.[45] From there, the idea of creolization expanded beyond linguistics, resonating with broader cultural and political concerns.

Within the context of slavery – Haitian creole emerged as an insider's cultural world, expressed and lived beyond the colonizers' gaze.[46] The population of Saint-Domingue was vastly ethnically diverse with enslaved people coming in regularly from different African nations speaking different languages and dialects, while French colonizers imposed their domineering linguistic presence. In such a linguistically, and societal fragmented environments, developing a shared vernacular became essential for the enslaved, for communication, for sustaining community life, and for survival. Often functioning as a "secret" or "masked" culture during periods of conquest and colonization, creolization is intimate, rooted in the home, in the daily native lifeways of a people.[47] Developed and practiced by communities without political power yet aching for autonomy, creole expressive forms frequently operate as subversive social and political tools[48]. Even when they adopt the appearance of the dominant culture, these forms remain deeply grounded in the lived realities of their own creole communities. Hence, creole enactments are counter-hegemonic, because they are challenging cultural dominance through their very presence and practice.[49] Creole is the bridge between African ancestral imaginaries and Haitian contemporary reality.[50] Within a Haitian context, Vodou and carnivals are spaces through which spiritual transcendence and collective empowerment become possible, moving beyond the constraints of linear time, whether past, present, or future. Understanding these notions help better assess the uniqueness of Jacmel's Carnival and its masks tradition as more than art, but as the legacy of an entanglement of past stories that contributed to forming new identities, and culture. Masks can embody the intangibility of the imaginary, thus adding layers of opacity.

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[45] Robert Baron and Ana C. Cara, "Introduction: Creolization and Folklore: Cultural Creativity in Process," *The Journal of American Folklore* 116, no. 459 (2003): 4, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4137938.
[46] Ibid. 5.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Aliocha Wald Lasowski. *Edouard Glissant* (Paris: PUF, 2021) 98.

Opacity and Vulnerability

In *Poetics of Relation* Glissant "clamors for the right to opacity for everyone."[51] He is asserting that others possess the inherent right to remain partially veiled, resisting full comprehension by the Other.[52] In other words, one does not owe anyone to be available, transparent and reduced to a simplified and convenient self-definition. For historically oppressed cultures this opacity serves as a safeguard against the reductive tendencies of dominant narratives that often flatten cultural complexity into easily digestible or nostalgic stereotypes.[53] Instead, he argues, peoples should be able to maintain their uniqueness and complexity as testaments of their own reality and identity. He also suggests that parts of our identity can remain opaque even to ourselves, and embracing this opacity doesn't mean surrendering it.[54] For instance, second-generation immigrants may carry cultural pride, or awareness of their cultural background, passed down from their parents, even when their own knowledge or engagement with ancestral traditions and histories is limited. Glissant adds that one can feel solidarity for others without needing to fully comprehend them.[55]

Framed within the context of Haiti's papier-mâché masks and carnival traditions, one may not fully grasp the origins or intentions behind each act of performative storytelling. However, one can feel a sense of a shared recognition of depth and significance—that emerges from these moments and spaces fostering a feeling of collective understanding, solidarity, celebration or harmony. Glissant suggests that the right to opacity is essential for protecting cultural diversity and nurturing mutual respect and acceptance among different cultures. The theory of opacity enables resistance to the homogenizing forces of globalization and colonialism, which tend to impose a single, dominant cultural narrative where there is no space for nuances.[56] His poetic and philosophical vision has paved new ways to explore how opacity and transparency

[51] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 194.
[52] Ibid.193
[53] Ibid.189-190. For example, the negative connotation about Vodou in Haiti as a symbol of evil and savagery instead of understanding it as a syncretic religion that responded to a mental, cultural and spiritual need for the slaves blending African spirituality and Catholicism.
[54] Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 192.
[55] Ibid.193.
[56] Ibid. 189-190.

shape identity, culture, and colonialism—highlighting the distinction between power withheld from oppressors and power given to them by the oppressed.

Religion was perceived, deployed, and practiced differently in Haiti before and after Haiti's independence—particularly through Catholicism and Vodou. The Catholic religion was positioned as the only religion and used as a political instrument to suppress ancestral memory and manipulate the will of enslaved Africans, and later to control Haitians.[57] Publicly, the oppressed adopted the imposed religion of their oppressors.[58] Privately, however, they transformed this imposed faith into a syncretic spiritual system—Vodou—that safeguarded and reanimated their original religious beliefs beneath the surface of Catholic ritual and a seemingly submissiveness.[59] The enslaved often feigned obedience to survive while using opacity to guard the remnants of their African spiritual world—one that resisted the control of slave owners and the Church. Vodou became not just a religion but a coded form of resistance, identity, celebration, and ancestral memory.

The theory of opacity can be applied to Jacmel's carnival masks as the embodiment of a form of resistance against oversimplification of Haitian stories while fostering relations with global audiences. The stories re-enacted during that space in time help remember the shared past and understand today's present better. A mask can deliver a message with nuance or protection because of the anonymity it provides to its wearer thus partially absolving the messenger of any responsibility. The anonymity afforded by a mask creates also a freedom that renders the wearer unrecognizable, untranslatable, and ultimately unknowable—even to those who might know them intimately. This produces a paradox: a mask can reinforce a collective identity while simultaneously erase the individual one. For example, the mask discussed in the first chapter (Figure 2) belongs to the Kifwebe tradition, a distinctive category of striated masks from the Songye and

[57] Laënnec Hurbon, "Haitian Vodou, Church, State and Anthropology," *Anthropological Journal on European Cultures* 8, no. 2 (1999): 34–35, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43234856.
[58] Ibid. 36.
[59] Caroline Levine, Religion and Power in Haiti: An Evaluation of Catholic Syncretism in Haitian Vodou (University of Florida Honors Thesis, 2022).8-9.

Luba peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.[60] Anyone familiar with these African masks could identify the cultural origin of the object; however, the identity of the person behind it remains concealed, whether the mask is used in ritual ceremonies, storytelling, or other activities. This ability of the mask to erase individual identity contributes to the collective opacity of the group during carnival, producing two intertwined layers of opacity: one that belongs to the individual for their own purposes, and another that functions as a tool supporting the collective movement as it may voice political, social, or spiritual demands.

Jacmel's Carnival is the bridge that allows the mask to become the opacity, and for the opacity to become the mask – intangible becoming the tangible and the tangible becoming the intangible. This flow between opacity and transparency is conducive to liberation for performers and participants alike. Reflecting upon that day at "my uncle's", I realize it was an early encounter with Glissant's opacity. Parts of myself and my heritage remain unknown to me. Being born in Canada added that invisible layer that prevented me sometimes from fully connecting with others who shared my ethnic background.

[60] *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, accessed February 22, 2026, https://www.metmuseum.org/essays/senufo-arts-and-poro-initiation-in-northern-cote-divoire

Chapter 2: *Zel Maturin* and *Le Hounfort*

"*We did not invent this story. It came from older people, but we are keeping the tradition going*"
-Ronald Bellevue

Taking a moment to pose for photographer Leah Gordon, Ronald Bellevue is holding a papier-mâché devil head in his hands in his *Zel Maturin* (The Wings of Mathurin) two colored striped costume with wings. The mask is a bi-colored horned animal with a thick mustached muzzle smiling with bucked teeth (Figure 3). Ronald Bellevue explains how his fondness for that character came about and what it represents not only for him personally, but also within the carnival's performance. Zel Maturin are devils of different categories where the red ones are among the most powerful. The red devil is Bellevue's favorite character because it is the strongest one of them all.[61] Bellevue is one of Jacmel's carnival performers who lifts a veil of opacity on the meaning of his character. In doing so, he is leaving a trace of both his existence and his red devil immortalized in Gordon's book *Carnival: Vodou, Politics and Revolution on the Streets of Haiti*. Gordon's photography is documenting Bellevue's storytelling and it becomes part of public memory, thus emphasizing the power of artistic expression in support of culture and identity. Myron Beasley, Associate Professor of American Studies at Bates College calls this "performance ethnography", where carnival pictures represent a moment intertwined with historic imagination, documentation, collective memory and phantasmic performances.[62]

In relation to opacity, outsiders, such as tourists from other countries, could be enjoying, and embracing the performance without realizing the subtle underlying message of rebellion against the Roman Catholic religion. In an interview accompanying the photography, Bellevue explains that the play, "St Michel Mardi Gras" is inspired from the bible and depicts the battle between good and evil. In the first part of the performance, churchgoers are kneeling with a bible in hands and praying. In the second scene arrives

[61] Characters representing Lucifer and his minions inspired by the biblical fight between angels and demons where St-Michael will triumph. Gordon et al. *Carnival: Vodou, Politics and Revolution on the Streets of Haiti*. (London Soul Jazz Records, 2010), 111
[62] Beasley, Myron. ``The Performance of Possibilities`` Essay. In *Carnival: Vodou, Politics and Revolution on the Streets of Haiti*. (London: Gordon et al. 2010), 107.

St Michel the Archangel (*Sen Michèl Arkanj* in creole) along with other angels with pink satin dresses and a small blue and white angel descending from Heaven to protect the pious ones.

The Zel Maturins came to disturb the peace and to chase the angels away. St Michel kills them all using his mighty sword – however, the strongest devil – Bellevue's red Zel Maturin challenges St Michel in an epic battle. The creature puts up a good fight but is ultimately vanquished by the Archangel along with all the other Zel Maturins. One would think the performance ends there, but here comes the black devil – the most powerful of all devils. He carries chains and is holding a skull that he presents to the four cardinal points and then hits the dead red devil three times.[63] This ritual resuscitates the red devil who revives all the other devils. He continues his story by highlighting the difference between the black devil and the others: the black devil is a *Vodou* devil while the other devils are Christian devils. Bellevue ends his narration by stating that "The *Vodou* devil has greater forces than the Christian devils", and that he is not really a bible person, thus inferring his allegiance to Vodou.[64]

Bellevue is a living testament of the opacity of these festivities and a carrier of oral traditions that are soaked in activism, politics, and spirituality. His perspective adds a layer to understanding how anti-colonial efforts are omnipresent through Jacmel's carnival. His explanation about the particularity of the bible inspired theme of St. Michael offers an example of opacity through resistance to historical domineering groups. In this chapter, I will reflect on the omnipresence of opacity within Jacmel's Carnival. I will draw on the insights of scholar Mahmood Mahavish, linking them to Glissant's theory of opacity, and showcase Didier Civil's art as an embodiment of artistic opacity. I also incorporate in this analysis the perspective of performer Ronald Bellevue, a lifelong participant in Jacmel's carnival who has inherited and safeguarded ancestral narratives through his involvement. His reflections on the preservation of these stories—through masks, costumes, performances, and religious affiliation—underscore their role in

[63] The presence of the number three calls to mind the Holy Trinity in Christianity: Father, Son (Jesus Christ), and Holy Spirit, especially considering that this resuscitates the red devil who himself awakes all the other dead devils.
[64] Gordon et al. *Carnival: Vodou, Politics and Revolution on the Streets of Haiti*. (London Soul Jazz Records, 2010), 111.

sustaining the town's cultural identity, offering a vantage point as relevant as that of external scholars studying the phenomenon.

