"Give me back my black dolls": Damas's Aframérind': Mapping the Trans-Caribbean, Transgender and Trans-Atlantic Other

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Abstract: A triple trauma haunts Léon Damas' poetry from *Pigments* until the now finally releashed *Mine de rien*s (which he left unpublished when he died suddenly in Washington, D.C., in 1978). Born at the beginning from the XXth century, a year before Aimé Césaire, the Cayennese poet was in fact born from twins: his little sister Gabrielle only lived some days. This sister is a female double that continuously haunts him like his "black doll" that should be rendered to him. A year old, Damas loses his mother, and finally another year later his grandmother. Women are the "fantoms" that surround him (*Black-Label*, 1956) which orient a poetry that is made of recollections and dreamlike visions, acid protestations against racism and exclusion because of skin colour and even sexual orientation. But most of all, the cry to give him back his "black dolls" in the poem "Limbé" brings us to another major dimension: Damas as "dangerous orphan" (in the words of his fellow writer Jayne Cortez) begs for fe/male company in the cold city of Paris, and goes even to search for tenderness and love on the boulevards of France's capital. It is here that I capture a wish to return to a precolonial and pre-gendered identity, not yet determined by "race", "class", "gender" and other "labels" which pin you down. In this article, I suggest a totally new reading of his vivid claim to give him back his "black dolls" which has been interpreted as a nostalgic cry to return to African, Damas being enlisted in the négritude movement and its utopian return to the native land.

Keywords: gender in colonial societies, colonialism and homosexuality, post-négritude and the vindication of a new gender politics, equality beyond the racial and gender division in the post-slavery Circum-Caribbean

Knot/ Not's

2012 was the centennial year of Léon-Gontran Damas's birth, a year that broadly spoken, went unnoticed in Caribbean circles except for an April conference I organized in Cayenne, and several poems regularly posted on *France-Guyane* newspaper and the website E-karbe.com[1]. Overseas and across

[1] www.e-karbe.com/

the Channel, the same ignorance of Damas has been witnessed, despite the "Third Man" of *Négritude*'s contacts with Caribbean authors and critics, such as Andrew Salkey[2], John La Rose[3] and many others[4]. Reclaiming three rivers running through his veins[5], Damas remained in the shadow of Césaire[6] and Senghor[7]? In this paper, I try to do justice to the poet who rebelled against the establishment. As Keith Walker states in *Countermodernism*[8]*,* Damas explored the significations of his last name[9]. Damas favours a sinister image in *Black-Label,* namely that of a lynched "Negro" for "having wanted to cross the line". In his poetry he stages a fictional double[10] entangled in existential knots. A city dweller and bohemian, a jazz lover and anthropologist[11], the censured poet[12] and

[2] Salkey, Andrew, *Breaklight. Poets of the Caribbean*, Anchor Books, 1973; *An Island Post. Stories from the Caribbean*, Liveright, 1970.

[3] In a letter dated 25 January 1968, John La Rose wishes Damas Happy New Year and encloses C.L.R. James' play, asking if Damas had received Wilson Harris's *Palace of the Peacock*. LaRose also announces that he has begun translating *Pigments* and will have to see Damas to discuss this. He ends his letter by wishing him "Bonne Année" (in French).

[4] Tshitenge Lubabu M.K., translated by Olivier Milland**,** "The Third Man of Négritude", *Africa Today*, March 2012, online. (French translation: *Jeune Afrique*).

[5] By doing so, he acknowledged the important yet invisible figure of the "red-skinned" Galibi, "la Tigresse des Hauts Plateaux", his ancestors living on the borders of the Orénoque-river in the Amazonian forest (*BL* 63), les "Roucouyennes" (*BL* 21), playing the "bone flute" ("flûte en tibia" *BL* 31), both a fetish and a ritual instrument. Elsewhere in *Black-Label* the "flûte de bamboo" (*BL* 45) is an instrument which brings back to live Amerindian ancestors: "une Galibi matinée de sang Congo".

[6] *Discourse on Colonialism* and *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* are two of Césaire's works in which he vehemently shows the dehumanization of French colonialism: "and movement is negro / for laughter is negro / for joy is negro / for peace is negro / for life is negro."

[7] In 2006, for instance, the centennial year of Senghor's birth in Joal, Senegal, was widely celebrated, including here in Liège with international forums and conferences, where the name of Damas has never been pronounced.

