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**Bit in the Mouth, Death in the Soul:  
Remembering The Poetry of Léon-Gontran Damas**

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The word “*Negro*,” the term by which, orally or in print, we black folk in the United States are usually designated, *is not really a name at all nor a description*, but a psychological island whose objective form is the most unanimous fiat in all American history; a fiat buttressed by popular and national tradition. [...] This island, within whose confines we live, is anchored in the feelings of millions of people, and is situated in the midst of the sea of white faces we meet each day; and by and large [...] *its rocky boundaries have remained unyielding* to the waves of our hope that dash against it (Richard Wright, *Twelve Million Black Voices*, 1947).

In 2009, the watershed year in US history marked by the inauguration of Barack Obama as the very first black American president, Richard Wright’s thought-provoking statement reminded us that, only half a century ago, the spiteful and hurtful word *nigger* was still commonly used in certain Euro-American circles. And although we have come a long way since 1947, the term is still used. Racism is alive and well.

In a section of his long poem, *Black-Label<sup>i</sup>*, the Guyanese Léon-Gontran Damas rhymes French words ending in “aille”, a decidedly pejorative suffix:

à mort la négraille

la valetaille

la racaille (*BL* 20)

Rhyming as it does with “canaille”, “valetaille”, “négraille”—while at the same time echoing the language of *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (“la négraille inattendument debout”), the landmark poem by his Martinican co-father of négritude, Aimé Césaire—the term “racaille” has a dismissive resonance. And as such, it becomes a bitter reminder of the fact that Nicolas Sarkozy, French prime minister in 2005, used it during the protests that took place in Parisian suburbs. Like everyone else, the current French president knows that “négraille” rhymes with

“racaille”, and Sarkozy, who attended Aimé Césaire’s funeral in April 2008 in Fort-de-France, could not have been unaware of the racist connotation the term “racaille” conveyed when he uttered it in 2005. Indeed, the three founding fathers of Négritude, namely Léon-Gontran Damas, Aimé Césaire (nicknamed the “fundamental black”), and Senegalese Léopold Sédar Senghor, adduced this insult to whites, and more precisely to the “French of France” (to share Damas’ cynicism). More than 70 years after the publication of the first volume of Négritude-poetry (*Pigments*, Damas, 1937), the balance-sheet of those indices in the collective mind of the French in particular, and Europeans in general, is hardly cheering. In stark contrast with the acclaim enjoyed by the fathers of the pioneer movement of black emancipation in academic and intellectual circles (even though they were still treated as second-class citizens in the larger society) the denigration of blacks and, more generally, of immigrants of color, remains excruciatingly sharp. Despite the fact that Négritude is enjoying renaissance in intellectual milieu, as witnessed by the recrudescence of calls for presentations and colloquia following the death of Aimé Césaire, the use of the hurtful word “nigger” has not completely disappeared from the streets. Far from it.

Whether it be “neger” in Dutch-speaking countries, or “nègre” in Wallonia and Brussels, or yet “Schwarze”, or “nigger” in the United States and beyond the Channel, the term “nègre” and its derivative, “négraille”, are often shockingly spat out in the streets, on trains, in cafés ... These defamatory echoes lead us to reflect once more on Négritude and to remember the origins of this artistic and political movement, its evolution and the famous post-Négritude period. For, in spite of the name changes, of *labels* (“antillanité”, “créolité”, “tout-monde”, etc.) that claim to be steps forward, the crux of the matter remains: the exclusion of and the discrimination against peoples of color in European, predominantly white, societies still exist. From this fact, the demands remain the same in the movements and manifestos that have followed Négritude. One could perfectly argue that of the three co-founders, Léon-Gontran Damas was the one who understood best the multiple stumbling-blocks standing in the way of the ideal of a “black, blanc, beur” (black, white, Arab) community in the heart of the French Republic. Poet and politician, Damas (1912–1978), born in Cayenne, lost his mother when he was one year old and raised by an aunt, he refused to talk until the age of six. He portrays the severe mother in his most famous poem “Hoquet”, hinting at the Antillean alienation systematically educated and forced upon by mothers who forbid their children to speak Creole or behave as “negroes”. She is the mother who imposes all those annoying activities Damas mentions in his poems: to have good, i.e. white, manners; to speak French correctly; to pray to the Lord; to play with mulattos, not with negroes; to play the violin, not the banjo. The