The Opacity of a *Zel Maturin*

When explaining opacity, Glissant begins by challenging the notion of transparency as a necessary tool for cultural exchanges. He argues that it is used by Westerners as a method meant to simplify "us" and hinder other cultures' agency.[65] He posits that the transparency demanded is misguided because it is based on a value system rooted in colonial mindset.[66] How can there be a true understanding of one another if the foundations for a dialogue are only from the stand point of the dominant group?[67] The right to opacity promotes cultural autonomy by claiming that cultures have the right to assert their own identities independently from external validations or standards.[68] Therefore, the right to opacity encourages a mutual acceptance and respect for the uniqueness and complexities of other cultures.[69]

Haiti over the centuries had to fight to preserve its identity and culture by offering linguistic, territorial and culture resistance in addition to its religious affirmation. Linguistic resistance in the form of Haitian Créole reduced to being a primitive tongue not elaborated enough to express complex concepts, and was only recognized as an official language along with French in the constitution of 1987.[70] Territorial resistance as formers slaves needed a piece of land to live off from, and cultural resistance as anything too close to Africa needed to be erased. Considering how the Roman Catholic Church tried relentlessly to eradicate the Vodou religion and all former connections to Africa by imposing Western standards and values on Haitians during slavery and post-slavery, Bellevue's statement seems to be one of defiance. [71]

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[65] Blacks and Afro descendants, and nations that have been colonized by Western nations.; Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. 191. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.
[66] Ibid.
[67]Ibid. 194.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid, 189-193.
[70] Reed, Kalso. EBSCO. Haitian Creole. Published in 2024. https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/language-and-linguistics/haitian-creole
[71] Hurbon, Laënnec. "Haitian Vodou." *Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, November 5, 2024. https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/haitian-

Bellevue's belief that Vodou devils are stronger than Christian devils might be understood differently depending on one's positionality. His statement could be interpreted in different ways such as that Vodou forces that originate from Africa are greater than European white Roman Catholic forces, because at the end, in spite of it all, Bellevue, Haiti, and Haitians around the globe are still standing. A Westerner or an 'outsider' and even a Haitian person born in or outside Haiti who was taught to fear this part of their heritage might see in Bellevue's point of view a reinforcement for existing racial and racist biases about the Vodou religion which mostly originated during the 1915-1934 U.S. Occupation of the island.[72]

Mahavish states about Haitian carnivals and Rara that these carnivals are traditionally about claiming lost powers from the lower-class to the benefit of power brokers such as oppressive governments or the Roman Catholic Church, a European religious organization.[73] According to him, those festivals and carnivals serve two opposing purposes, one of disruptive political power, and the second as a subversive religious movement challenging standards and customs enforced by the Roman Catholic Church which has tried consistently to eradicate Vodou from Haiti.[74] The Roman Catholic Church sees itself as the savior of the masses – but the said masses want to keep their own spiritualities and beliefs.[75]

One of the ways Haitians have managed to salvage this aspect of their cultural identity and spiritual sovereignty was by combining Christian elements with African religions, thus creating Vodou as a syncretic

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vodou#:~:text=From%20this%20perspective%2C%20the%20theory,cultural%20traditions%20of%20the%20country.

[72] *"Overview of Haitian Religious Traditions,"* Spaces and Stories: Haitian Churches and Oral Histories in Chicago, Digital Chicago, accessed February 27, 2026, https://digitalchicagohistory.org/exhibits/show/spaces-and-stories-haiti/haitian-religious-traditions.

[73] Mahavish, Mahmood. "The Haitian Carnival & Rara: Avenues for Political & Religious Assertion by Haiti's Poor." *Caribbean Quilt* 2 (2013), 61.

[74] Mahavish, Mahmood. "The Haitian Carnival & Rara: Avenues for Political & Religious Assertion by Haiti's Poor." *Caribbean Quilt* 2 (2013), 61. Merrill, John. "Vodou and Political Reform in Haiti: Some Lessons for the International Community." *The Fletcher Forum* (1996), 43. https://dl.tufts.edu

[75] The mass being defined as the poorest, most often the dark-skinned Haitians where tension existed between them and mulattos who had the powers and were called the elite. Merrill, John., "Vodou and Political Reform in Haiti: Some Lessons for the International Community." *The Fletcher Forum* (1996),44. https://dl.tufts.edu Mahavish, Mahmood. "The Haitian Carnival & Rara: Avenues for Political & Religious Assertion by Haiti's Poor." *Caribbean Quilt* 2 (2013), 63.

tradition.[76] Under that light, Bellevue's position on Christian devils versus Vodou devils becomes more nuanced. It can be interpreted as an act of rebellion against an historically oppressive system, and an act of emancipation towards another form of freedom – in this case, a spiritual one. The Church wanted total control of Haitians by demanding transparency of their spirituality and to some extent of their soul. One of the most effective ways was to devoid them from their past and identity before the Church was introduced to them. The Church did not care nor wanted to recognize an African influenced spiritual agency among Haitians, because it would be unable to control them and thus imposing their self-serving religious and mental obedience on them.

Bellevue is reclaiming openly the Africanity that was taken away from him and his enslaved ancestors by the Catholic religion who felt that Africans were flawed, and needed to be purified from barbaric practices that followed them from Africa.[77] Annihilating the Vodou religion aimed to eradicate any traces of Africa in Haiti.[78] Under the pretense of salvation through God and the Church, the abolition was deemed necessary when in reality racism was fueling the need to control and to dominate.[79] This will had nothing to do with religious benevolence or altruism, but rather everything with Black submissiveness and white supremacy.[80] Vodou is to some extent a shield aiming to protect the cultural and spiritual diversity of Haitians, and thus a form of resistance against colonialism which is one of the key concepts within Glissant's theory of opacity.

Bellevue's Zel Maturin costume is the physical and symbolic embodiment of Glissant's theory of opacity because his right to spirituality challenges the notions held by Westerners. It opposes the notion where to comprehend the "Other" it must be done by integrating them into the 'universal' categories owned

[76] Mahavish, Mahmood. "The Haitian Carnival & Rara: Avenues for Political & Religious Assertion by Haiti's Poor." *Caribbean Quilt* 2 (2013): 64.
[77] Laënnec Hurbon, "Haitian Vodou," *Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, November 5, 2024, https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/haitian-vodou.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.

and defined by the West.[81] To outsiders, Bellevue is a performer wearing a devil head during Jacmel's carnival, but for his community, the meaning behind that physical mask is deeper. [82] Bellevue does not wish to be integrated in Western values or adopt their belief system: he believes in Vodou. The Zel Maturin papier-mâché mask is a testimonial of his own belief system that opposes the Church's own principles. This mask is an act of resistance against post-colonial attempts to erase cultural, spiritual and collective memories of the Haitian people. This tale is Bible inspired but adapted to Haitian folklore and Vodou spirituality to connect with the people of Haiti.

Bellevue's comment about keeping alive the tradition inherited from older people, and that the legend of "Zel Maturin" was not invented is quite meaningful. The desire to perpetuate this tale contributes to preserving and protecting the legacy of the African ancestors and former slaves for their free descendants and the generations to come. Storytelling is about a message, something to be shared and communicated with a community. When stories are told through performative acts with music and chants during carnivals, is one of the most effective ways to engrave in the collective memory a sense of identity and belonging. [83] Emotionally charged messages such as fear, joy, sorrows, or excitement can elevate the experience of participants during carnivals by transforming it into something bonding, powerful, fearless and even spiritual.[84] Allowing a space, during these festivities, for individual voices to become one powerful apparatus that will be demanding changes to those in power.

The custom of storytelling during Caribbean carnivals and the artistic practice of creating masks can be thought of as manufacturers and reflectors of cultural memories. Carnival is also a time to remember the past, expressing popular grievances, send political messages.[85] It brings to light what usually exists in

[81] Mattias Strand, "Opacity, Difference and Not Knowing: What Can Psychiatry Learn from the Work of Édouard Glissant?" *Medical Humanities* 50 (2024): 441. https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2023-012790.
[82] Westerners, tourists or even the Haitian diaspora not aware of Haitian codes and characters in Jacmel's carnival
[83] Averill, Gage. "Anraje to Angaje: Carnival Politics and Music in Haiti." *Ethnomusicology* 38, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1994): 219. University of Illinois Press on behalf of the Society for Ethnomusicology.
[84] Ibid.
[85] When using Carnival, the creole spelling of carnival – I am strictly referring to the Jacmel's carnival.

the shadows, and reinforces the bonds of solidarity through identity and culture for Haitians. [86] An example of Jacmel's role as cultural manufacturing stems from the central stage arts and the carnival take in the city's identity, culture and economy. Carnival is a great opportunity for people to earn money as tourists come to celebrate and enjoy themselves. Civil employs several people in his studio, and even though every member of his team is skilled in mask-making, his mask compound operates like a manufacturing plant, with each person assigned to a specific aspect of the mask to guarantee precision and craftsmanship.[87] Craft and Folk Art are vectors of creative and economic development for the city through painting, giant papier-mâché masks and other objects.[88]

Jacmel and Papier-Mâché

Papier-mâché originates from China during the Han Dynasty around 202 B.C. – 220 A.D.[89] The expansion westward of the technique is explained through commerce along the Silk Road and reached the Middle East, Europe and the rest of the world through colonization.[90] Papier-mâché masks are made of materials easily accessible and inexpensive such as glue, or starch, and layered paper or pulped.[91] Widely used during the 1970's in Jacmel, papier- mâché masks were crafted from materials like goatskin, cardboard, and paper softened with sugar and starch to give them rigidity. Artisans shaped them using wire or clay molds, introducing a technique that revolutionized the local handicraft industry.[92] Nowadays, the technique of papier-mâché is widely used during various carnivals and festivals globally.

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[86] Mahavish, Mahmood. "The Haitian Carnival & Rara: Avenues for Political & Religious Assertion by Haiti's Poor." *Caribbean Quilt* 2 (2013):59;61.
[87] Briggs, Joanne. "Haitian Artist Shares His Heart with Trinidad." *Trinidad Guardian*, August 17, 2016. https://www.guardian.co.tt/article-6.2.357152.9d50c4445f.
[88] "Jacmel - Creative Cities Network." Creative Cities Network. Accessed May 25, 2025. https://www.unesco.org/en/creative-cities/jacmel.
[89] Dianne van der Reyden and Donald C. Williams, "The Technology and Conservation Treatment of a Nineteenth-Century English 'Papier-Mâché' Chair," *Conservation Analytical Laboratory, Smithsonian Institution* (2006), 3, accessed February 24, 2026, https://www.wag-aic.org/1986/vanderreyden86.pdf.
[90] The Silk Road was an ancient trade route that linked the Western world with the Middle East and Asia. It was a major conduit for trade between the Roman Empire and China and later between medieval European kingdoms and China. Silk Road | Facts, History, & Map | Britannica ; (A brief history, 1).
[91] Juliet Bawden, *The Art and Craft of Papier Mache* (London: Collins & Brown, 1995): 24-28.
[92] Candice Russell, Masterpieces of Haitian Art: Seven Decades of Unique Visual Heritage (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2013),217.

The materiality of a mask is intertwined with an ethereality that makes it an inaudible, and yet a powerful communication vector even today. Haiti's devil *Zel Mathurin* is a popular traditional character deeply rooted in biblical and Christian belief which was adapted into local folklore to serve a communicative purpose.[93] Masking has 'multifaceted, multipurposed, and multidimensional activities' such as communicative, interactive, spiritual, political, ceremonial, festive, protective, or artistic.[94] The tactile opacity of a mask is meant to preserve the anonymity of the wearer. A mask carries significant meaning as it conveys messages about identity, struggle for space, and creating a place for those whose voices are often marginalized.[95]

According to Gary Edson, "the history of mask making is the history of humankind".[96] He argues that the incentives behind mask making were the essential elements shaping both the conception and evolution of social order and cultural identity. Masking allowed elements of spirituality to be reaffirmed while the limitation of societal reality was pushed beyond human experience.[97] The mask is a "powerful cultural phenomenon" because it transformed over time and original space. It also serves as a way for communities to express their dignity and sense of purpose, while also creating a connection between the natural and supernatural realms – between reality and the imaginary.[98] Within Haiti's colonial context – a country built by a diverse ethnic and cultural composition and a tragically short life expectancy —enslaved people's desire to pass down their stories to future generations constituted a vital means of preserving what remained of their humanity. The context in which a mask is used gives further information on its purpose.

