

# Pigments in Translation

by

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## Introduction

### I. French Guyana

Though called French Guyana to distinguish it from other colonies historically named Guyana, the French were not the first Europeans to discover this Caribbean land.<sup>1</sup> Christopher Columbus arrived at the region that would become French Guyana during his voyage in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Other explorers followed, and in 1604 France claimed French Guyana as a colony, incorporating the continental region into its empire. The colony's location on the South American continent allowed the internal border to remain unfixed for many years; it was not until 1900 that the limits of French Guyana were set at the Oyapok River by the cession of tracts of land to Brazil.<sup>3</sup> The impreciseness of this border created a land where Europeans, Amerindian natives, slaves, and *marrons* intermixed, without the oceanic constraints of the island colonies.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am referring to the region as French Guyana, instead of Guayne, Guyana, Guiana, or French Guiana. Léon-Gontran Damas uses "Guyane," the French spelling, and French Guyana is the closest English has while preserving the distinction of French.

<sup>2</sup> Léon-Gontran Damas, *Retour de Guyane, Suivi de Misère Noire, et autres écrits journalistiques* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 2003), 30.

<sup>3</sup> Bridget Jones, "French Guiana," in *A History of Literature in the Caribbean*, Vol I, ed. A. James Arnold, Julio Rodríguez-Luis, and J. Michael Dash (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1994), 389.

<sup>4</sup> J. Michael Dash, "Introduction," in *A History of Literature*, ed. A. James Arnold, Julio Rodríguez-Luis, and J. Michael Dash, 311.

French Guyana became mythologized in the European imagination, a “green hell” of a jungle at once El Dorado and a deathtrap for laborers.<sup>5</sup> The French of the metropole were brought to the colony by these myths, for French Guyana became both a gold mine and a penal colony. The English writers Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Laurence Keymis, who traveled to French Guyana “dans le but de pénétrer jusqu’au lieu de tant de richesses” and recorded their search for El Dorado, propagated the mythification.<sup>6</sup> This fascination appeared throughout Europe:

À peine le littoral figurait-il sur les cartes du seizième siècle, que, sur la foi de relations de voyages, un bruit se répandit de toutes parts situant sur les bords du lac Périmé, entre l’Orénoque et l’Amazone, une ville aux toits d’or dans laquelle s’était réfugié, avec les derniers de sa tribu, le chef Inca, Manoa Del Dorado.<sup>7</sup>

The myth of El Dorado was realized in the discovery of gold, which drew Europeans to the region.<sup>8</sup> But French Guyana was not settled in a systematic way despite this influx of colonists, and not many colonists survived long in the landscape of the “green hell.”<sup>9</sup> Besides the settlers, offenders were brought to the penal colony on *Île du Diable*.<sup>10</sup> The environmental conditions were so severe the colony was described as a graveyard for Europeans in 1763, as few people returned from laboring on the island.<sup>11</sup> France continued to use *Île du Diable* as a penal colony until 1951. Of the

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

<sup>6</sup> Léon-Gontran Damas, *Retour de Guyane*, 30.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Jean Petot, *L’or de Guyane*, (Paris: Editions Caribéennes, 1986). Referenced in Bridget Jones, “French Guiana,” 391.

<sup>9</sup> J. Michael Dash, “Introduction,” 311.

<sup>10</sup> The penal colony where Alfred Dreyfus was sent in 1895 by the French military during the Dreyfus Affair.

<sup>11</sup> Bridget Jones “French Guiana,” 389.