difficult relationship with his aunt's second husband led the young orphan to go and study in Meaux (France), where he finished secondary school and dreamt of becoming an anthropologist and linguist of Oriental and Slavic languages at the Sorbonne. By then Damas had developed a heightened consciousness regarding his blackness. In French society of the forties and fifties, white, racist, sexist, and patriarchal, he was an "affront", a scandal—which Frantz Fanon calls the "scandal of the Negro". In his first collection of poetry, *Pigments*, the verbal and physical violence Blacks endured on a daily basis comes to the forefront. The young Guyanese poet felt at once attracted and rejected by Paris. The fact that individuals of colour, "enfants des colonies" were discriminated in a white world (at that time) is a lingering theme which will become predominant in Damas' third volume: *Black-Label* (1956). Despite this important theme the volume has not received the accolade his other works have garnered. In these poems, uncivil words are strung together, the whole gamut of offensive language and images, from "négraille" to "racaille", from "fous" to "poux". Perhaps that is one of the reasons Damas did not receive in 1978 the distinctions Senghor was awarded in 2001, and Césaire in 2008. In short, Damas remains in the shadow of the two co-founders of Négritude.

### **1. Genesis of the movement**

Négritude was born thanks to the momentous meeting of three young students of African descent in Paris in the 1930s. The urge to protest publicly against their inferior status was anchored in the avant-garde movements such as Surrealism, on the one hand, and Harlem Renaissance, on the other hand. Indeed, all three were struck by the influence of African Americans exiled in the French capital and the movement saw the light of day under the auspices and the imprint of various African Americans (Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay, amongst others)<sup>ii</sup>. The Martinican Aimé Césaire distinctly recalls how, one day at the Sorbonne, a Senegalese accosted him and this meeting, together with the bohemian Léon-Gontran Damas as their partner, eventually led to their founding of two critical journals with resounding titles: *Légitime Défense* and *L'Étudiant noir*. In these journals they decided to publish the testimonies and poems, reflections and opinions of immigrants from Africa or of African descent that revolted against the injustices and inequalities of French society.

In French-Caribbean literary history though, Damas is suffering from oblivion. Two years later (1939), Aimé Césaire published what is considered the manifesto of the Négritude-movement, *Notebook to a Return to my Native Land* (*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*). A few years earlier Damas published a collection of vociferous, epileptic and eruptive, yet also

elusive and painful poems. It bears the title *Pigments*, referring to pigmentation as the eternal marker of otherness and the ontological reason for his self-exile, distress and solitude. The collection, prefaced by surrealist poet Robert Desnos, was censured by the French (colonial) authorities, because it was so openly anti-colonial and anti-racist. Damas and Césaire together demanded their legitimate place in the history of the metropole; while, at the same time, dismantling the ambiguous relationship between the West Indies, French Guyana, and France.

But their literary beginnings were anything but a smooth journey in those post-war years: Black poets had the greatest difficulty in finding a publisher and in attracting the attention of critics and the public alike. Once these obstacles were overcome, they had to find white mentors who would write prefaces to their publications. It is in fact remarkable that the first poetry collections by Césaire and Damas are introduced by French celebrities: the leading luminary André Breton, for *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939, in *Volontés*), and the dissident surrealist Desnos who would be ejected from the movement by Breton, for *Pigments* (1937) launched those first “Black poets” in the City of Lights. According to his biographer, Daniel Racine, André Gide was also Damas’ godfather<sup>iii</sup>. As for Senghor, he has an even more prestigious writer for his preface, for Jean-Paul Sartre stood up for the new revolutionary poetry. Sartre’s “Orphée noir”, the preface to *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache*, edited by Senghor (1948), remains a panegyric of those first poetic voices from the French ex-colonies. For good or for ill, there was no movement of Négritude before Sartre declared it in this foundational, yet polemical text, in which he came to fix “blackness” as an irreducible essence and the generation of the inter-war just a step towards the “synthesis” (see Gyssels<sup>iv</sup> 2003).