[93] More about Zel Mathurin will be discussed in chapter 2.
[94] Gary Edson, *Masks and Masking: Faces of Tradition and Belief Worldwide* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 212-214.
[95] Riggio, Milla C. "Introduction: Resistance and Identity: Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago." TDR (1988-) 42, no. 3 (1998): 7–13. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1146676.
[96] Gary Edson, *Masks and Masking: Faces of Tradition and Belief Worldwide* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 217.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid, 215.

Edson states that by understanding the specific environments in which a mask is created, it can then be assessed as an artistic, anthropological and ethnological manifestation.[99]

Carnivals transcend mere celebration, serving vital, social, and political functions while also fostering creativity and elevating the artistry of papier-mâché masks in Haiti. Papier-mâché is a powerful medium to narrate multi-layered stories dear to Haitians and to share them with the world. Contemporary Haitian artist Lionel Simonis is often credited by art historians for elevating papier-mâché beyond its traditional carnival context, using the medium to craft works of art and historical homage to Haiti.[100] In his piece *La Vie Drole (Life is funny – or Funny Life)* (1992), Simonis uses papier-mâché as an homage to materialize the experience of boat people and the tragedies they face in the sea (Figure 4). The title is meant to be ironic and is in contradiction with the artwork's emotional gravity, as several figures are depicted praying and mourning while confined aboard a boat. The boat is colorful and nicely decorated with fish, sea stars, flowers, a siren blowing into a horn, and at the tail end the Haitian flag. At first glance, the artwork conveys a sense of joy through its vivid colors and the simplicity of the characters' features. However, upon closer examination, each figure reveals a new layer to the initial impression: a profound narrative emerges from the composition. The contrast between the apparent simplicity and joyous aesthetic of the artwork against the complexity and sorrow of the unfolding story is compelling. Fellow artist Didier Civil, whose work will be explored in the next chapter credits Simonis as both a mentor and a formative influence in his own development as a papier-mâché artisan.

Didier Civil and Le Hounfort

"*Haiti may be economically poor but, in our culture, we are very, very rich. We have a lot of personality by creating, organizing things. The problem is often the government doesn't want to hear the poor people and help them*".
-Didier Civil [101]

[99] Ibid.
[100] Candice Russell, Masterpieces of Haitian Art: Seven Decades of Unique Visual Heritage (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2013),221.
[101] Briggs, Joanne. "Haitian Artist Shares His Heart with Trinidad." *Trinidad Guardian*, August 17, 2016. https://www.guardian.co.tt/article-6.2.357152.9d50c4445f.

Many societal topics relevant to Haiti's realities are dealt with during Haitian carnivals.[102] Rara music used during these Haitian festivals help masking political reliance as well as central religious beliefs by integrating Christian elements to protect the most vulnerable ones, another example of opacity. [103] Didier Civil's artworks are a form of artistic opacity. During the 2022 Jacmel carnival Civil used "Les créations Didier Civil" to narrate the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Haitians lives. Civil wears many hats as an artist, a community leader, an activist, a storyteller, an ambassador of Haitian culture and identity through his art.[104]

In the specific context of the 2022 Jacmel carnival, Civil's Covid themed "masks" bear multiple functions: the carnival masks used for entertaining, artistic and cultural purpose, the use of surgical masks worn by performers representing doctors fighting the coronavirus, thus supporting a powerful social and political message, and the "symbolic and invisible" masks of joy of participants and performers alike remembering the tragedy. All these layers of symbolisms and meanings attached to that festive space make these masks the materialization of the right to opacity. These masks echo the emotion that seeks to protect cultural diversity and resist colonialism. Their interpretation need not to be completely revealed to outsiders to be enjoyed and embraced and yet protects a group who is oppressed.

One of Haiti's best-known ambassadors of papier-mâché art is artist Didier Civil. Born in 1973, in Jacmel, Haiti, Didier Civil is a painter and a celebrated maker of papier-mâché masks (Figure 5). His work has been featured in magazines, newspapers, tv shows, carnivals, museums, and art galleries in Haiti and abroad.[105] "Le Nouvelliste" has called Civil signature style as "intense three-dimensional portraiture.[106] In addition, he has been invited to different countries to offer workshops on the art of papier-mâché and take

[102] Mahavish, Mahmood. "The Haitian Carnival & Rara: Avenues for Political & Religious Assertion by Haiti's Poor." *Caribbean Quilt* 2 (2013),64. https://doi.org/10.33137/caribbeanquilt.v2i0.19306.
[103] Rara is a form of festival music that originated in Haiti that is used for street processions, typically during Easter Week.; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rara_music. Mahavish, Mahmood. "The Haitian Carnival & Rara: Avenues for Political & Religious Assertion by Haiti's Poor." *Caribbean Quilt* 2 (2013),61.
[104] Vilbrun, Emerson, Vedette. "Didier Civil, L'Artiste Qui Éveille Les Consciences Avec Son "TETRA-DRAME Au Carnaval De Jacmel
[105] Galerie Macondo: Haitian Art by Didier Civil
[106] Haiti's oldest newspaper – founded in 1898. https://lenouvelliste.com/; Briggs, Joanne. "Haitian Artist Shares His Heart with Trinidad." *Trinidad Guardian*, August 17, 2016. https://www.guardian.co.tt/article-6.2.357152.9d50c4445f

part in exhibitions. A multidisciplinary artist, Civil is also known for his paintings exploring vodou themes, with a particular focus on the Gede spirits, who embody the essence of the afterlife.

Civil pursued a classic curriculum at the Christian Brothers school in his hometown and demonstrated early on his talent for drawing.[107] Civil was mentored and inspired by Haitian artist Lionel Simonis, a pioneer of the high-art carnival masks.[108] He popularized this art in the 1980's although records of papier-mâché masks in Jacmel's carnival can be found as early as in 1950's.[109] Simonis was the first, according to Civil, to create masks representing Indigenous people of Haiti.[110] Simonis privileged themes on papier-mâché were animals, religious characters and Haitian Tap Tap buses.[111] By 1990, Civil's paintings were showcased in various galleries across Jacmel. In 1994, his work was featured in the Jonathan Demme exhibition, "Island on Fire", held in New York.[112] Civil has led numerous papier-mâché mask making workshops in Haiti and in the United States. He was commissioned by the Musée d'ethnographie de Genève in Switzerland to recreate the scene of the ceremony of Bois Caïman, which launched the Haitian Revolution as part of the exhibition *Le Vodou: Un art de vivre.*[113] He was also one the artists in *In Extremis: Death and Life in 21st-century Haitian Art* organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA in 2013.[114] Considered an astute observer of Haitian culture, Civil often highlights its less visible aspects, drawing

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[107] Galerie Macondo: Haitian Art by Didier Civil.
[108]Douby Jean (OHM). "Didier Civil Te Nan Espas Pa W Show," February 4, 2024 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lMzJnRS7cEE.
[109] Projet d'inventaire du patrimoine immatériel d'haïti. 1. "la fabrication de masques en papier mâché à jacmel," ipimh, accessed may 25, 2025, https://www.ipimh.org/recherche/la-fabrication-de-masques-en-papier-mache-jacmel.
[110] Briggs, Joanne. "Haitian Artist Shares His Heart with Trinidad." *Trinidad Guardian*, August 17, 2016. https://www.guardian.co.tt/article-6.2.357152.9d50c4445f.
[111] Florida International University – Digital Communications. "Fenèt Sou Ayiti/Window on Haiti." *Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum*. Accessed May 25, 2025. https://frost.fiu.edu/whats-on/digital-experiences/window-on-haiti/.
[112] Jonathan Demme was an American filmmaker, whose career directing, producing, and screenwriting spanned more than 30 years and 70 feature films, documentaries, and television productions. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonathan_Demme
[113] Hainard, Jacques, and Johnathan Watts. *Le Vodou, un art de vivre: Cet ouvrage est publié à l'occasion de l'exposition "Le vodou, un art de vivre" au musée d'ethnographie de genève (Suisse) du 5 décembre 2007 AU 31 août 2008*. Gollion: Infolio éd, 2007.
[114] In Extremis: Death and Life in 21st-century Haitian Art organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA:38 In Extremis: Death and Life in 21st-Century Haitian Art | Fowler Museum at UCLA

attention to the struggles of the underprivileged, including street children and homeless families.[115] Civil's painting also reflects his cultural allegiance and identity such as religion and Vodou.

In the painting *Le Hounfort* [116] (Figure 6), Civil depicts the Vodou temple, a sacred space, where the lwa are honored during Vodou ceremonies.[117] On a black background, are three curtains of different colors: black, white and purple. These colors have within the Haitian Vodou context have special meanings: black symbolizes death and the spirit of the dead. The color white is associated with spirituality, purity, and light, whereas the color purple or violet is linked to Gede spirits and royalty.[118] Sacred objects that are found traditionally on an Hounfort are represented: on a white alter stands a white cross, and in front of it is a skull with black sunglasses a reminder of those worn by Bawon Samedi and colored burned candles.[119] In the foreground are three green and orange drums used to enable states of trance and possession, beats and rattles lying on a wooden and straw chair. On a lower table are dark bottles meant to containing the souls of the dead, and a clear glass bottle filled with the traditional clairin or rum infused with hot peppers to be drank during the ceremony. The scene is completed with a bowl of food meant as an offering to the spirits. The colors chosen by Civil for this painting are dark to respect the decorum appropriate for the sacred and religious functions of the space.

Civil's artwork, like many Haitian artists, has been inspired by the Vodou culture and religion during his artistic development. Acknowledging Vodou is to asserting a cultural and religious autonomy where the uniqueness of Haitian identity is maintained without having to conform to Western expectations, which is one of the main arguments of Glissant's right to opacity. Vodou is in opposition to colonial mindset that has seek to simplify, define and control Haiti and Haitians. Embracing the opacity of African ancestral

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[115] Vilbrun, Emerson, Vedette. "Didier Civil, L'Artiste Qui Éveille Les Consciences Avec Son "TETRA-DRAME Au Carnaval De Jacmel

[116] Civil, Didier. *Le Hounfort* (2006) 60x40" Acrylic on canvas

[117] Vodou spirits

[118] House, Protection. "Home." protectionhouse.org, November 22, 2024. https://www.protectionhouse.org/liste-des-principaux-loas-du-vaudou-haitien-regroupes-par-familles-avec-leurs-caracteristiques-principales-et-domaines-dinfluence/#famille-ghede.

[119] Bawon Samedi or Baron Samedi is the guardian of the cemetery. Michel, Claudine. "Of Worlds Seen and Unseen: The Educational Character of Haitian Vodou." *Comparative Education Review 40*, no. 3 (1996): 289.

spirituality has allowed a coexistence between Roman Catholic and Vodou as two recognized religions in Haiti.