[8] Keith Walker, *Countermodernism and Francophone Literary Cultures: the Game of Slipknot*, Dunham, Duke UP, 1999, p. 14: "The slipknot is also a recurring image in the writing of the Césaire-Damas generation. Like the lifelines metaphor, the slipknot has much to do with the sea and survival. It is polyvalent in its signifying power and multilayered in its richness and aptness to the history and experience of New World Blacks, evoking a string of verbal associations that plot the legacy of the Middle Passage, colonial domination, plantation experience and post-colonialism: capture, bound hands, nautical voyage, bondage, suicide, lynching, strangulation, triangulation, struggle, tics, knots prestidigitation, escape, freedom and survival." Damas also corrects the number of victims of the *Middle Passage*, which Jacques Roumain has estimated at 25,000 in his *Bois-d'Ebène* (1947). Instead of thousands, Damas figures it would have been millions: "DEUX CENTS CINQUANTE MILLIONS DES LEURS" (*BL* 17).

[9] The noun "damas" refers to an iron to forge weapons, as well as to sea knots, and textile (*damassé, fibré*).

[10] The image of the "corbillard" (dead weagon) appears in Movement One (*BL* 27). The recurrent image of the "hanged Negro", a clear reference to lynching, is particularly signifying in this respect.

[11] As an "indigenous observer and collector of remnants of African culture in French Guyana, Damas finally published a report, *Retour de Guyane* (1938), which would be destroyed by French authorities: it did not at all correspond to their expectations of bringing a positive "balance" of what

"députe dépité", was ahead of his time by moving beyond the antagonisms of Négritude. Not only did he claim African heritage alongside Amerindian[13] as well as European, he also moved away from binaries between class and gender.

An ethnographer and pupil of Marcel Mauss and Paul Rivet, Damas moves beyond a third Line, the enduring "différend avec l'Afrique" that authors of the next generation from the French Caribbean, I maintain, continue to struggle with. First of all the "antillanité"-movement by Glissant, and second the "créolité"-movement by Confiant and Chamoiseau. The Martiniquan theoreticians have in spite of appearances maintained a distance between the literarure of the continent and the Antilles (more precisely their island). Moreover, they have established a strong Line between an elitist culture in the *Départements d'Outre-Mer* and what they consider a more popular culture (Gyssels 2010). Much closer to Senghor, Glissant's vindication to write in hermetic style would further diminish Damas' contribution. Senghor's statement ("Damas' poetry is not sophisticated"[14]) has been repeated by many later critics and authors from the African diaspora, including Glissant[15]: he places Damas alongside Haitian Jacques Roumain[16] (the Indigénist-movement) and Cuban Nicolas Guillén.[17] While labelling

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French colonization has meant in these countries. Moreover, Damas got sick of the "prénotions / notions / présomptions" and theorizing about the "Other", himself, in the French intellectual circles. Michel Leiris' *Afrique fantôme* or *Contacts de Civilisation à la Martinique et à la Guadeloupe* would be much more "valuable". Hence the total absence of Damas in Claude Lévi-Strauss' writings. See Sally Price on Leiris' anthropological works. The same omission goes for works on Robert Desnos and Langston Hughes.

[12] In Amerindian cultures the knot often serves to measure time, as in the Aztec and Mayan calendars. The knot comes close to the other famous "metaphor" for mixed cultures in the New World, the "branchement" (see Amselle, *Branchements, Anthropologie de l'universalité des cultures*, Flammarion, 2001, and of course Glissant's rhizome, which Amselle, author of *Logiques métisses. Anthropologie de l'identité Afrique et ailleurs* (Payot 1990, rééd 1999) in fact criticizes for risking a slide into a new "essentialism".

[13] Gyssels, Kathleen, « Léon-Gontran Damas et le mythe de l'Amérindien », *Dalhousie French Studies*, 86 (Spring 2009): 45-56.

[14] Rather dismissive of the profound meaning of the poem, Senghor called Damas' poetry less sophisticated than his own. This statement was so extensively repeated by many later French critics and authors (though less so in the French-speaking Caribbean) that Damas disappeared from the "picture". "Mine de rien", Damas hinted at the long-lasting aftershocks of colonial rule, of the collision between two cultures in which the oppressed one would be considered without value and their *évolués* betraying their people. Senghor failed to grasp the multilayered ambivalence embedded in the images of knots, of lines, of his *poetry (a new word formed by poésie and métrie)*?