70000 men shipped to French Guyana by 1951, only 5000 returned at the end of their sentence.<sup>12</sup>

French Guyana was not only detrimental to prisoners, but to slaves as well. The Caribbean had many sugar plantations and slaves were the main source of labor for crop production. As part of the triangle trade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Africans were taken from their continent, brought to French Guyana as slaves to work the land, and became permanent residents. This slavery-induced diaspora experienced a long history of emancipation and reinstitution; the National Assembly abolished slavery in 1789 but Napoleon reinstated it to benefit from the profits of the plantations. It was not until 1848 that the French emancipated their colonies permanently. But emancipation only eliminated slavery and did nothing to eliminate the vast social divides that existed in Caribbean and Guyanese culture; social divides perpetuated by colonial ideals and the racial divide of slavery.<sup>13</sup> In fact, emancipation may have compounded the issue. Plantation owners brought Indian, Malay, Chinese, and Indochinese workers to French Guyana to take the places of former slaves who had left the plantations after emancipation, further complicating racial relations with the addition of other diasporic peoples.<sup>14</sup>

Though brimming with a population of diverse racial ancestry, literature written in the Caribbean during the colonial period attempted to replicate European ideals. Léon-Gontran Damas, one of the founders of the Negritude movement, termed the poetry produced during this period imitative poetry; poetry that

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<sup>12</sup> Michel Devèze, *Cayenne; Déportés et Bagnards* (Paris: Julliard, 1965), 277.

<sup>13</sup> A. James Arnold, prologue to *Modernism and Negritude; the Poetry and Poetics of Aimé Césaire*, ed. A. James Arnold (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1981), 6.

<sup>14</sup> J. Michael Dash, "Introduction," 311.

imitated European cultural and poetic ideals without attempting to express a Caribbean identity.<sup>15</sup> These works ignored race and tried to find commonality in assimilation instead of expressing the reality of France's colonial impact on the Caribbean. Beyond imitative works, the inaccessibility of printing presses to any non-European language was both the product of and perpetuated the colonial and assimilation practices in the Caribbean. Assimilation, with its roots in education and class, produced a cultural elite through access to the French language, which allowed access to literature and publication. The ability to write in French was a means of entrance into French society, and a means of advancing in the Caribbean hierarchy; the uneducated spoke Creole.<sup>16</sup> Those who wanted to write for the Caribbean and not Europe were nonetheless obliged to write in French to be published. And even with access to a press willing to print a non-European language, Creole was a mostly oral language and could not be printed.<sup>17</sup>

## II. Léon-Gontran Damas

Léon-Gontran Damas was born into this colonial system in Cayenne, French Guyana on March 28, 1912. His father was a *mulatto*, of African and European descent, while his mother was *métissage*, descended from Amerindians and Africans.<sup>18</sup> She died shortly after his birth, and Damas was raised by his father's

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<sup>15</sup> "Avec eux, fini le règne de l'imitation, de la décalcomanie!" Léon-Gontran Damas, introduction to *Poètes d'Expression Française [d'Afrique Noire, Madagascar, Réunion, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Indochine, Guyane] 1900-1945* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1947), 9.

<sup>16</sup> J. Michael Dash, "Introduction," 311-312.

<sup>17</sup> Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, introduction to *Aimé Césaire, the Collected Poetry*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Bridget Jones "Léon Damas," in *Critical Perspectives on Léon-Gontran Damas*, ed. Keith Q. Warner (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1988), 31.

relative Man-Gabi.<sup>19</sup> Both his mother and adopted mother privileged a European upbringing, encouraging those habits the Guyanese culture regarded as French.<sup>20</sup> Their bourgeois attitude and attempt at assimilation would influence Damas' later conception of Negritude.<sup>21</sup> He entered elementary school in 1919 in Cayenne, and in 1924 was sent to the Lycée Schoelcher in Fort-de-France, Martinique, where he met Aimé Césaire.

The Lycée Schoelcher was the only secondary school for all of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and French Guyana until after World War II.<sup>22</sup> It was part of a colonial system which enforced social divides for the profit of the French empire, and whose "deliberate policy [was] to limit cultural development."<sup>23</sup> The policy included a restriction of education to primary school, a refusal to create secondary schools, and an indifference to the establishment of cultural institutions such as libraries and print shops.<sup>24</sup> The Lycée Schoelcher became the source of colonial administrators; students from oversea territories were recruited to oversee the territories, a cyclical production sustaining the metropole's dominance. Not only was the Lycée the only secondary school and means to university, it was not free for students.<sup>25</sup> Those who had already assimilated into the colonial system were the privileged members who could afford to send their children; education produced the figures

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<sup>19</sup> Daniel Racine, *Léon-Gontran Damas l'Homme et l'Oeuvre* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1983), 25.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Racine, "Léon-Gontran Damas: Bibliographical Data," in *Léon-Gontran Damas, 1912-1978: Founder of Negritude, A Memorial Casebook*, ed. Daniel Racine (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, Inc., 1979), 1.