Both Civil's artwork and social engagement are complementary and impactful in the thriving artistic scene of Jacmel. He is a pillar in his community wishing to empower his people both economically and mentally through promoting and teaching art for all.[120] Civil is a proud ambassador of Haitian art and the practice of papier-mâché in Haiti and abroad. Civil's art offers various degrees of opacity to transparency depending on his audience and where he is in the world. While researching about Civil and his art, it seemed that he was more transparent when he was addressing himself to Haitian audiences, while he appeared more restrained or politically cautious with his messages abroad. For example, Civil would name social issues and concerns affecting daily Haitian lives such as corruption, violence, climatic changes on Haitian media, which is riskier given that he lives in Haiti with his family. However, when he speaks while in other countries, it is as an artist, who wishes to highlight the contribution of papier-mâché to the world history of mask-making.[121] Civil outside of Haiti does not speak as an activist, he maintains an opacity on the complex nature of masking in Jacmel's carnival. Civil does not feel the necessity to be transparent particularly in a context of globalization and colonialism. Civil choose to avoid giving additional material that could be misinterpreted under foreign lenses. He wants to empowering Haitians culturally, socially, politically and economically with the papier-mâché tradition in Haiti. His creations are helping his community dealing with adversity, releasing tension, remembering history while celebrating.[122]

The practice of papier-mâché may not be recognized as a discipline by academia like painting or sculpture are, however, the practice of the tradition is legitimized through the transmission of know-how

[120] Bawon Samedi or Baron Samedi is the guardian of the cemetery. Michel, Claudine. "Of Worlds Seen and Unseen: The Educational Character of Haitian Vodou." *Comparative Education Review 40*, no. 3 (1996): 289. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1189105.

[121] Briggs, Joanne. "Haitian Artist Shares His Heart with Trinidad." *Trinidad Guardian*, August 17, 2016. https://www.guardian.co.tt/article-6.2.357152.9d50c4445f

[122] Boroff, Kari. "Haitian Carnival: The Art of Resistance" (2019):2. Africana Studies Student Research Conference. 3. https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/africana_studies_conf/2019/003/3

by educators and artists like Simonis and Civil worldwide.[123] There are six steps to the creation of papier-mâché masks that Civil privileges.

First, he starts by preparing the mold that will give shape to the mask. It consists of clay moistened with water until it becomes pasty, sticky and solid. Then, he works the clay until it takes on the desired shape. According to Civil, this first step is the most important, because it helps visualize the desired creation. Using his fingers, he forms the basis of the papier-mâché. Didier explains that it is the way the mold is made that distinguishes one craftsperson from another.[124] The shape and expression of the mask will depend on the creativity and dexterity of the artist. The second step is the preparation of the paper which is made from recycled bags and cardboard boxes. The third step is the preparation of the glue consisting of starch (cassava flour) and water. Once mixed with water the flour's consistency looks like very translucent milk; after stirring it in a saucepan, Didier leaves it to simmer for a few minutes over a low heat. Once lukewarm, he applies the paper with his fingers. The fourth step is to apply the paper on the mold. Depending on the kind of mold, the paper can be applied outside or inside. Civil insists that at least four layers of paper need to be applied on the mold before moving on to the next step. Once dried, he pulls the mask from the mold. It is then cleaned, trimmed, and beautified using tools such as chisels. The sixth and final step is the application of the paint. Civil begins with a base coat and then other colors of acrylic paint are added to make the mask shine. The artist recommends acrylic paint because it's easy to mix and less toxic, but other types of paints can be used.[125] A coat of varnish is applied to protect the mask from water, humidity and dust. Finally, patterns are added according to Didier's inspiration, purpose and taste[126]. Civil through his

[123] Briggs, Joanne. "Haitian Artist Shares His Heart with Trinidad." *Trinidad Guardian*, August 17, 2016. https://www.guardian.co.tt/article-6.2.357152.9d50c4445f.
[124] Projet d'Inventaire du patrimoine immatériel d'Haïti. 1. "La Fabrication de Masques En Papier Mâché à Jacmel," IPIMH, accessed May 25, 2025. https://www.ipimh.org/recherche/la-fabrication-de-masques-en-papier-mache-jacmel
[125] Projet d'Inventaire du patrimoine immatériel d'Haïti. 1. "La Fabrication de Masques En Papier Mâché à Jacmel," IPIMH, accessed May 25, 2025. https://www.ipimh.org/recherche/la-fabrication-de-masques-en-papier-mache-jacmel.
[126] "L'art Du Papier Mâché En Haïti. - Fédération Enfants Soleil." 2020. Enfants-Soleil.org. February 25, 2020. https://www.enfants-soleil.org/spip.php?article338.

art ensures that a legacy will be passed on to next generations of artisans, and that they will be able to live off their acquired skills, especially since it is not costly to make, and the availability of the material.[127]

When Performing and Storytelling Become Cathartic

Jacmel's Carnival serves as an emotional and psychological outlet while providing hope and joy for the population. With its vast reach and irrepressible energy, Haitian carnivals are essential spaces for political expressions in a society where freedom of speech is controlled by elites. Mahavish points out that these carnivals also give a creative and inspirational stage where a diversity of artistic expressions can be displayed, many of which are vectors of explicit political messages.[128] As highlighted in Donald Consentino's "Vodou Carnival.", important contemporary characters or events do become part of the modern local or national storytelling and therefore of the Haitian carnival folklore[129]. The corona virus was no exception. After the pandemic, the 2022 edition of the Jacmel Carnival was used to address the collective trauma experienced by the population with the coronavirus claiming 860 lives in the country.[130]

Performative storytelling succeeds at preserving Haitian culture, identity and the collective memory in a way that can be understood by the community. These are meant to keeping the past alive, understanding the present, and hoping for a better future. In other words, we must know where we came from to understand how we got here in order to see where we are going. This knowledge empowers a group to define itself for itself, and not according to arbitrary external standards. It echoes Glissant's following statement: ''Only by understanding that it is impossible to reduce anyone, no matter who, to a truth he would not have generated on his own.''[131] In Douby Jean's "*Espas Pa W Show"* Didier explained how he came to become a papier-mâché artist and his creative process in designing his creations, and those created for the Covid-19 parade

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[127] Briggs, Joanne. "Haitian Artist Shares His Heart with Trinidad." *Trinidad Guardian*, August 17, 2016. https://www.guardian.co.tt/article-6.2.357152.9d50c4445f.
[128] Mahavish, Mahmood. "The Haitian Carnival & Rara: Avenues for Political & Religious Assertion by Haiti's Poor." Caribbean Quilt 2 (2013):59;62. https://doi.org/10.33137/caribbeanquilt.v2i0.19306
[129] Cosentino, Donald. "Vodou Carnival." Aperture, no. 126 (1992): 25–26. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24472309.
[130] "Haiti Coronavirus: 7,197 Cases and 154 Deaths - Worldometer." n.d. Www.worldometers.info. https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/haiti/.
[131] Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997, 194.

of 2022.[132] He reminded viewers some of the misconceptions and beliefs that were held back then, where Haitians had more trust in healing power of natural herbal teas than in chemical vaccine to fight the coronavirus.[133] In that context, a group of masqueraders parading as "Les Créations Didier Civil" featuring the personified giant Covid-19 virus in papier-mâché, with some 30 doctors and health specialists symbolizing medicine's fight against the pandemic and some 60 people in disguise drinking anti-Covid tea, were among the characters marching down the streets of Jacmel. The Coronavirus character (Figure 7) is represented with vivid colors of red to draw attention on the virus whose hellish head is the replica of the corona virus structure with its crown of spikes to create similarity with the actual virus. The winged figure, resembling an angel of death, with dark bulging eyes is meant to be scary with contagious and deadly drool spitting out of its wide opened mouth to spread the virus. Thus, a reminder of how this disease is transmitted. Instead of a rib cage infected lung are displayed symbolizing the painful and burning sensation that will be felt by its victims. The giant Covid-19 is holding a least one skull to symbolize death. Next to it, at the bottom is a black man with his face painted in white and wearing sunglasses symbolizing Bawon Samdi, the lwa of the dead. These papier-mâché masks are meaningful as they are carriers of messages on a specific reality that becomes part of a cultural identity and reality. Covid in Haiti was dealt culturally and psychologically differently than in other places in the world. For instance, many health professionals living in Haiti believed that the population was better equipped to deal with the consequences of social distancing and mental health distress resulting from the Covid pandemic than higher income countries because of the many hardships it had faced recently: 2010 earthquake, the cholera outbreak 10 months later, and the political lockdown in Port-au-Prince that occurred 3 months prior to the pandemic.[134] Addressing the pandemic as a central theme of the carnival may have offered participants and spectators a form of collective

[132] "*Didier Civil Te Nan Espas Pa W Show"*- YouTube." Jean, Douby. Www.youtube.com. Accessed April 27, 2025. (3:57 – 4:57) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lMzJnRS7cEE.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Political lockdown that lasted for 3 months from September 2019 to December 2019 to ask President Jovenel Moise to step down. Thornton, Chandler, Etant Dupain, Taylor Barnes, and Jackie Castillo. "Humanitarian Crisis Increases in Haiti as Anti-Government Protests Grip the Nation." CNN, October 3, 2019. https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/03/americas/haiti-anti-government-protests.

catharsis, allowing them to gather and remember an event that had once prevented them from doing so—at the cost of many lives. Symbolically, confronting the "evil" COVID-19 as a community, and using carnival as a means to reclaim some agency over a crisis that had spiraled beyond global control, could have been especially empowering for a nation lacking modern health infrastructures. In this particular edition, wearing a mask carried an additional layer of survival: it not only protected individuals from potential retaliation if their message was deemed controversial by those in power, but also served as literal protection against the virus.

The carnival performances can be about healing from collective trauma or making a place for those whose voices are not heard enough.[135] Those voices are multiples, ancestral and generational, from the moment the first slave taken from Africa was marooned on the French colony of Saint-Domingue, to the young nation called Haiti until now.[136] To visitors, tourists or non-initiated, the Carnival might appear to be only about celebration, but to the participants, it means much more, and that deeper knowledge is not mandatory for the enjoyment of the festivities. Glissant states that "Widespread consent to specific opacities is the most straightforward equivalent of nonbarbarism."[137] The masks within the context of a carnival help narrating the core messages of the nation with some degree of freedom or protection because the masks put a distance between the message and the messenger – thus maintaining a certain opacity between the message carriers and the receivers which could be the government, elites, church, and foreign countries. Behaviors and messages otherwise not allowed outside of that carnivalesque time frame for individuals or the masses are tolerated usually by those in power. During that temporary context, social status and traditional hierarchies as we know them can be reversed.[138] This creates a space where social satire and the grotesque

[135] Riggio, Milla C. "Introduction: Resistance and Identity: Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago." TDR (1988-) 42, no. 3 (1998): 7–12. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1146676.
[136] Original name of Haiti when it was a French colony. Marcel Dorigny, "De Saint-Domingue à Haïti : Une nation issue de l'esclavage," *Outre-Mers. Revue d'histoire*, April 13, 2016, 5. https://www.persee.fr/doc/outre_1631-0438_2003_num_90_340_4039.
[137] Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997, 194
[138] Fahim, Maira. "Carnival and the Carnivalesque." *www.Academia.Edu*, March 17, 2016. https://www.academia.edu/23379880/Carnival_and_the_carnivalesque.

using humor and exaggeration empower participants – spectators like performers can denounce publicly social or political issues or absurdities.[139] Mahavish suggests that the power of carnivals is in the fact that it belongs to its people and the stories they have been telling and sharing.[140] At its climax, carnival becomes an immense, all-embracing festival acted out by the people for the people".[141] Hence, there is an opacity within that performance because it is primarily created for its people by its people – not for outsiders. The stories and the voices of those who suffered survived and transformed the landscape and the narrative of these islands while declaring their cultural traditions.[142]

"Jacmel Debout," Or "Jacmel Standing Tall." Carnaval 2025

The entertaining power and the theatricality of the carnival crystalizes any message being shared with the crowd. The 2025 edition of Jacmel's carnival placed social and political subjects at the center of storytelling. The resilience of Jacmelians against societal challenges was showcased through lively performances by dance groups and Vodou adepts.[143] Celebrating when all is difficult is a way to manifest that culture is not just about festivities, but also an act of resistance.[144]

Writing about Jacmel, Richard Flemming describes that "Carnival has never been just a party. Carnival is a time for releasing tensions, for rupturing the boredom of the quotidian labouring life. It's a time for making political commentary, and for keeping history in mind and focus."[145] Carnival in 2025 was focused on denouncing political apathy and rallied around activism. The theme "*Jacmel Debout*," (Jacmel Standing Tall) was a demand from the population to the government and political elite to act against

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[139] Fahim, Maira. "Carnival and the Carnivalesque." *www.Academia.Edu*, March 17, 2016 https://www.academia.edu/23379880/Carnival_and_the_carnivalesque.