[15] "*The imposition of lived rhythms*. That is orality finally recognized as a forceful presence to the extent that it became the nerve center of Damas's and Guillén's writing, thereby giving birth to the movement that would support the great thrust in Creole writing" (*Caribbean Discourse*, 154). Ironically these words by Glissant have apparently been unheard by Chamoiseau and Confiant who forget Damas in *Lettres créoles* (Chamoiseau and Confiant, 1991index) and struggle with his acerb condemnation of colonial mimicry (see Gyssels, forthcoming, Ibis Rouge, 2013).

[16] Gyssels Kathleen, « Damas et McKay: les démons blancs", *Riveneuve Continents* (automne-hiver 2008-2009), Hors Série, Harlem Heritage: 219-227. Gyssels, Kathleen, « Correspondances et consonances: *Bois-d'Ebène* et *Black-Label"*, in *Révolte, subversion et développement chez Jacques Roumain*, Acacia, Michel, ed., Port-au-Prince, Editions de l'Université d'Etat d'Haïti, 2009 : 231-244.

Damas' poetry "less sophisticated", Senghor had a hand in reducing Damas' work, a judgment picked up by Glissant and his followers, much to the disadvantage of Damas' posthumous fame. But other reasons have to be taken into account for the oblivion of the militant's work. Protesting fiercely against the *départementalisation* he might have found Aimé Césaire and Cayenese intellectuals such as Gaston Monnerville too loyal to the colonial rule. People like the governor of Tchad, Félix Eboué were betraying in his eyes the ideals of decolonisation and together with Guyanese politicians of his own generation, like Bertène Juminer, Damas was always a strong defender of independentism, sharing Fanon's views on the crisis of assimilation and alienation. Rejecting the status of "D.O.M." for his own country and the neighbouring French islands, Damas was convinced this in-between status (autonomy *vs* dependence) would enhance a neo-colonial régime holding the populations in a dreadful *double bind*. In line with Fanon, Damas believed that citizens of France, they would always remain out-laws, under-dogs because of their origin and skin colour. Another explanation for the omission is Damas' bad luck with French authorities who censured both *Retour de Guyane* (1938) and *Pigments* (1937) for being too overtly anticolonial.

Finally, his withdrawal from politics and his distancing from the Négritude-movement contributed to his isolation. Quite in the margins of the French Caribbean canon, omitted in manifestos written by Glissant and Chamoiseau, Damas deserves a second opinion. Indeed, his work is very valid in the actual debate on migration, on helping the integration of colonized and oppressed populations of any pigmentation, origin, and even sexual orientation.

1. Africa ransacked by Europe/ l'Afrique cambriolée

His first collection, *Pigments* (1937), was seized by French authorities for its outright anti-colonial discourse. In the first poem, Damas portrays the invasion of the European colonizer as a moment that forever stops the drumbeat of the many African worshippers and dancers. The arrival of the white barbarians destroyed forever African ritual ceremonies of dances, songs, and drums:

> Ils sont venus ce soir[18]
> ils sont venus ce soir où le tam tam
> roulait de rythme en
> rythme
> la frénésie des yeux
> la frénésie des mains

[17] Kutzinski rightly shows that Guillén's poetry also has been labelled as easy and thereby simplified. There is a whole undercurrent that has not been dealt with in this apparently "easy" poetry.

[18] Video recording of Senghor reciting this poem available at http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/histoire/aime-cesaire/damas-photo.asp

la frénésie
des pieds de statues
DEPUIS
combien de MOI MOI MOI
sont morts
depuis qu'ils sont venus ce soir où le
tamtam roulait de
rythme en
rythme
la frénésie
des yeux
la frénésie
des mains
la frénésie
des pieds de statues[19]

The English translation reads as follows:

THEY CAME THAT NIGHT

They came that night when the
tom
tom
rolled from
rhythm
to
rhythm
the frenzy

of eyes
the frenzy of hands
the frenzy
of statues' feet
SINCE
how many of ME ME ME
have died[20]

[19] *Léon-Gontran Damas, Pigments, Présence Africaine, 1962. We refer to the 1972 edition. Pigments Névralgies* collection, re-issued by Présence Africaine. While the original edition of *Pigments* has this first poem without the dedication to Senghor, the admiration expressed by his fellow Senghor made Damas add "To Senghor" in the new edition of the collection of poetry at Présence Africaine in 1962.

since they came that night when the
tom
tom
rolled from
rhythm
to
rhythm
the frenzy[21]