<sup>21</sup> See "Hiccups" page 23.

<sup>22</sup> Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, introduction to *Aimé Césaire, the Collected Poetry*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> Jack Corzani "Poetry Before Negritude," 466.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Léon-Gontran Damas, *Retour de Guyane*, 86-87.



that would later return and subject the colonies to further rounds of this cycle. It was a means of domination, as Damas wrote in *Retour de Guyane*:

Cette éducation ne comporte ni l'histoire, ni la géographie du Continent Américain où vit l'individu qui la reçoit, ni l'organisation sociale, ni les origines de premiers hommes qui habitèrent la région, encore moins la tragédie d'où naquit la réalité présente.

L'éducation semble n'avoir qu'un but: masquer certaines lacunes mais aussi certaines réalités. Cet enseignement singulier se rapporte invariablement à un pays qui s'appelait la Gaule, aux habitants de ce pays, les Gaulois, à leur héroïsme dans l'espace, à leur incontestable autorité dans le temps, au respect qu'ils méritent, à leur humanité supérieure, à leur conception mystique de la race.<sup>26</sup>

An idea he returned to in 1971:

The négritude movement at first tried to oppose the absorption the grandsons of the Gauls wanted to inflict on us. They claimed we had the same grandfathers. The textbooks, one must remember, were destined solely for use by the metropolitans. I can distinctly remember that in my class in French Guyana we were more familiar with the names of plants growing in France than those growing at home.<sup>27</sup>

Damas criticized colonial education for both its lack of Caribbean subject matter and its social exclusivity.<sup>28</sup>

Students at the Lycée Schoelcher studied for the entrance exam to the French university system, an exam with questions based on France's history and geography. Information about the Caribbean was excluded from the exam and therefore from study, though the Lycée's geography teacher tried to interest the students in the local geographical characteristics of Martinique.<sup>29</sup> The education system in the Caribbean propagated issues of identity and race through privileging European ways, a system in which Damas was complicit through his education.

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<sup>26</sup> Léon-Gontran Damas, *Retour de Guyane*, 85.

<sup>27</sup> Léon-Gontran Damas, "La Négritude en question" interview by *Jeune Afrique*, in *Critical Perspectives*, trans. and ed. Keith Q. Warner, 18.

<sup>28</sup> Léon-Gontran Damas, *Retour de Guyane*, 88-87.

<sup>29</sup> Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, introduction to *Aimé Césaire*, I.

Damas did not finish his secondary education in Cayenne, but transferred to the metropole. From 1928 to 1929 Damas continued his studies in Meaux, France. While at school, the principal asked him if he were a *bagnard* since he came from French Guyana. Damas responded “[s]i mon père était bagnard, je serais aussi blanc que vous...la Guyane est le dépôt des bagnards mais la France en est bien la fabrique,” referencing the contradiction in the metropole’s conceptions of its colonies.<sup>30</sup> He finished his studies, moved to Paris, and in November 1929 enrolled at the École des Langues Orientales to study Russian and Japanese, while also taking law classes to please his family and sitting in on classes at the Faculté des Lettres. Damas met Léopold Sédar Senghor in 1930 at school, and in 1932 enrolled in the Institut d’Ethnologie de Paris. As he was no longer studying law his parents cut off his allowance, but friends successfully petitioned the governor of Martinique, Félix Eboué, for a scholarship to enable Damas to resume his studies.<sup>31</sup> Damas continued to study ethnology, attending courses that would influence the creation of Negritude.