These first collections also allow for a comparison of the thematic concerns of the three co-founders of Négritude: 1) Senghor emphasizes the aspect of “race” and celebrates the beauty of sub-Saharan Africa; 2) Césaire combines “race” and “class”; and Damas adds yet another category, namely of other “injustices” such as “gender”. In Senghor’s famous ode to the African woman, the theme is more explicit than in the works of his colleagues, although it is not absent in their writing. It is therefore not surprising that “Femme nue, femme noire” is Senghor’s most famous poem. Despite structural and thematic differences in their work the main principle is the same for all three poets: to reveal the grandeur of African civilization to the French and other Europeans.

Damas also had political ambition, and apart from that aspired to be an ethnologist. He represented the French Antilles in France’s Assemblée Générale from 1948 to 1951. As an ethnologist, he traveled to the interior of the Amazon forest on a UNESCO mission. (Like

Michel Leiris, who he befriended, and to whom he introduced Richard Wright while he was staying with the Leiris family in Paris). His travelogue *Retour de Guyane* (re-published by Ed. J.M. Place, 2003) contains very personal reflections on the indolence of the Cayenne population in a town stigmatized by the penal colony of Devil's Island and France's colonialist authority. *Départementalisation* did not offer a solution to the people of the French-Caribbean, and Damas criticized the alienation that resulted from France's policy of assimilation—a policy that had devastated the population's original cultures and languages. The people subsisted under France's condescending attitudes toward its colonies, Guyana even more than the others, isolated into their vast continent at the frontiers of Latin America and Brazil.

In his *Discours sur le colonialisme*, Césaire describes *Nations nègres et culture* (1954) as being “*le livre le plus audacieux qu'un nègre ait jusqu'ici écrit et qui comptera, à n'en pas douter, dans le réveil de l'Afrique*” (“the most audacious book to date written by a black and which will count, without a doubt, in Africa's re-awakening”). The historian Cheikh Anta Diop later published *Antériorité des civilisations nègres—mythe ou vérité historique?* (1967) and, as an Egyptologist and linguist of modern times, thereby awakened the “African historical consciousness”. In turn, Senghor, Damas and Césaire offer a poetic homage to the stunning beauty of the black continent, to the natural and cultural riches of black Africa, to her twin beauty of landscape and humanity. A demonstration of African pride, of black dignity, is the essence of Senghorian Négritude, which differs from the Césairian concept thereof. For Césaire unravels the “black” identity quest by adding to it the criterion of “class”. As a Marxist and founder of the Communist Party in Martinique, Césaire's oeuvre stresses the correlation between being black and belonging to the lower classes, which makes one condemned to stigmatization and proletarianization. In his rumbling *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1955), Césaire accuses the colonizer of having undertaken a vast enterprise of oppression and domination, so that the colonizer becomes the white master, the French settler, the Creole planter.

Faced with the beauty of Africa sung by Senghor, faced with the tirade against the oppression of black people, of the individual of color and of the worker in a Western civilization mired in prejudice, in a capitalist world and a hegemonic Europe, Damas quickly recognized the danger of folklorization and of exoticization of blacks, and also the threat of essentializing “the” black. He feared that those favorite themes might definitively determine a black identity (African or West Indian). In the light of the law of departmentalization voted as an alternative to independence of the French Antilles and Guyane (Césaire), Damas appears

the most resolutely postcolonial in the threefold sense (after, against, self-corrective) of the term. Consequently, his insubordination and his unruliness could explain why his political career was much shorter than that of two fellow writers in struggle. Disavowal and resistance lead to the proof of skepticism at a key moment in postcolonial France. Being an iconoclast, he warns against a third identity factor at the source of inequality: that of gender, for he is “gender” aware that masculine and feminine performances are yet culturally determined constructs that remains a source of inequality. In “Si souvent” (“So often”), he applies a double meaning to the substantive “homme”:

Si souvent<sup>v</sup>

si souvent mon sentiment de race m'effraie  
autant qu'un chien aboyant la nuit  
une mort prochaine  
quelconque  
je me sens prêt à écumer toujours de rage  
contre ce qui m'entoure  
contre ce qui m'empêche  
à jamais d'être  
un homme [...]

so often  
so often my feeling of race  
strikes the same fear  
as the nighttime howling of a dog  
at some approaching death  
I always feel  
about to foam with rage  
against what surrounds me  
against what prevents me  
ever  
from being  
a man (translation Conroy-Kennedy 55–56)