For Senegalese Léopold Sédar Senghor this poem demonstrated the typical African rhythm,[22] and therefore it was his favourite. The poem would be dedicated to Senghor in the subsequent reedition. Also, Senghor dedicated his own first poem of his first collection of poetry, *Hosties Noires* (1948), to Damas. This rhythm and jazz beat was also appreciated by his second new "prefacer", the Belgian novelist and poet from Liège, Robert Goffin.[23] Complimenting Damas on the African beat, Senghor glossed over the actual event portrayed in "They came that night / Ils sont venus ce soir": men slaughtering and ransacking, genocidal violence and the poet's incapacity of counting the victims who fell and continue to fall under the assault of these invaders. Long after the colonizer first came to this country, violence strikes the "indigenous populations". Nor did Senghor understand at that time the multi-layered knots in a poetry (*poétry*[24]) that is much more ambivalent than one would first expect: by leaving out who the "they" actually are, Damas leaves the interpretation open. First, he denounces the French, but second, those very Africans who sold their own brothers and sisters into slavery and who knew when to strike best for their incursions and *razzias*. Also, by leaving the gap[25] on the identity of the "Ils" (They) and the use of the *passé composé* verb

[20] We lose the "moisson" at which Damas alluded to: proof to that is the title *La moisson des trois domaines* (nouveaux contes), one of the many unfinished manuscripts he left at Washington D.C. apart from a biography of *Langston Hughes* Damas was working on a third anthology: *L'écot de la race*, *Plusieurs vie en une*, an essay and *Mines de rien*.

[21] Alexandra Lillehei, Wesleyan college, *Pigments* Translation, online.

[22] *Les écrivains noirs et le surréalisme*, Jean-Claude Michel, Ed. Naaman, 1982, p. 117.

[23] The Belgian befriended Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, and many other jazz icons. After the original edition of *Pigments* was seized and with it the original "Preface" by Robert Desnos, Goffin wrote a short yet convincing Preface in which he argued that Damas with his poetry could without doubt be seated next to these singers and musicians. Goffin emphasized in the second and definite *Pigments* edition with *Présence Africaine* in 1962, that Damas earned serious attention, given the musical impact and strong anti-colonial messages of his militant poetry. Daniel Droixhe, « Variations autour de *Jazz-Band* (1922) de Robert Goffin », Bruxelles, Académie Royale de langue et de littérature françaises de Belgique: <http://www.arllfb.be/ebibliotheque/communications/droixhe100307.pdf>

[24] Glissant uses this word to designate a poetry that is foremost meant to be read aloud: "poésie" and orality merging in the noun "poétry".

[25] The implicit character of many poems makes the poetry a particularly resistant text: Sommer, Doris, « Resistant Texts, Incompetent Readers », *Poetics Today*, 15.4 (Winter 1994). Reprinted in *Proceed with*

tense, Damas seems to evoke a singular evening while in fact the brutality of the conquest, the violent incursion of the White colonizer, keeps going on.

Favouring peasantry, orality, and a writing that was comprehensible to all, those poems were finally dismissed as less literar than the next generation's, which claimed opacity as a means to resist the "piège folklorique" (Glissant), it is representing the Caribbean as a simply producer and consumer of folklorist ceremonies, a superficial culture aimed at pleasing the European visitor who comes to these places only to project a colonial gaze of exoticism on the reality in the Tropics. Yet Damas's transparent poetry, often generously dedicated to a network of the modernist avant-garde (surrealism and dadaïsm), gives rise to the same neglect by the generation of *créolité*.

In a second famous poem, "EtCaetera" Damas indirectly condemns the enrollment of colored troops and specifically Senegalese soldiers in the French army. Among the "tirailleurs sénégalais", there was also the future president of Senegal, L.S. Senghor.

2. Senegal, mother of coloured soldiers

> IF TOMORROW THE GHOSTS
> — Men came how many I can't recall
> men came I'm haunted by their memory
> men came and sang life in the hollow of my shoulder
> men came (*BL*, M II)

The yesterday-ghosts are mingling with the today-ghosts; Damas predicts Senegal will keep "making" soldiers for the French empire as long as the African man is not standing up and kicking out the real invader, France:

> ET CAETERA
> Devant la menace allemande, les Anciens Combattants Sénégalais adressent un câblogramme d'indéfectible attachement. (*Les Journaux*)
> Aux Anciens Combattants Sénégalais
> Aux Futurs Combattants Sénégalais
> A tout ce que le Sénégal peut accoucher
> De combattants sénégalais futurs anciens
> De quoi-je-me-mêle futurs anciens (*P* 79)
>
> *Facing the German menace, the*

Caution when Engaged with Minority Literature. (Harvard UP, 1999). Vera Kutzinski makes the same argument in her essays on Guillén (the Afro-Cuban poet translated by Langston Hughes).