[140] Mahavish, Mahmood. "The Haitian Carnival & Rara: Avenues for Political & Religious Assertion by Haiti's Poor." Caribbean Quilt 2 (2013):62 https://doi.org/10.33137/caribbeanquilt.v2i0.19306

[141] Richard D. E. Burton, "Cricket, Carnival and Street Culture in the Caribbean," The British Journal of Sports History 2, no. 2 (September 1985): 179–197.

[142] Mahavish, Mahmood. "The Haitian Carnival & Rara: Avenues for Political & Religious Assertion by Haiti's Poor." Caribbean Quilt 2 (2013):59 https://doi.org/10.33137/caribbeanquilt.v2i0.19306.

[143] Danise Davide Lejustal. 2025. "Jacmel Marks 33 Years of National Carnival with a Spectacular Showcase of Top-Tier Performances, Music and Dance Talent." The Haitian Times. February 27, 2025. https://haitiantimes.com/2025/02/26/jacmel-carnival-2025/.

[144] Fleming, Richard. "Carnival" in Carnival: Vodou, Politics and Revolution on the Streets of Haiti. London: Soul Jazz Publishing, 2010, 15.

[145] Ibid.

corruption, inequalities, and violence halting the country's development and future. The government had to cancel the nation's carnival in Fort Liberté, because of security concerns due to rising gang violence, and the huge expense of the national and local carnivals.[146] Although a responsible decision from the government, it generated a public outcry, as many saw this decision as an attack to their cultural identity and their ability to generate economic opportunities.[147] To appease the anger, the government decided to reallocate funds to local carnivals, among them Jacmel.[148]

Civil's creations and theme for the 2025 carnival was political, (Figure 8) and clearly demonstrated the anger, fear, and frustration taking place in the country.[149] However, he also offered concrete solutions such as education, agriculture as ways to achieve food autonomy, and sustainable development among other proposals. On a Facebook post, Civil was very vocal about Haiti's problems and what could be done about it.[150] Using his masks and giant papier-mâché characters, Civil materialized his messages through his artwork and empowered the population. At the center of the parade swallowed by a crowd are three papier-mâché characters with giant heads each expressing something.

The first figure to the left with what looks like blue hair has both of its nostrils blocked by cotton balls, his eyes shut and his mouth mimicked disgust over something it smelled. When looking closely, not too far from it there is a sign written in Haitian creole saying "Our noses are tired of breathing smells of garbage and burnt bodies".[151] The second giant figure is the middle with green hair has its ears blocked by cotton balls – and not far from it there is a sign stating that "Our ears are tired hearing gunshots and bad news about people dying every day."[152] The last giant papier-mâché character with a purple nose and

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[146] Bossou, Wilner. "Haiti Cancels National Carnival amid Security Concerns." Voice of America, February 19, 2025. https://www.voanews.com/a/voa-creole-haiti-cancels-national-carnival-amid-security-concerns-/7981184.html.
[147] S, Merie. "Home." FunTimes Magazine, February 27, 2025. https://funtimesmagazine.com/carnival-of-defiance-haitian-citys-joyful-rebellion-against-adversity/.
[148] Ibid.
[149] "Galerie." *Carnaval de Jacmel*. Accessed February 27, 2026. https://www.carnavaldejacmel.org/galerie
[150] EV Media Haïti. "Jacmel Mascarade 2025 : Un cri d'alarme et d'espoir—Les créations Didier Civil à travers…" *Facebook*. Accessed February 27, 2026. https://www.facebook.com/evmediahaiti/posts/1078734100937914.
[151] Ibid. Loosely translated from the original text in creole: *Nen nou bouke respire sant fatra ak sant moun kap boule*.
[152] Ibid. *Zorèy nou bouke tande bri bal, ak vye nouvèl lanmô chak jou*.

mouth wide open is staring down at the crowd. Right next to it is a sign that states that "Our mouths are tired eating spoiled food from our neighbors." These three giant papier-mâché characters are addressing issues such as poor waste management and burials, gun violence by criminal gangs killing citizens every day, and food dependence from Haiti's neighbor Dominican Republic with which it has an historic acrimonious relationship.[153]

Many participants holding the protesting signs are wearing simple colorful paper masks. They are denouncing the ongoing social and political unrest taking a toll on the youth. Jacmel's deputy mayor, Benissoit Jean Pierre, in his speech urged the crowd to combat insecurity, unemployment, and the high cost of living to create a brighter future for Haiti.[154] The contrast between painful and disheartening subjects and the festive ambiance anchored in a spatial time of festivities expressed through beautiful, colorful and vivid mobile works of art carried mostly by youth is striking. The fact that Jacmel holds annually its carnival despite ongoing social, economic and political dynamics can be viewed as an act of defiance and rebellion necessary to keep going. Social anthropologist Max Gluckman has compared carnivals to "rituals of rebellion" where they are barely a pause from regular life and its many social pressures.[155]

Edouard Glissant's theory is materialized through carnival, but also with the masks. Raw emotions, creativity and a spirit of rebellion that runs in the DNA of its people, are additional layers to that opacity. Within the Haitian context, particularly pertaining to Jacmel's Carnival, the act of wearing a mask and embracing another persona provides a space where celebration, escapism, activism, liberation, and creativity can coexist temporarily to form an opaque identity fully decipherable only to those initiated like Bellevue. Wearing a mask during carnival allows for one to be while withholding their identity and thus

[153] Morfa Wilfred. The Difficult Relationship between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. City University of New York (CUNY). 2011. https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1043&context=cc_etds_theses
[154] Danise Davide Lejustal. 2025. "Jacmel Marks 33 Years of National Carnival with a Spectacular Showcase of Top-Tier Performances, Music and Dance Talent." The Haitian Times. February 27, 2025. https://haitiantimes.com/2025/02/26/jacmel-carnival-2025/.
[155] Edward Muir. *Ritual in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 98.

preventing to be divulged outside of one's clan– and that is a right that should be understood across humankind.

Wearing a mask in public—whether in a carnival setting or elsewhere—can communicate a range of meanings. During the height of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, for instance, masks served not only as protection against surveillance but also as a deliberate tactic to evade police facial-recognition technologies (FRT) and the monitoring practices of platforms like Facebook.[156] By obscuring their identities, protesters shielded themselves in situations where being visible could result in targeting, arrest, or long-term tracking processes enabled by opaque data circulations among Facebook, commercial data brokers, and law-enforcement agencies. Such infrastructures of surveillance functioned to destabilize the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and curtailed broader expressions of activism. [157]

This practice aligns closely with Glissant's notion of the *right to opacity*: the insistence on remaining unreadable to systems of power. Masks also fostered solidarity, visually reinforcing the collective nature of the struggle and the shared commitment to resisting structures that oppress Black communities. In this sense, wearing a mask at BLM protests and wearing one during Jacmel's carnival both enact Glissant's right to opacity. In each context, the mask becomes a refusal of legibility, a form of protection, a source of collective empowerment, and a way of transforming the body into a site of resistance.

[156] In 2013, three radical Black organizers—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—created a Black-centered political-movement-building project called #BlackLivesMatter in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer, George Zimmerman. Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, "History," accessed March 27, 2026, https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/.

[157] Chloé Lynn Nurik. 2022. Facebook and the Surveillance Assemblage: Policing Black Lives Matter Activists & Suppressing Dissent. *Surveillance & Society* 20(1): 30. https://ojs.library.queensu.ca/index.php/surveillance-and-society/index | ISSN: 1477-7487

Chapter 3: Opacity, Twice and Rhizomic

There Is Always a First Time

As a child, I was repeatedly taught, implicitly and explicitly, that the Caribbean community, and Black people in general, should remain discreet: not too loud, not too visible, certainly never occupying too much space. Montréal's Caribbean festival—known as Jump Up— was inspired by a similar Toronto celebration that began in the late 60's.[158] Encountering the festival for the first time ruptured that script. It offered me a surge of joy and recognition, a sense of empowerment and belonging that revealed a community much larger than anything I had previously been allowed to imagine. Witnessing a parade of hundreds of performers from various Caribbean countries proudly and loudly celebrating their identity and culture in the streets of downtown Montréal, with thousands of parade watchers of different ethnicities was a revelation. In addition to feeling part of a greater community that resembled me, it also felt like there was a political statement from Afro-descendent diasporic communities displaying their cultures in full transparency. In that moment, I finally understood—perhaps for the first time—the profound connection Haitian carnivals had for these adults who had so passionately talked about them during my childhood. Their vivid memories of expatriates - almost mythical in nature of beautiful recollections from these carnivals still lingering in their imagination, thus painting a picture of joy, nostalgia, and cultural pride.

Listening to these reminiscences sparked a sense of nostalgia in me for a time and a place I had never known—and somehow understood I never would. These tales of unforgettable carnivals from a past long gone, revived through the experiences of Montréal's Haitian diaspora, left me with a quiet ache, as if I were missing out on something deeply significant and bonding. Being born in Québec, I grew up under the subtle but persistent weight of cultural omission. A polite reminder that one's birthplace does not solely define their identity. My friends and I were made to understand in various ways to stay within the space we were given, and to never take more than what was allowed. I learned to create a metaphorical mask to help me navigate in society. It allowed for an opacity that gave me agency on what I chose to reveal or not about

[158] Museum of Toronto. "*The History of Caribana & the Grand Parade - Museum of Toronto*." Last modified April 2, 2024. https://museumoftoronto.com/collection/caribana-the-grand-parade

my ethnic, and cultural identity. Society tends to favor what aligns with a constructed narrative that validates a belief system benefitting those in power while often excluding marginalized groups. As I was experiencing my first carnival where I was part of the majority for once, I understood at last that sense of togetherness, belonging and pride so often talked about by the "*gran moun yo*".[159]

As previously discussed, masks are powerful vectors for storytelling and for arousing immediate emotions when situated within a carnival context. This is particularly true within carnival spaces shaped by Caribbean traditions where remnants of colonialism and capitalism still resonate. Carnivals can become an umbrella under which identity, survival, visibility, resilience, precarity, pride, and celebration can be a collective response to specific needs of Black people in Jacmel, Montréal and Toronto. If a mask represents a strong vector of communication, then the carnival itself can be imagined as the larger body that enables its messages to circulate inward—through its own community—and outward toward the so-called "Other".[160] What sort of a gaze do Black people have on themselves and project on others once they have accepted their right to opacity?