Let us not forget that both Gide, grand connoisseur of Africa and author of *La porte étroite*, and Langston Hughes, “presumably gay” according to his biographer Arnold Rampersad, supported Damas who quite often uses syntagmas with a sexual connotation (“éjaculer les patrons d’usine”, “sucrer le pouce du sorcier en soutane”, “désirs comprimés” and “tabous bandés de son enfance amérindienne”: “ejaculate the factory masters”, “suck the thumb of the wizard in cassock”, “compressed desires” and “bound taboos of his Amerindian childhood”). Césaire adds the factor of “class” to that of ethnology so as to make it understood that, when one is born with a colored skin, one is almost automatically placed at the bottom of the socio-racial ladder, while Damas does more than that by poetizing oppression in its different “conjugations” and does not forget women either. Rebelling against domination and working for emancipation of all *Les damnés de la terre* (*The wretched of the earth*, Fanon, 1966), Damas at once exiled himself from both the academic community and the diplomatic corps. Irritated by an avant-garde obsessed with its visibility, he turned his back on an academic career, quitting the benches of the Sorbonne. According to his friends and brothers in struggle, Césaire and Senghor, his self-derision and his “less sophisticated poetry” (Senghor) show him in the process of *roaring* against the idea of *whitening*. The poet strongly and staunchly espouses the contrary of alienation and, in addition, he asserts the “formal defense” and the “prohibition” (*BL* 58) to talk openly about it:

J’ai l’impression d’être ridicule

Parmi eux complice

Parmi eux souteneur

Parmi eux égorgueur

Les mains effroyablement rouges

Du sang de leur ci-vi-li-sa-tion (« Solde », *Pigments*, *Névralgies* : 42)

I feel ridiculous

Among them

Like an accomplice

Like a pimp

Like a murderer among them

My hands hideously red

With the blood of their ci-vi-li-za-tion (Conroy-Kennedy 51)



In his preface to *Pigments*, Desnos underlines how much Damas was attached to the black essence (“essence nègre”), while Césaire emphasized the “black dereliction” of the rebel that frequented the bars and the “Cabane cubaine”. Impassioned with the black counter-culture in a capital where there is no escape to the “Nuit blanche” (“Sleepless/white night”), the poet disdains the “whitening” of certain friends of his who reproach him for the “sin” of acknowledging his African roots and values. The greatest insult that one could throw at him is to call him “blanchi” (whitened/white-washed), as he laments in a poem dedicated to Christiane and Alioune Diop:

Se peut-il donc qu'ils m'osent  
Me traiter de blanchi  
Alors que tout en moi  
Aspire à n'être que nègre  
Autant que mon Afrique  
Qu'ils m'ont cambriolée (*Pigments, Névralgies*: 59)

Whitewash (for Christine and Alioune Diop)  
It may be  
They dare to  
Treat me white  
Though everything within me  
Wants only to be black  
As Negro as my Africa  
The Africa they ransacked (Conroy-Kennedy 56)

In that stanza, the epithet “nègre” is used instead of “noirci”, since “blanchi” would be the antonym. Actions on “textiles” and “textes” (blank pages blackened with letters, whitened by sunlight, turned yellow), indeed, on the “peaux” (skins), the two verbs activate a semantic field where the epithet “nègre” then acquires a singular ameliorative value. Nauseated to see himself being treated as a fake “Nègre”, the poet laments the black man’s condition and sees himself in the impossible situation of simply behaving and “being a man” and a male. At the same time, “nègre” alludes to the river Niger irrigating several African countries, crossing the cradle of black civilization, and, indeed, of the entire human race. There is in “cambriolage” (“burglary”) more than an allusion to theft and pillage practiced by the colonizers, all

nationalities included. Assuredly, the poet suggests a violation of intimacy, almost corporal. The “conspiration du silence autour de moi-même” (“conspiracy of silence around myself”, *BL* 29), “Moi qui n’ai encore rien dit qui pût l’être” (“I who have not yet said anything who it might be”, *BL* 25) could also be read as that unnamable and taboo subject par excellence: the interracial relationship (“Bouclez-la”, “shut up”).