Senegalese veteran combatants deliver
a cablegram of unwavering
commitment. (The Newspapers.)

To Veteran Senegalese Combatants
to Future Senegalese Combatants
to all that Senegal can birth
of future veteran Senegalese combatants
of future veteran what-did-I-get-mixed-up-in
of future veteran mercenaries
of pensioned
of tasseled
of decorated
of wretched
of gravely wounded
of maimed
of burned
of gangrened
(...)
Me I ask them
to say nothing of the need that they feel
to pillage
to rob
to rape
to defile again the ancient banks
of the Rhine
Me I ask them
to begin by invading Senegal
Me I ask them
to *fucking make peace* with the "Germans" [26] (italics mine)

Damas blames the French occupier in Senegal, the European in Africa, for having *ransacked* the black continent and its populations. While Senghor writes *Hosties noires*, *Elégies*, paying tribute to the many Black soldiers who were killed in the Somme and elsewhere on the battlefield, Damas indirectly criticizes Senghor, who was imprisoned by Nazis yet continued to defend French values and the "civilization de l'universel"[27]. Damas portrays the consent of the governed, the agreement of the subaltern to partake

[26] Identified the white settler and the French colonialist as a fascist who would one day "eat" all of him and pushing him to ransack the borders of the Rhine river : "De piller / De voler / De violer / De *souiller* à nouveau les *bords antiques* du Rhin" (*P* 80) (Italics mine).

[27] Senghor, *Liberté 3*, Seuil, 1977.

in the disastrous decisions of their (ex-) colonizing powers, rather like Ishmael Reed in *The Freelance Pallbearers.*[28]

In contradistinction to his peers Césaire and Senghor[29], Damas fiercely rebelled in simple, frank, and sarcastic poetry against the neo-colonial "Françafrique" (an invention or convention to agree upon the intervention in African affairs by France). For Damas, one of the most urgent needs was to bring to light atrocities even more horrific than the material damage and ransacking of Africa. Lingering in the back of his head, Damas thinks of how many Black men and women were humiliated in their bodies. Invisible and mute, unheard utterings and spectral presences keep the poet from sleeping.

3. The Bleached Negro

Blanchi
(Pour Christiane et Alioune Diop)

Se peut-il donc qu'ils osent
me traiter de blanchi
alors que tout en moi
aspire à n'être que nègre
autant que mon Afrique
qu'ils ont cambriolée
Blanchi
Abominable injure
qu'ils me paieront fort cher
quand mon Afrique qu'ils ont cambriolée
voudra la paix la paix rien que
la paix
Blanchi
Ma haine grossit en marge
de leur scélératesse
en marge
des coups de fusil
en marge
des coups de roulis
des négriers

[28] See Michael Collins in *PMLA*, 123.2 (March 2008), pp. 422-437.

[29] After WWII and the dismantling of the French colonies in Western Africa, Senghor would found "la Francophonie" together with Tunisian Bourguiba and Vietnamese N. Sianuk. Having been colonized by the French, Senghor still thought they had to be loyal to the *Métropole* and continue to offer sacrifices, while Damas strongly opposed the idea.

des cargaisons fétides de l'esclavage cruel
Blanchi
Ma haine grossit en marge
de la culture
en marge
des théories
en marge des bavardages
dont on a cru devoir me bourrer au berceau
alors que tout en moi aspire à n'être que nègre
autant que mon Afrique qu'ils ont *cambriolée*

Can it be that they dare
call me whitewashed
when everything in me
aspires only to be nègre
like my Africa
that they have robbed
Whitewashed
Abominable insult
which they will pay dearly for
when my Africa
that they have robbed
wishes for peace peace nothing but
peace
Whitewashed
My hatred grows in the fringes
of their villainy
in the fringes
of the gun shots
in the fringes
of the rolling shots
of slave ships
of the reeking cargos of cruel slavery
Whitewashed
My hatred grows in the fringes
of the culture
in the fringes
of the theories
in the fringes of the gossip
they thought they had to stuff me with in the cradle
when everything in me aspires to be nothing but nègre

like my Africa that they have robbed

"Robbed" is not a strong enough translation for "cambrioler". In *French Négritude Poets*, Conroy-Kennedy[30] translated with Belgian Lilyan Kesteloot the verb "cambrioler" as "ransacking". For Kesteloot, the first poems had an incisive character[31]. The verb "to robb" does not have the stringent corporeal meaning of "fouiller" (nor of "cambrioler" it is: "camber" being close to "chamber", the intimate space where atrocities are going on between white master and black slave):