This chapter will examine a Black diasporic context comparing and contrasting dynamics of Caribbean carnivals in two geographic locations: Montréal and Toronto. These sites are significant because they are home to large Caribbean populations yet are outside of the geographic context of the Caribbean itself. I argue, as seen in previous chapters, that while Jacmel's masks and carnival practices are deeply rooted in Haitian history, vodou religion, politics and local artistry, Montréal's and Toronto's carnivals had to adapt to a different set of demographic, linguistic, economic and political pressures.[161] Moreover, various forms of "polite racism" at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels have shaped these Black cultural events by forcing the organizers to innovate and adapt to a kind of reverse opacity—one in which communities are publicly assured of institutional support while being denied the actual means to succeed,

[159] It means Big People i.e. adults in Haitian creole
[160] Non-Caribbean people
[161] As seen in previous chapters about the importance of Jacmel's carnival as political, religious and social resistance.

whether through adequate funding, appropriate venues and visibility, effective police collaboration, or clear administrative backing. The system refuses full transparency and do not truly allow the Others inside. Instead, it offers symbolic gestures of inclusion—celebrated as exceptional—while directing substantial funding and support toward groups already embedded within the system itself. More precisely, this chapter will expand on my previous analysis of Jamel's Carnival as an embodiment of opacity by positioning Caribbean Carnivals in the Canadian context within a Glissantian perspective: Montréal's Carimas as the implementation of a double opacity, and Toronto's Caribbean Carnival as the manifestation of rhizomic identity.

Montréal: Jump Up, Carifiesta, and Carimas

In earlier chapters, the importance of the Jacmel carnival emerged as a vital channel for preserving Haitian cultural sovereignty and political agency. Beyond its festive apparatus always lies emotional, political, economic, ancestral and spiritual narratives needing to emerge for the population by the population. It is a local carnival rooted in the heart of cultural inheritance and collective memories that are not completely transparent or easily translatable - hence its opacity. At its core, the creative power of storytelling is the driving force of a narrative practice that centers art as the expression of communal purpose and collective survival.

Montréal's Jump-Up was originally created in July 1974 by the Caribbean diaspora— from mostly Trinidadian, Jamaican, Barbadian, and Haitian communities in response to Toronto's carnival that had emerged a few years earlier.[162] This event was meant to celebrate Caribbean identity in Québec, and to offer a space where the diasporic community could express itself. It was also a moment where the community's visibility, cultural pride and beauty as well as inter-Caribbean solidarity and the right to belonging in Québec could be showcased and revendicated freely.

[162] Museum of Toronto. "The History of Caribana & the Grand Parade - Museum of Toronto." Last modified April 2, 2024. https://museumoftoronto.com/collection/caribana-the-grand-parade

Unfortunately, since its inception, the Jump-Up event suffered many setbacks due to organizational instability, lack of fundings, legal disputes, firearms incidents, canceled editions, and tensions with the city and the police force.[163] These interruptions and tensions caused the fragilization of the event, its reputation and its perennity. It also underwent a few name changes initially redubbed Carifiesta, and over time renamed again as Carimas Festival in 2024 (a combination of the words "Caribbean" and "masqueraders"), marking its 50th anniversary.[164] This rebranding was a testament to the commitment of the new organizing body - the Caribbean Coalition Network of Montréal (CCNM), to turn things around and strengthen community empowerment.[165] Meanwhile, the intermittent presence of the main Caribbean festival gave room for other Caribbean festivals to gain traction over the past few years such as: Taste of the Caribbean Festival (TOTC) or Festival Haïti en folie (Haiti on Fire!). The emergence of other Caribbean carnivals\festivals in Montréal suggests the need for more fragmented diasporic events to celebrate different aspects of cultural sovereignty for the Caribbean collectivity in the city.

Montréal's carnival organizers must navigate a distinct linguistic reality. Unlike the city of Jacmel, where Haitian Creole predominates, or in Toronto, where English is the primary language, Montréal's Carimas is operating within a francophone context while also accommodating English, given that many West Indian communities use it as their main tongue. The CCNM has narrowed its scope to focus on English speaking islands of the Caribbean, inspired by the CARICOM model.[166] The countries represented on the CCNM board are Jamaica, Barbados, Antigua and Barbuda, St. Vincent, Grenada, Dominica Island, and

[163] "New CARIMAS Festival Promises Fresh Energy," Montréal Community Contact, n.d., https://qcna.qc.ca/new-carimas-festival-promises-fresh-energy/.; "Carifiesta," *Wikipedia*, last modified January 19, 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carifiesta.
[164] *CityNews Montréal*, "50th Anniversary of Montréal's Caribbean Carnival Parade," July 6, 2024, https://Montréal.citynews.ca/2024/07/06/50th-anniversary-caribbean-carnival-parade/.
[165] Jamaica Association of Montréal, "Jamaica Association of Montréal," n.d., https://jam-Montréal.com/caribbean-coalition.
[166] CARICOM works in 15 Member States and 6 Associate Members to create a community that is integrated, inclusive and resilient; driven by knowledge, excellence, innovation and productivity. Austin, Timothy. "Homepage - CARICOM." CARICOM, January 12, 2026. https://caricom.org/.

Guyana. The linguistic particularity in Québec might have contributed, among other factors, in creating the conditions for two separate main Caribbean carnivals to emerge.

According to 2021 census data, Québec's Caribbean community—represented 22% of Caribbean residents in Canada—a significantly smaller presence than in Ontario's, which accounted for 69%.[167] In 2024, the projected operating budget for Carimas was $105,000. The City of Montréal granted $30,000, leaving $75,000 to be fundraised.[168] The new organizing committee produced a five-year sustainability plan to secure future carnivals and a stability aimed at preserving and promoting diverse cultural heritage.[169]

As Caribbean carnival traditions traveled to new diasporic contexts, such as Montréal and Toronto, their community must learn to adapt to their respective geopolitical reality. Montréal's Caribbean community (100,000) might suffer from a limited visibility in comparison to Toronto's greater Caribbean population (350,000).[170] In addition, the Montréal Caribbean pool is linguistically divided between French and English. As a result, this might affect a natural cohesion between these communities that may not be an issue in Toronto where English is the langua franca.

In the Montréal context, opacity takes on a doubled form or a double opacity: one that resists assimilation into Québec's dominant cultural narratives, and an opacity that exists within the Caribbean diaspora itself, affirming that Caribbean identities are linguistically and culturally diverse rather than a monolithic bloc. This double opacity emerges in the parallel trajectories of Carimas—rooted in the anglophone Caribbean diaspora—and Haiti en Folie, shaped by Haitian organizers working within the francophone sphere. Each festival evolves within its own relational space, asserting its right to opacity, and

[167] "Table 2: The Caribbean Population in Canada, by Province and Territory, 2001," *Statistics Canada*, n.d., https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-621-x/2007007/t/4123241-eng.htm.; Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, "2021 Census of Population – Data Products," October 16, 2025, https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/index-eng.cfm.
[168] Christine Long, "Caribbean Festival Coming Back to Montréal This Summer," *CTV News*, November 22, 2024, https://www.ctvnews.ca/Montréal/article/caribbean-festival-coming-back-to-Montréal-this-summer/.
[169] Ibid.
[170] "2021 Census of Population – Data Products," October 16, 2025, https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/index-eng.cfm.

revealing how distinct cultural languages can coexist without collapsing into a single, legible form. There was once one main Caribbean festival in Montréal – where Caribbean nations all celebrated under one banner. Over time, however, a combination of cultural and linguistic differences—and evolving community needs—led to the creation of a second festival designed to address gaps that neither event was adequately meeting. However, both festivities remain open spaces welcoming participants from any cultural or linguistic background who wish to enter their rhythms and share in their celebrations. Although Québec is a province that does not abide by Canada's official multiculturalism model, it remains home to profound cultural diversity. Haiti has a long and deeply rooted history with Quebec, which became home to a significant Haitian community in the 1960s and 1970s, when many fled the brutality of the Duvalier dictatorship. As the largest francophone territory in North America, Québec naturally became a preferred destination, offering linguistic continuity as well as possibilities of building a new life.[171] As a result, generations later, Haitian Creole contributed to the creolization of Québec French—especially in Montréal—through the incorporation of expressions, vivid vocabulary (slang), and syntactic structures originating from the Haitian community.[172] This linguistic blending, or "code-switching," has permeated everyday urban speech and has impacted the cultural interaction and strong presence of the Haitian diaspora in Quebec.[173] Glissant's take on language is highlighted by the influence Haitian culture has had in French Québec language.

Toronto Caribbean Carnival: A $400M Economic Engine

Toronto Caribbean Carnival, known as Caribana was launched for the first time in 1967 as part of Canada's Centennial celebrations as a gift from the Caribbean community.[174] The inaugural event was

[171] Encyclopédie du MEM, "La Communauté haïtienne à Montréal," February 3, 2023, https://ville.montreal.qc.ca/memoiresdesmontrealais/la-communaute-haitienne-montreal.
[172] YouTube. "L'empreinte du créole à Montréal." YouTube Shorts video, 0:15. Accessed February 16, 2026. https://www.youtube.com/shorts/LHFyfo3EQpI.
[173]Ibid. Code-switching is the use of more than one language within a single conversation. Ibid.; Sandra Najac, *Contact de langues et identité chez des Québécois d'origine haïtienne* (PhD diss., Université d'Avignon, 2023), 2;40 https://theses.hal.science/tel-04414929v1/file/These_Sandra_Najac.pdf.
[174] Canada's Centennial was a year long celebration held in 1967 in honor of the 100th anniversary of Canadian Confederation. McIntosh, Andrew, and Betty Nygaard King. "Canada's Centennial Celebrations, 1967." *The*

meant to highlight the contributions of Canadians of West Indian origin.[175] Caribana took place on the first Saturday of August in commemoration of the *Slavery Abolition Act* that took effect throughout the British Empire and most of its colonies on August 1st, 1834.[176] Over the following years, African Canadians began to celebrate Emancipation Day with events that eventually led to the birth of festivals like the Toronto Caribbean Carnival.[177] It has grown from originally a three-day festival to an extended three-week celebration including not only the carnival itself, but also the King and Queen show parade, nightlife performances and parties, daytime family events, pool parties and more, where a majority of these activities are free.[178] (Figure 9) Toronto Caribbean Carnival is rooted in Trinidad's traditional pre-Lenten Carnival and captures the rich cultural diversity of Caribbean communities.

Beginning in the late 1980s, multiculturalism has been prominent in this festival with the involvement of cultural groups from Central and South America, Africa, the Bahamas, Haiti, and various Canadian regions which provides a unique Canadian flavour to this experience.[179] This cultural grassroot is an event attracting 2 million visitors, generating $467 million in economic activity and $182.7 million in tax revenues to the city of Toronto.[180] In addition this carnival supports more than 3,000 small businesses and creates over 3,341 jobs every year.[181] In addition to chronic underfinancing, the organizers' long-standing fiscal instability, and the pandemic have contributed to the festival's perpetual financial strain. As

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Canadian Encyclopedia. Historica Canada. Article published October 01, 2013; Last Edited October 06, 2017. https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/1967-centennial-celebrations-emc

[175] Ibid.

[176] Parks Canada Agency, Government of Canada. 2020. "The Enslavement of African People in Canada — National Historic Event - the Enslavement of African People in Canada (C. 1629–1834) National Historic Event." Parks.canada.ca. July 28, 2020. https://parks.canada.ca/culture/designation/evenement-event/esclavage-enslavement.

[177] Heritage, Canadian. 2021. "Emancipation Day — August 1." www.canada.ca. July 20, 2021. https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/campaigns/emancipation-day.html.

[178] *Toronto Caribbean Carnival – Events*, accessed July 28, 2025, https://www.torontocarnival.ca/events.