Yet, convinced that the theory of Négritude is restricted once one dichotomizes white and black, Damas introduces in *Black-Label* a passport of identity where “pigmentation” and “neuralgies” are offered in an indivisible duo of ill-being and re-curling. Just as Afro-Guyanese, or better still, Afro-Caribbean, Damas’s first name is also hyphenated; likewise the (bilingual) *Black-Label*, which inscribes an ontological solder, is all the more striking given that the collection was published in a year when the poet shone through his very absence.

The original year of publication, 1956, is indeed a key date in the transition from colonial to post-colonial: Négritude is the object of the first big transnational and translanguistic conference in Paris. The first Congress of black Writers and Artists, at the Sorbonne (“center” of “Hellenic reason”) is a definite success, bringing together writers, artists, critics from a myriad linguistic affiliations, and Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone, and Americans, Brazilians, Caribbeans, and Africans met, discussing “Panafrikanism”. However, the transnational and linguistic factors were also sources of conflict.

## **2. “Bonjour et adieu à la négritude” (Depestre): developments, detours, denials**

From the 60s, harsh criticisms arose with regard to this ideology that certain individuals call a “white anti-racism blanc” and a new “servitude” to Europe (Marcien Towa 1971), especially from the Anglo-African side. That was the case with the Cameroonian, Marcien Towa, in 1971. In this regard, the witticism of the 1986 Nobel laureate in literature, Wole Soyinka, has become famous: “the tiger does not have to defend its tigritude”, in *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (1976). Other Africans castigated Négritude even more severely. Thus, the critic Adotévi invented in turn a new word (echoing the semantic inventiveness of the trio introducing the neologism “négritude”). In *Négritudes et négrologues*, Adotévi cleaves asunder this fixation on an African “essence”. In short, Césaire and his movement have endured a lot of harsh criticisms, unjustified in the sense that Césaire himself considered Négritude only a first stage in the history of liberation, a first step in the contestation, and particularly a capital moment in the process of decolonization, both physical and mental. Indeed, someone such as Kwame Anthony Appiah believes in neither “race”, nor

an essentialist “Négritude” bringing together beyond continents people having in common merely the color of their skin. In *Pour un nouveau cosmopolitisme*, he concludes that the praise of diversity and difference will not suffice to construct a less fanatical world, a more tolerant society (Appiah 2006). Afro-centrism is therefore, for him, a paradox, but it does not prohibit the blacks of America, for example, from thinking of their African origins. Others even talk of “malediction of the theory” (Kemedjio 1999).

Négritude has been misunderstood, deliberately reduced to an anti-white revolt, or nostalgia for Africa. This continent remains for Damas the source of exploitation and of vile commercialization of men and labor, cannon fodder in the exploitation of soldiers of color, recruits from the colonies into the French Army. Contrary to Senghor who served as a soldier (and was taken prisoner), Damas exhorts all the Africans to desert. In “S.O.S”, his cry of distress calls for a stop to the black man’s commitment to causes that do not at all concern him, and to halt the hunt for his African American brother being lynched in the Deep South. In “Et Caetera”, which is written entirely in italics, he stresses this henceforth famous incitement:

*Aux Anciens Combattants Sénégalais  
aux Futurs Combattants Sénégalais  
à tout ce que le Sénégal peut accoucher  
de combattants sénégalais futurs anciens  
de quoi-je-me-mêle futurs anciens  
de mercenaires futurs anciens  
[...]  
Moi  
je leur dis merde  
[...]  
Moi je leur demande  
de commencer par envahir le Sénégal  
de foutre aux « Boches » la paix (Névralgies, 79)*

To the Senegalese veterans of war  
To future Senegalese soldiers  
To all the Senegalese veterans or soldiers  
That Senegal ever will produce

To all the future veterans  
Former and future regulars  
What-do-I-care future former (...)  
Me  
I say shit  
And that's not half of it  
(...)  
Me  
I ask them  
To begin  
To invading Senegal (Conroy-Kennedy 61)

Deliberately provocative, Damas takes the “bit out of his mouth”, the “carcan de la langue” with which insolent slaves were kept quiet, with which the obedient colonized have been prevented from speaking out loud. His language is blasphemous and conjures up the violence and the rage, in sharp contrast with the eloquence of Senghor and the baroque verses of Césaire. Damas’ “lack of decorum” is spittle in the face of white oppressors, of French colonists, of Nazis that deport Jews and blacks, communists and other dissidents, including his friend Desnos.