Le sauront-ils jamais cette rancune de mon coeur
A l'oeil de la méfiance ouvert trop tard

Ils ont *cambriolé* l'espace qui était le mien (*P* 44)

Most likely the poet hints at his "own space", the tiny roof-room he occupied in Paris. At the same time, he refers to his own body, his private space as a place where the violent oppression has been felt most clearly. The fact that Europeans dispossessed the Africans of their material wealth was a first wrong, however beating, harassing, and violating women and men was another which on a long-term basis inspired in Africa's children intense shame and a mistrust of themselves. Many would accept that abject condition of denying their blackness and masculinity, a result of the trauma of lynching:

"S.O.S."
Them
Coldly beating up
knocking down
laying out
the blacks
cutting off their genitals
to make candles for their churches[32]

Nowhere has such a striking, sad image been used by Senghor or Césaire. Damas audaciously denounces the complicity of the Church and of school system, together with the officials in power. Moreover, he will not fear to attack friends who witnessed the violence and murders of their fellow brothers in a racist America, and would remain indifferent. He accuses the bystanders for their "inaction" as he realizes that sequels of this massive human traffic, still persist. His brethren are victims of racism. Yet they

[30] Conroy-Kennedy, Elizabeth, *The Negritude Poets: An Anthology of Translations from the French*, NY, Thunder's Mouth Press, 1989, p.39-61.

[31] Kesteloot, Lilyan. "Léon Damas: *Pigments*." In *Black Writers in French*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974.

[32] Warner, Keith Q., *Critical Perspectives on L Damas*, Washington, Three Continents Press, 1988, p. 70.

contribute to that ongoing self-contempt and disgust, as he slams in another stanza from *Black-Label*:

> we the villains
> we the littl'uns
> we the slurs
> we the curs
> we the beggars
> we the Niggers (...) (translation Pagnoulle, Ojo-Ade, Gyssels, *BL*)

Grown up men have become toys in the hands of White manipulators and adults of both sexes have been "*Cambriolés",* in their private spaces, including their private parts[33] (while they, on return, are forbidden to "penetrate" the White plantations and gardens, squares), and this "défense de pénétrer" is to be taken literally in several of his poems dealing with interracial love (like "Contre notre amour qui ne voulait rien d'autre" *N* 105-6, from which he will recycle the "défense de pénétrer" in a much later poem (in *Dernière escale)*: "Je le confesse mon Révérend").

A transgressor of Lines, Damas would ultimately address the last Line to cross, the one separating masculinity and femaleness, which are "constructions", forged in a specific cultural and religious context. Coming from a society where sexual initiation was not taboo and in which young partners experienced their first "liaisons" with several partners, the poet-ethnographer might well hint in a nostalgic manner at those tribal "customs" forever buried and remote in "le nombril du Monde", Paris.[34]

4. The knotted Negro

The final line of his famous poem "Hiccup" is the neutral pronoun "ça": What is the "ça", what is the "that" which "mulattos" don't do? "Hoquet" makes a strong condemnation of the hierarchy of colour installed upon the colonized mind. The mother forbids the "mulatto" to hang out with the "Negro"; the mother forbids him to speak Creole and to play the banjo. On each level of the cultural authenticity, the

[33] Malgré la faim d'amour qui le tenaille
Malgré sa grande désillusion
Malgré son drame fait de doute et d'espoir
Malgré l'expérience acquise au prix lourd du sang des Trois Fleuves
Malgré les visites à domicile
Malgré les rafles
Malgré les flics
Malgré les fouilles (*BL* 28)

[34] This made my argument of comparing James Baldwin with Léon Damas. See chapter two in Gyssels, Kathleen, *Passes et impasses dans le comparatisme caribéen postcolonial. Cinq traverses*, Paris, Champion, 2010.

individual must "repress" his desires and his beliefs. Most of all, the light skinned one is made to believe that s/he is better than the dark/er skinned, the individual of mixed descent grows up with disdain for the darker men or women around him. Not only is there racial and sexual inequality in the Caribbean, but colour prejudice and miscegenation can be seen as direct consequences of Africa having been ransacked by Europe. By insisting recurrently on "ransacking" and "robbing of" (the French "fouiller"), Damas hints at sexual connotations; gender inequalities are rampant as by-products of racial discrimination. Damas pleads for a recognition of the "ultimate" Africanized Other, the *queer* and the homosexual. This message has been understood by Christiane Taubira, who in her function as French Minister of Justice, quoted Damas's poem before February's 2013 National Assembly vote for gay marriage! In Damas's work, (Mother) Africa is a raped continent, its children systematically dispossessed, deprived of dignity and proud, its men infantilized and emasculated. Reversal and inversion become the burden of African Diaspora's children: women are forced to act like men, and men feel obliged to compensate for their lack of masculinity by performing acts of machismo to avoid the label of "macoumè" (homosexual).