[179] Annemarie Gallaugher; Maude-Emmanuelle Lambert, "Toronto Caribbean Carnival (Caribana)" *Canadian Encyclopedia*, ed. Annemarie Gallaugher; Maude-Emmanuelle Lambert: Toronto (Historica Canada, 2019). https://lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/encyclopedias-reference-works/toronto-caribbean-carnival-caribana/docview/2316675751/se-2 (accessed June 22, 2025).

[180] Julia Chapman, "A Funding Rollercoaster: The History of Toronto's Caribana Festival." Ppgr. May 22, 2025. https://ppgreview.ca/2025/05/22/a-funding-rollercoaster-the-history-of-torontos-caribana-festival/.:*Toronto Caribbean Carnival – Advocacy*, accessed July 28, 2025, https://www.torontocarnival.ca/advocacy.

[181] *Toronto Caribbean Carnival* – Advocacy, accessed July 28, 2025, https://www.torontocarnival.ca/advocacy.

a result, at the end of each edition, the organizing committees either break even or incur some losses while the entire city capitalizes on this international financial and public relation success which showcases to the rest of the world a city that offers a diverse, inclusive and safe cultural space.

The Toronto Caribbean Carnival costs roughly $3 million per year to produce but obtains about $1 million from all three levels of government combined.[182] In 2022, the federal government announced an investment of $1 million to support the festival, because of its importance for uniting people and celebrating diversity while bringing millions of visitors. In the wake of risking to be cancelled in late 2024, the Toronto Caribbean Carnival secured a $3.5 million in federal funding for two years.[183] The Festival Management Committee (FMC) which oversees the organization of the event declared this funding to be an historic investment made possible because of the "intense advocacy" by its executive team relentlessly "addressing systemic underfunding and highlighting the Carnival's vital cultural and economic contributions to Canada."[184] While other factors are likely taken into account when allocating government support, it is nevertheless striking that a festival deemed the largest of its kind in North America receives so little support-considering the incredible economic boost and global visibility it brings to the city compared to other similar festivals. In comparison the Stratford Festival and the Canadian National Exhibition (CNE) are receiving significantly more substantial and regular public funding.[185] The federal government invested $10 million in 2022 which enabled the Stratford Festival to generate around $277 million in economic activity,

[182] CBC News. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-caribbean-carnival-emergency-funding-petition-1.7368926 Posted: Oct 30, 2024. 10:53 PM EDT | Last Updated: October 30, 2024.
[183] Michael Talbot, "Toronto Caribbean Carnival Announces $3.5M in Federal Funding over next 2 Years," *Canada Caribbean Institute*, December 20, 2024, https://canadacaribbeaninstitute.org/2024/12/19/toronto-caribbean-carnival-announces-3-5m-in-federal-funding-over-next-2-years/.; Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario. "Government of Canada Invests $1 Million to Support Return of Toronto Caribbean Carnival." *Canada.ca*, July 7, 2022. https://www.canada.ca/en/economic-development-southern-ontario/news/2022/07/government-of-canada-invests-1-million-to-support-return-of-toronto-caribbean-carnival.html.
[184] Ibid.
[185] According to an article published in the *Public Policy and Governance Review* (PPGR) of the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy of the University of Toronto. Julia Chapman, "A Funding Rollercoaster: The History of Toronto's Caribana Festival," *PPGR*, May 22, 2025, https://ppgreview.ca/2025/05/22/a-funding-rollercoaster-the-history-of-torontos-caribana-festival/.

create 1,466 job opportunities, and contribute approximately $46.2 million in tax revenues.[186] As for the CNE, in 2022, it was awarded a $7 million non-repayable federal investment.[187]

According to a 2023 economic impact analysis, the event subsequently generated an estimated $112.8 million in economic activity within the Greater Toronto Area.[188] However, with an average annual investment of $1 million, the Toronto Caribbean Carnival has consistently generated greater economic returns for the city than those produced collectively by the well-known Stratford Festival and the (CNE), which together received $17 million in federal funding.[189] Yet, despite its remarkable success, international visibility, decades-long history, and substantial economic impact, the Toronto Caribbean Festival remains in a position where its organizers must continuously negotiate and defend the legitimacy of this landmark cultural event.

Caribbean carnivals in Canada can be understood as sites where the diasporic identity is entangled in negotiation and racial politics as Blackness interferes with hegemonic standards.[190] In *Polite Racism and Cultural Capital: Afro-Caribbean Negotiations of Blackness in Canada*, Karine Coen-Sanchez introduces the term *polite racism* — which is defined as a specifically Canadian tool of racial bias that conceals exclusion beneath the appearance of tolerance and politeness. She argues that it functions as a protector of "cultural capital" in Canada to decide which forms of Black identity are deemed legitimate versus those that should be marginalized.[191] The normalized chronic underfunding of Black and Caribbean cultural and creative endeavours even when the rapid economic power of Caribbean cultural production is demonstrated

[186] Ibid. https://www.canada.ca/en/economic-development-southern-ontario/news/2022/07/government-of-canada-supportsstratford-festival-tourism-and-community-infrastructure.html
[187] Ibid.
[188] Ibid.; Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario. "Government of Canada Invests $1 Million to Support Return of Toronto Caribbean Carnival." *Canada.ca*, July 7, 2022. https://www.canada.ca/en/economic-development-southern-ontario/news/2022/07/government-of-canada-invests-1-million-to-support-return-of-toronto-caribbean-carnival.html.
[189] Ibid
[190] Karine Coen-Sanchez, "Polite Racism and Cultural Capital: Afro-Caribbean Negotiations of Blackness in Canada," *Social Sciences* 14, no. 8 (2025): 451, https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14080451 (doi.org in Bing).
[191] Ibid.

infallibly, the repeated need for the Toronto Caribbean Carnival to legitimize and explain the benefits of this carnival is symptomatic of systemic polite racism.

In 2022, when the Festival Management Committee (FMC) received one million dollars from the government, The Honourable Helena Jaczek praised and congratulated the FMC.[192] She said the following: "This $1-million FedDev Ontario investment will allow the Festival Management Committee to position the Toronto Caribbean Carnival for success for years to come."[193] According to that statement, that one-million-dollar allocation should last *for years* and be enough to position and secure *for years to come* an event that generates hundreds of millions of dollars per year for the city. It was a polite way to say to the FMC that they should be very grateful to have been granted this amount, and that they should not be asking for more *for years to come*.

Toronto Caribbean Carnival incarnates Glissant's rhizomatic theory where every identity surfaces because of a relation shaped through the "Other".[194] This carnival is as celebrated by non-Caribbean than it is by Caribbean people. This event is becoming part of the Torontonian's history and culture. Moreover, it is an international Carnival attracting participants from different parts of the world, each adding to the collective experience. Caribbean identity is unfolding horizontally, adapting, blending, and forging fresh relations across the diaspora and Torontonians. In a 2020 interview, Aneesa Oumarally then Chief Executive Officer of the FMC, explained that the Carnival was now also part of Toronto, and that it had absorbed its Caribbean people as well. The Carnival's international success resides in cultures entangled and feeding off each other to morph into different versions without assimilation. Trinidadian mas, Haitian rara, Jamaican

[192] The Honourable Helena Jaczek, was the Minister responsible for the Federal Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario https://www.canada.ca/en/economic-development-southern-ontario/news/2022/07/government-of-canada-invests-1-million-to-support-return-of-toronto-caribbean-carnival.html.

[193]Government of Canada, "Government of Canada Invests $1 Million to Support Return of Toronto Caribbean Carnival," *Economic Development Agency for Southern Ontario*, July 22, 2022, https://www.canada.ca/en/economic-development-southern-ontario/news/2022/07/government-of-canada-invests-1-million-to-support-return-of-toronto-caribbean-carnival.html.

[194] Édouard Glissant. Poetics of Relation. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997, 11.

dancehall, or Grenadian jab jab coexisting without needing to resolve into a single narrative, but rather into what Glissant would see as a rhizomatic effect.

Montréal, and Toronto's carnivals are testaments of cultural resilience despite chronic economic precarity. Montréal and Haiti en Folie, Toronto Caribbean Carnival, all play an informal role in supporting economies that sustain artisans and grassroots communities. Although they evolve in different realities based on their socio-political context, geographic location and history, these Montréal and Toronto carnivals are more than local or diasporic entertainment; they are cultural foundations embedded in native or new lands, tools for preserving identity in the face of control, migration, racism, and cultural erasure. These carnivals are positive reminders of the legitimacy and contribution of these communities to society. Each carnival is working to assert its presence, resist erasure, and sustain its vitality and visibility, all while contending with its own distinct sets of pressure. Reflecting on my first experience at the Montréal Caribbean carnival—and on the early curiosity my elders sparked in me as a child—I have come to recognize that these loud, vibrant celebrations are a powerful and fitting response to systemic polite dynamics that hopefully will erode with time.

Conclusion

Chéri, allow me to lay the story
Knees deep and I'm in it for the glory
Just a girl tryin' to navigate the world
Big dreams in our hands and a complex identity
I hate the boxes, they suffocate me
Big claustrophobia, it's not simple
It's never simple, ah
Late bloomer, took some time to figure out
Who I was, felt hollow in my skin
Wings clipped early, but I did arise
Caterpillar, chrysalis, boss lady fly
I roll up and rest my eyelids
Been around the world enough to say this
Everybody's tryin' to find where they fit
But it all comes down to this
I got layers, you got layers
We got layers
I got layers, she got layers
Many flavors, ah
There's not one right way to be
More than what the eye can see
Baby, all these layers
Keep me warm and make me me
And when they tell me that I don't look like I'm Haitian
I say, "Nan gyet marain ou"
I finally found my peace, and I'm done getting sentimental
Too this, too that, not enough this, prove that
Lord knows
You get used to switchin' codes
Oh, tell me where you're from
Uh-uh, where you're really, really from
Citoyenne du monde, child of the world
Dans ce grand mélange, where do I belong?
Got my roots from Haiti to Madagascar
TCK raised in Africa
French vanille avec la voix de miel
Find me mixing my Ugali with pwason gwo sèl
I tell 'em I got layers, you got layers
We got layers
I got layers, she got layers
Many flavors, ah
There's not one right way to be
More than what the eye can see
Baby, all these layers
Keep me warm and make me me[195]

[195] Source: LyricFind Songwriters: Victoria Naïka Richard, Layers lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC; Naïka, "Naïka – Layers (Official Lyric Video)," January 23, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tyX1ZtMvXkA.

Layers, is a song written by American-born French-Haitian singer and songwriter Naïka about embracing one's plurality and identity. Naïka said about that song:

> "I wrote Layers to reflect the complexities of identity. Growing up, I never felt like I fully belonged anywhere, and I've always hated being confined to a single box. We're so much more than the labels society places on us. This song is my way of embracing the layers that make us unique and encouraging everyone to celebrate the beauty of their multifaceted selves."[196]

The popularity and lyrics of this song resonated around the world, particularly with TCK generations, thus demonstrates the intricacies of owning one's identity in a world of conformity.[197] If Glissant's theory of opacity had to be made into a song for today's youth, *Layers* would stand as an iconoclastic but accurate embodiment of its core principles.