### **3. Coda, “the bit in the mouth”, “death in the soul”**

When Edouard Glissant later replaces Négritude with *antillanité* (Antillaninity), it is, indeed, to support the need for solidarity between the various Caribbean communities and to promote the distinctiveness of the Antilles. However, this interregional solidarity, this pan-Caribbeanity,<sup>vi</sup> seems yet to be realized. During the general strikes in the Overseas French Departments in February 2009, Glissant and Chamoiseau called for a transregional solidarity (“Manifeste pour les produits de haute nécessité”, “Manifesto for products of high necessity”, 2009), and launched a pamphlet against the policy of Sarkozy regarding the minorities of color (“Quand les murs tombent. L’identité nationale hors-la-loi?”, “When the walls fall. Outlaw national identity?”, 2006). The third generation, that of *créolité*, claims to be eminently dependent at once on Négritude and on Antillaninity. The “Nouvelle revue française”, founded in 1909 (it has just celebrated its 100th anniversary) by, amongst others, André Gide, wished to renew the room for debate and the orientation of literary criticism, calling for a lever of action, a platform demobilizing a Europe mired in colonialism and wars

of expansion. A century ago, the *Nouvelle Revue française* assumed a middle position, between the nationalism of a Maurras and the internationalism of a Rolland.<sup>vii</sup>

And while *Obamania* was having its day and a black person had been elected president of the United States, the “torche de résine” (“resin torch”) of Damas is shining with rather a low flame as evidenced by the lack of progress regarding racism demonstrated at the Durban II Conference in South Africa.

In a 1973 interview accorded to Mudimbe—who, in the eyes of Damas, is representative of the new generation—he calls himself disenchanted: *Black-Label*, as well as *Mine de rien* (mentioned in the biography by Daniel Racine, *Avant-Propos*, 1983) are full of disappointment and virulent denunciation of colonial policy and assimilation. That is also confirmed by Chris Filostrat who quotes from *Mine de rien*, an ambiguous title that we willingly associate with the expressions, “avoir mauvaise mine”, “[ne pas] payer de mine”. In Filostrat’s opinion, Damas also takes it literally, the gold mines from which non-Guyanese companies enrich themselves and which brought nothing to Damas’ homeland:

Mine de rien  
riches<sup>viii</sup>  
des seuls sève  
suc  
sel de la Terre Ferme  
aframérindienne  
mienne  
ensemencée  
abreuvée  
nourrie  
du sang  
de la sueur  
de ma peine offerte  
non sans peine  
pour que tout fût  
pour que tout soit<sup>ix</sup>

*Mine de rien* rivets the political and economic fate of the Guyanese “penal colony” to the status of the subordinate citizens in the metropole. The former “*mine de rien*” are treated by the ex-colonizers as “nothing, nonentities”. With the “bit in the mouth”, alluding to the extremely harsh punishments in the Universe of the Plantation, and suffering from stammering, Damas dies in 1978, with “death in the soul”: those that are “labelled black”, are still under surveillance and perceived as “blacks” instead of being viewed simply as “human beings”, declares also Femi Ojo-Ade (*Being Black, Being Human*, 2004). The rage always rises a notch and is transformed into action, into exhortation not to accept one’s fate. At the same time, roaring calls for insubordination and revolt are heard, and, to speak like Mbembé,<sup>x</sup> more or less orders to act against the stigma of being “the black beast” of the French Republic. To the face of Sarkozy, he would have cried, forty years after 68:

Mort au Maître de l’École

et vivent

vivent les rebelles

les réfractaires

les cul-terreux

les insoumis

les vagabonds

les bons absents

les propres à rien

Et vive

vivent la racaille

la canaille

la valetaille

la négraille

Et vivent

vivent les fous

vivent les poux

vivent les cancre

vivent les chancres

(BL 68)