In her speech for the Assembly in January this year[35], Christiane Taubira the minister of Justice in France and heir of Damas' poetry, quotes from "GRAND COMME UN BESOIN DE CHANGER D'AIR" to conclude her defence of *queerness* ("Mariage pour tous") in the French Republic. By doing so, she clearly makes understood two things: not that Damas was gay (as a reviewer of my comparison between *Giovanni's Room* and *Black-Label* has pretended[36]), but that he was with his fellow men and women striving for the tolerance for their queerness (passing and queering are analogous as Butler made clear in *Bodies that Matter*, reads *Passing* by Nella Larsen). To conclude, the son of three rivers, reuniting Amerindia, Africa and Europe, was far ahead of his time and that both Césaire and Senghor were *gender-blind*. Go-between for the African American Diaspora and the Francophone Diaspora, close friend of Langston Hughes and protected by André Gide, Damas was aware of this other by-product of centuries of repression, disgust of the black body, racism: more than the material deprivation, and the long-lasting effects of discrimination, there was the hesitation about sexual/gender performance, and the fear of white women. This taboo is clearly hinted at when Damas addresses the last taboo, the «vérité terminus, terminale, terminée » (*Névralgies* 133).

If "Limbé", claims to recuperate his "black dolls", the "wish to change air" announces a strong manifestation for equality and a triumph after a long battle for a last Line of divide in the French Republic which finally has to be eradicated: the African

[35] http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xx5f7j_discours-d-ouverture-du-debat-sur-le-mariage-pour-tous_news?fb_action_ids=10151348089644064&fb_action_types=og.likes&fb_ref=.URG1EYT2sNQ.like&fb_source=aggregation&fb_aggregation_id=288381481237582#.URN9O6XWgeO

[36] Michael Dash, *RAL*, 43.3 (Fall 2012): 119-120.

heritage along with the true loyal lover of the "other" colour, might he or she be of the same sex. The poet laments the non-encounter between black male and white female, and crosses a last Line of solidarity. Befriending Langston Hughes, MacKay and Alain Locke, the third man of Negritude perfectly knew about their homoeroticism and bisexual liaisons.

The poem's ambiguity is already at work in the poem, given that the "black doll" is in the first place a girl's toy, and if it's an in-animated toy, serves as a substitute to deliver feelings of protection and of tenderness…The "black" might clearly refer to ethnicity, but where critics see this line as nostalgic cry to Africa, the poet might very well translate his frustration to be reduced to the rank of a child by the "catins blêmes", the white hookers in Paris. White girls receive the "white doll" and black girls as well, as Toni Morrison aptly showed in her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1977). In a similar vein, Damas reclaims black dolls to address the issue of alienation through toys, school books, readers and "history of France" anthologies and manuals which are circulating in Africa, Asia, the Americas: his aim is to rise at least awareness of the long-lasting impact of this kind of material when it is projected upon the "colonized masses".

Of course, there is also, next to the colour Line by DuBois, next to the class problem the Line between male/female and this is where the Black doll truly acquires transatlantic meaning: from Africa to America, the colonized male has learned to remain quite as a doll, gentile and obedient as an inanimate tool to please the Master. Lining up Chinese and coolies indentured labourers, the poet addresses in *Mines de rien* the servitude and solitude of at least three populations: the native American, the deported African, the clandestine Chinese or Asian immigrant. The strong sex has been devoid of its "grandeur", taking satisfaction with remaining small to the point of becoming a doll or somebody who covers his face behind a mask:

> "Trêve" (indifference of the African masks)
> "Position" (Pigments)

To play upon the construction of gendered identity the poet inverses the xx: to learn mothering or at least female "behavior", the doll is a typical Western "invention" to learn women their subaltern place from a young age. (Morrison's protagonist Peccola in the *Bluest Eye).*

A third and intriguing sense props up when we consider the black dolls as stolen object from museums. "Maroon" and trained as ethnographer at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris with Henri-Georges (?) Rivière, Marcel Mauss and Paul Rivet, Damas left the "Institution[37]"" because he felt uncomfortable with the fact that European