In reflecting on my own positionality, I have come to recognize that I have long enacted Glissant's right to opacity, often intuitively and without conscious theoretical framing. This mode of self-protection—at once a site of vulnerability and a strategy of resistance—mirrors the cultural logics embedded in Jacmel's papier-mâché masks traditions – particularly during the 2024 carnival. Much like the masquerader who moves through public space in layered, coded forms and is shielded by the mask, identity itself involves the deliberate withholding of certain aspects of the self from external scrutiny—particularly from those positioned outside one's cultural community. This insight becomes especially resonant when considered alongside the material and symbolic practices of Jacmel's papier-mâché. The masks produced in this tradition are constructed through successive layers of paper, pigment, and narrative meaning, each contributing to a facet identity that cannot be reduced to a single, transparent interpretation. Their aesthetic and performative power lies precisely in their opacity: they reveal selectively, conceal strategically, and

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[196] Cyrus Kyle Langhorne, "Naika: The 'Layers' Lyric Video Is All About Embracing Identities — Attack the Culture," *Attack the Culture*, January 24, 2025, https://www.attacktheculture.com/previews-reviews-more/naika-the-layers-lyric-video-is-all-about-embracing-identities.

[197] A *Third Culture Kid* (TCK) is someone who spends a substantial portion of their formative years outside their parents' home culture(s). Growing up between multiple cultural environments, they develop a "third culture" shaped by their family's background, the host culture(s), and their own transnational experiences—often resulting in a distinct, globally inflected sense of identity. Kate Mayberry, "Third Culture Kids: Citizens of Everywhere and Nowhere," February 25, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20161117-third-culture-kids-citizens-of-everywhere-and-nowhere.

communicate through culturally rooted codes that resist full translation for outsiders. These masks embody a relational and creolized epistemology in which meaning is contextual, situated, and often intentionally withheld.

Understanding opacity through the lens of these practices clarifies why such layered forms of self-presentation should not be stigmatized or softened to accommodate external expectations of legibility and legitimacy. Glissant's philosophy affirms that opacity is not a deficit to be corrected but a legitimate mode of being. In aligning my methodological stance with the principles woven into Jacmel's carnival and papier-mâché masks, I position opacity not only as a personal strategy but also as an intellectual and cultural orientation that informs how to approach, interpret, and represent the Caribbean communities and artistic practices of Civil at the center of this research. Moreover, Caribbean carnivals are very much relevant for their communities beyond their celebratory purposes as they function also as acts of resistances and badges of resilience regardless of the geographic location.

List of Figures

FIGURE 1: Last, Angela. "GLISSANT, Edouard." Global Social Theory. n.d., https://globalsocialtheory.org/thinkers/edouard-glissant-2/

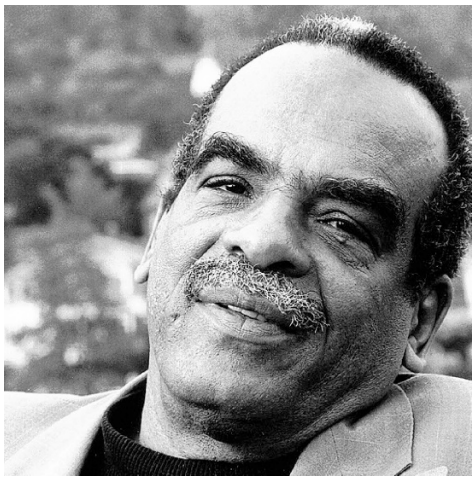

FIGURE 2: Congolese Artisan-Crafted Mask, belonging to the Kifwebe category (which simply means "mask" in the Songye language), from private collection, courtesy of Mr. Steve Ntambwe. 4.5 x 8.5 x 3 in.

It is a decorative piece that pays homage to a complex system of social control and ancestral beliefs.This type of mask has been produced continuously since the 1960s and 1970s for the craft and decoration market.

In this photo: the mask was purchased in Kinshasa, capital of the DRC, in 2022, specifically at Wenze ya Bikeko ("Statue Market") the leading market for Kinshasa crafts since 1958. It offers a huge variety of works representing almost all the tribes of the DRC. It is coated with incense to recall the presence of ancestors.

FIGURE 3: Lionel Simonis. *La Vie Drole*. Candice Russell, *Masterpieces of Haitian Art: Seven Decades of Unique Visual Heritage* (Schiffer Publishing, Ltd. 2013), 221. October 23, 1992, papier-mâché and paint, 13.5 x 42 x 3 in., private collection.

FIGURE 4: Leah Gordon. Zel Maturin (The Wings of Mathurin, character(s) from the St Michel Mardi Gras). *Carnival: Vodou, Politics and Revolution on the Streets of Haiti*. (London Soul Jazz Records, 2010), 111

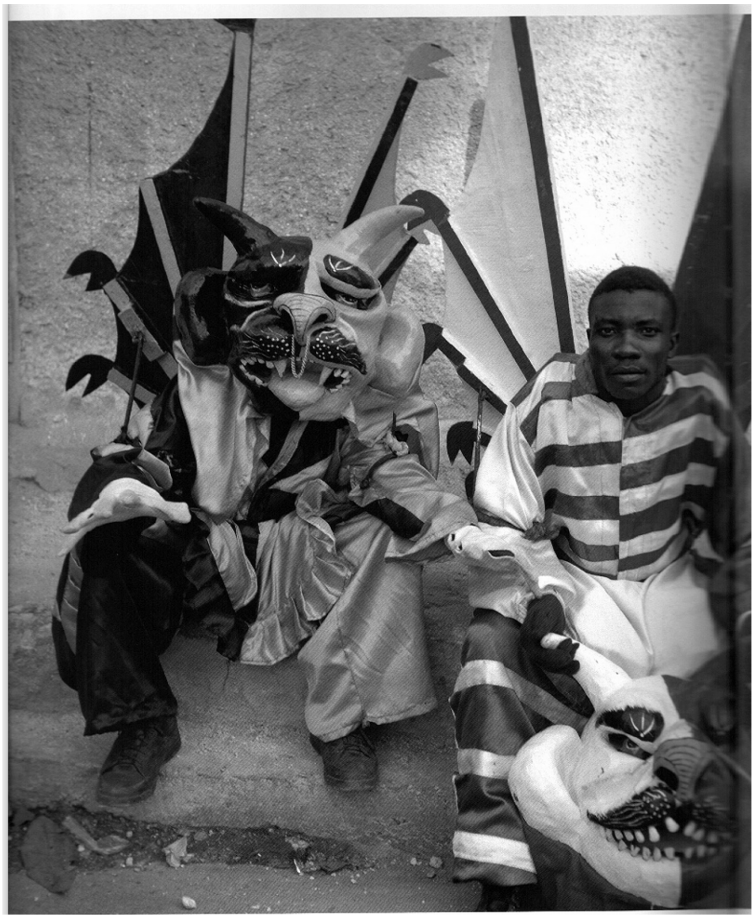

FIGURE 5: Photo Chrisfort. Vilbrun Emerson. Didier Civil, l'artiste qui éveille les consciences avec son "TETRA-DRAME au Carnaval de Jacmel" (avril 20, 2024). VedetteMag. L'Artiste Qui Éveille Les Consciences Avec Son "TETRA-DRAME Au Carnaval De Jacmel

Figure 6 : Civil, Didier. *Le Hounfort* (2006) 60x40" Acrylic on canvas
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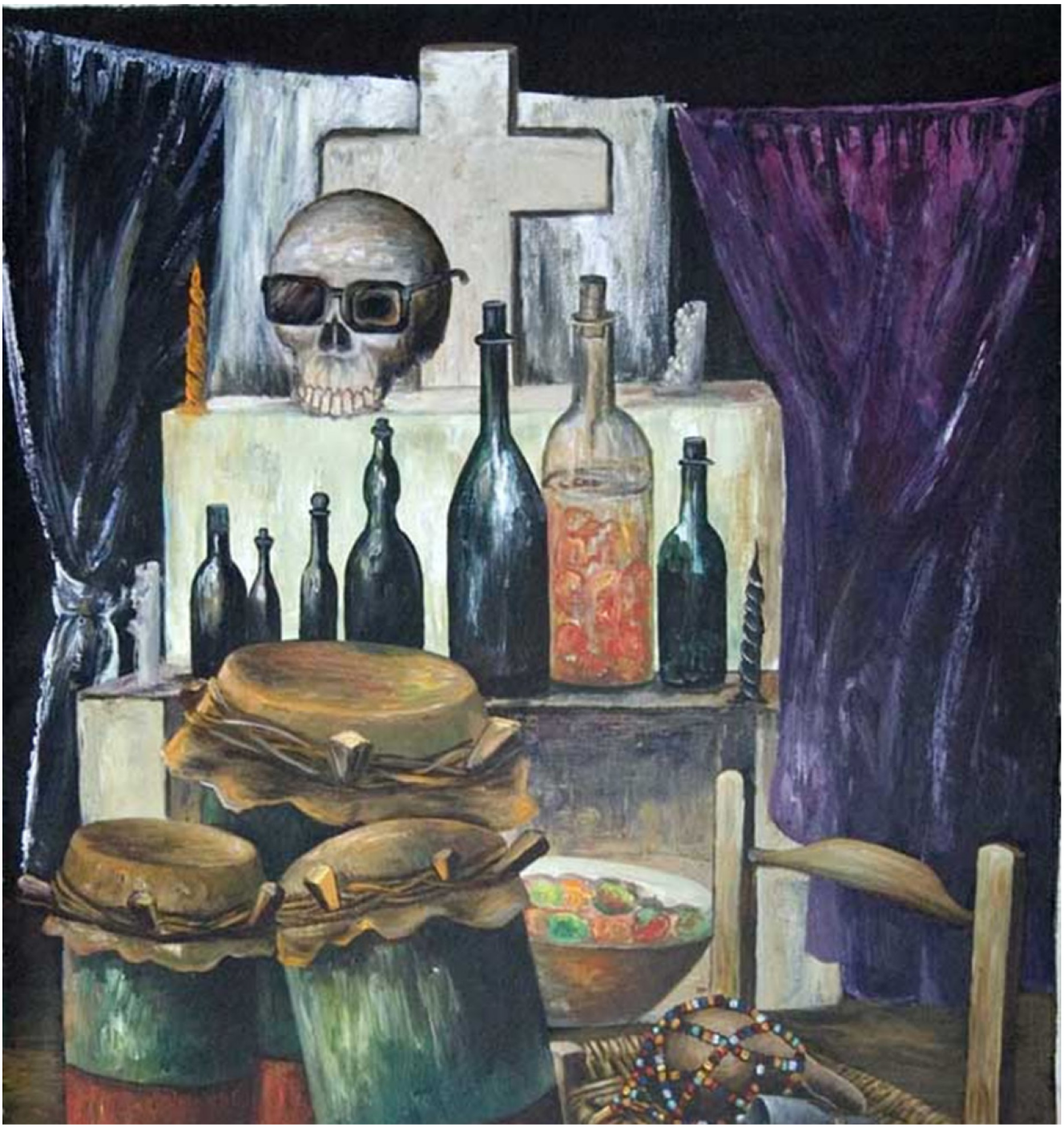

Figure 7 : Ancion, Pierre-Paul. Le Coronavirus “Les créations Didier Civil” “Le Coronavirus En Papier Mâché à Jacmel.” Lenouvelliste.com. February 25, 2022
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FIGURE 8: Photo courtesy of the carnival official committee Danise Davide Lejustal. 2025. "Jacmel Marks 33 Years of National Carnival with a Spectacular Showcase of Top-Tier Performances, Music and Dance Talent." *The Haitian Times*. February 27, 2025.
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Figure 9: Tribal Carnival's front Princess, Caneisha Edwards, takes part in the King and Queen Show, part of the Toronto Caribbean Carnival, on Thursday, August 3, 2023. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Chris Young Tribal Carnival's front Princess, Caneisha Edwards, takes part in the King and Queen Show, part of the Toronto Caribbean Carnival, on Thursday, August 3, 2023. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Chris Young - Record details - EBSCOhost Research Databases

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