If he had lived as long as Senghor and Césaire,<sup>xi</sup> would Damas have become famous or better known than he is today? Would he at least have a reputation as glittering as Césaire<sup>xii</sup> and his “Complainte du nègre” (“Lament of a Negro”)? Would his protest against the abusive litany perhaps have broken the wall of silence and detonated at the Élysée Palace? Without a doubt, the author of *Nourritures terrestres* would have approved of the “new French rabble” expressing with insult quite simply their “thirst for equality” (according to the title of Wright’s book, *American Hunger*, 1944). Slightly envious of the victory of a black president in the 2008 election in the United States, France and the whole of Europe should, at this moment, reflect upon going beyond old sectarian ideologies. Not surprisingly, Patrick Chamoiseau and Edouard Glissant interpreted Obama’s inaugural speech by pronouncing the unpronounceable word several times over:

Ce n’est pas seulement pour les Américains du Nord que cet improbable espoir a levé, mais pour les Nègres de la planète, quelle que soit leur race.

(...) Toux ceux, Nègres du monde, qui souffrent et qui attendent de vous le distillat d’un baume ultime, s’illusionnent. Cette attente fait partie de leur faiblesse même. (Glissant & Chamoiseau 2009, p. 9, 12).

As the major go-between between African Americans and West Indians, with his fascinating connections with both the Harlem Renaissance and Latin American magic realism, Damas is and remains arrestingly relevant today for students on both sides of the Atlantic. Damas had many projects under consideration when he died, but they were stifled by illness. He died in Washington D. C. where he was based at Howard University, the only French-Guyanese professor who could deliver lectures on Guyana, Martinique, Guadeloupe and the other French colonies.

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<sup>i</sup> Léon-Gontran Damas, *Black-Label*, Paris, Gallimard, 1956, p. 20.

<sup>ii</sup> Carter Woodson, Louis-Thomas Achille, Etienne Léro, Henri Eboué, Adrian Miatlev, J. A. Rogers, Ousmane Socé Diop, C. L. R. James, Nancy Cunard, Mercer Cook, Baghio'o Jean-Louis, Edmond Humeau, Jacques Audiberti, Charles Fasquelle, Katherine Dunham, Tchicaya U Tam'si, Iwiyè Kala-Lobé, Robert Romain and Etienne Zabulon [deux dédicataires du recueil *Pigments* (Paris, GLM, 1937)], “entend[aient] / être avec [les mots]” la “Jeune Garde” d'une “Guyane française”.

<sup>iii</sup> Daniel Racine, *Léon-Gontran Damas, l'homme et l'oeuvre*, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1983, p. 16.

<sup>iv</sup> Gyssels, Kathleen, *Sartre postcolonial? Relire Orphée noir plus d'un demi-siècle après*, Cahiers d'études africaines / Ecole pratique des hautes études. 6e section: sciences économiques et sociales [Paris] - ISSN 1777-5353 - 45:3-4(2005), p. 631-650.

<sup>v</sup> Un des poèmes qu'il fait enregistrer sur “Poésie de la négritude. Damas reads Selected poems from *Pigments* (...)", enregistré par Folk Records (1967). voir <http://www.rhapsody.com/leon-gontran-damas/poesie-de-la-négritude-leon-damas-reads-selected-poems-from-pigments-graffiti-black-label-and-nevralgies>

<sup>vi</sup> Mot non attesté, je l'invente pour traduire aussi l'anglais *Caribbeanness*, tel que proposé et rêvé par Derek Walcott et Kamau Brathwaite.

<sup>vii</sup> [http://www.nonfiction.fr/article-1714-la\\_nrf\\_de\\_la\\_paix\\_a\\_la\\_guerre\\_et\\_retour\\_.htm](http://www.nonfiction.fr/article-1714-la_nrf_de_la_paix_a_la_guerre_et_retour_.htm)

<sup>viii</sup> L'adjectif au pluriel plaide pour un titre pluriel: “Mines de rien”, le tapuscrit aurait par contre encore une autre version “Mine de riens”.

<sup>ix</sup> Page confrontant l'original d'un extrait de *Mine de rien* et sa traduction anglaise par Chris Filostrat, 2008: 139)

<sup>x</sup> Published in *Africultures*: <http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=article&no=4099>

<sup>xi</sup> Au micro de Dominique Roederer pour RFO, le 5 décembre 2008, on souligne cette importance “biographique” entre les trois phares, Damas ayant disparu donc trente ans avant Césaire et presque la même “durée” que Senghor. Émission mise en ligne sur: <http://www.ua.ac.be/postcolonial>

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