[37] Gyssels, Kathleen, « Damas mis au ban[c] de l'ethnologie française : faire 'ratiociner' les allergogues de Lévy-Bruhl dans *Black-Label* et *Retour de Guyane* », in *Relaciones caribeñas : Entrecruzamientos de dos siglos, relations caribéennes. Entrecroisements de deux siècles*, N Y / Berlin, Peter Lang, Liliana Gomez, Gesine Muller, éds., 2010, 173-193.

ethnographers and more precisely French ethnographers went to Black Africa to steal entire collections of art and other important "patrimoine". Think of the Djibouti expedition in that context. Black dolls functions as a strong metaphor of that systematic loss of value and wealth: next to the human catastrophe, there is the material dispossession. In this regard, his spleen poem as a request to reconquer or retrieve his "African playmates"[38]. But the ethnographer's cry reverberates too in the call for the stolen dolls and masks, the many African fetishes and totems.

To understand how "to give back to Damas back his black dolls" could disperse the image of African tangible cultural heritage as "wenches", we would have to turn back to the Négritude ideology created by Damas himself with Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor. Whereas ethnographic museums appropriated African artefacts in order to assimilate them in a play of otherness and sameness so that they speak to us as our contemporary history, the museum assigns them a single aesthetic quality, where they speak to us as art. Yet Négritude attributes them an alterity which refuses to be reduced to a western gaze. In their conception of "art", art figures were not separated from the world but belong to a cosmology of unity. This is quite distinct from the Western conception of art, in which art has its place outside daily life and whose detachment is enhanced by a spatial distinction of the museum. Damas identifies with the artefacts he sees in the museum and sees the imprisonment of African cultural heritage as an act of alienation in which collectors and art galleries, museums and art lovers took actively part.

recouvrés mon courage
mon audace
redevenu moi-même
nouveau moi-même
de ce que Hier j'étais
hier
sans complexité
hier
quand est venue l'heure du déracinement

Le sauront-ils jamais cette rancune de mon coeur
A l'œil de ma méfiance ouvert trop tard
ils ont cambriolé l'espace qui était le mien

The English translation reads as follows:

[38] On the internet, I found ta a you tube featuring the same stanza : http://limbedolls.blogspot.be/2012/02/homage-to-leon-g-damas.html

to recover my courage
my boldness
to feel myself myself
a new self
from the one I was yesterday
yesterday
without complications
yesterday
when the hour of uprooting came.

Will they ever know this rancour of my heart
in the eye of my mistrust too late opened
they have stolen the space that was mine

Uprooting the masks from their cultural context and "stealing the space that was mine" functioned within the logics of cultural colonisation and alienation: this was the "policy" applied by the French authorities everywhere in the French empire, from AEF to AOF and in the Caribbean especially. This politics of assimilation was needed to succeed economic colonialism.

Consequently the poet recovers and recuperates the loss because he is convinced, like Walter Benjamin in his famous 1936 essay on art that artefacts change from the modality of ritual-value to the modality of exposition-value in a matter of days: the Black statues and masks, the African cult objects have all become single goods in a new global trade. Black dolls are part of a shameful trade between the capitalist West and the ex-colonized East, African and Asia. When the poet describes himself as an uprooted subject:

redevenu moi-même […] de ce que […] j'étais hier […]
quand est venue l'heure du déracinement (Pigments)

He calls for a company and a presence of substitute lovers, mothers, female partners:

Rendez-les moi mes poupées noires
mes poupées noires
poupées noires
noires
noires

The English translation reads as follows:

Give me back my black dolls

my black dolls
black dolls
dolls

Giving him back his black dolls" would not only supposedly free the artefacts from the museum and possibly alter their meaning away from exhibition and prostitution, but bridges symbolically the Trans-Atlantic dissemination caused by centuries of slavery. Born in French Guiana, from African, Amerindian and European descent, Damas' mocks "lineage" and gives himself "Chinese" features!

Conclusion

Reading one of Damas' poems from *Pigments*, "Limbé", I have shed light on a particular metaphor used by the poet to denounce first and foremost the "chosification" (Aimé Césaire) and dehumanization of the Black colonial fe/male. Second, the image of the Black dolls might also refer to the many artistic "objects" stolen by French ethnographers and explorers, visitors and art collectors, in the colonies. Third, the "black doll" image transgresses the different Lines the Guayanese poet wanted to abolish: between "ages" and sexes, "races" and classes. The reading of this poem, by inspiring a short film, illustrates how much Damas' poetry, while often reduced as "simple", can be amplified by readings from various horizons, such as cultural studies and visual poetics.

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