Another influence on Negritude, the Etienne Léro led *Légitime Défense*, a Marxist Martinican magazine whose ideals Damas endorsed, was published this same year. In fact, while Damas would later publish the first Negritude text, he credits Léro with influencing the movement.<sup>32</sup> *Légitime Défense* took its inspiration from the

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<sup>30</sup> Daniel Racine, *Léon-Gontran Damas*, 26.

<sup>31</sup> Daniel Racine, “Leon Gontran Damas and Africa,” in *Critical Perspectives*, ed. Keith Q. Warner, 51.

<sup>32</sup> Damas discusses Léro’s “domine” of this phase of poetry and his influence on Negritude in to *Poésie d’Expression Française*, where he spends over half of his introduction discussing Léro. Léon-Gontran Damas, introduction to *Poètes d’Expression Française*, 11-16.

Harlem Renaissance, a movement with direct influence on the individual members of the Negritude movement and the movement itself.<sup>33</sup>

It was in Paris that the *trois pères* of Negritude, Damas, Césaire, and Senghor, met as a group for the first time with other members of the African diaspora. This group of student intellectuals, uprooted from the Caribbean by France for their intellectual gifts and destined to become the next administrators of the colonial system, formed a community in Paris that celebrated their common African ancestry. Negritude grew out of their rejection of bourgeois assimilation practices and a determination to not view Africa as cultureless nor African culture as inferior to European culture. As a movement, it repudiated Eurocentric ideals and found commonality and culture in African descent.

Negritude has its roots in ethnology. While in Paris, Damas' studies at the Institut d'Ethnologie exposed him to ethnographers who were the product of the European fascination with racial difference and cultural otherness of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>34</sup> These theorists, such as Leo Frobenius and Maurice Delafoss were influential in the creation of the movement, writing about the European invention of the French colonizing term *nègre*.<sup>35</sup> All three of the *pères* read at least Frobenius, according to Léopold Sédar Senghor, and had memorized sections of his work, an

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<sup>33</sup> A. James Arnold, *Modernism and Negritude*, 27-29.

<sup>34</sup> J. Michael Dash, "Before and Beyond Negritude," in *A History of Literature in the Caribbean*, ed. A. James Arnold, Julio Rodríguez-Luis, and J. Michael, 537.

<sup>35</sup> *Histoire de la civilisation Africaine* and *Les Nègres* respectively. "The title *Les Nègres* gave a new respectability to a noun that in the French West Indies had had the intentionally offensive connotation of nigger." A. James Arnold, *Modernism and Negritude*, 36.

anthropology of the African.<sup>36</sup> The Negritude movement is indebted to the texts of these ethnographers who saw in Africans a natural essence.<sup>37</sup>

While Negritude rejected the negative aspects of these ethnographic theories, the movement developed from their idea of Africans as inherently, essentially, other. It expressed a belief in this difference and a rejection of the European as superior: African culture was the equal of but not equivalent to European culture. Negritude's objective was to reclaim the history of Africa and to form a new identity in the redefinition of the pejorative term *nègre*.

As the community of the Parisians African diaspora formulated Negritude, Damas started publishing work. Five poems were first released in the review *Esprit* in April 1934.<sup>38</sup> These publications coincided with the creation of *L'Étudiant Noir* in 1935, a magazine modeled on Léro's *Légitime Défense*.<sup>39</sup> *L'Étudiant Noir* provided an outlet for expression for all students of African descent in Paris and through distribution created unity in the diaspora.<sup>40</sup> The magazine was "intended to bring together students from Africa and those from the West Indies and was...a matrix for the concept of negritude."<sup>41</sup> Only released a few times, *L'Étudiant Noir* folded in

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<sup>36</sup> "I still have before me, in my possession, the copy of *Histoire de la civilisation Africaine* on the third page of which Césaire wrote: 'décembre 1936'...We knew by heart Chapter II of the first book of the *History* entitled, "What does Africa Mean to Us?", a chapter adorned with lapidary phrases such as this: 'The idea of the 'barbarous Negro' is a European invention, which in turn dominated Europe until the beginning of this century.'" *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>37</sup> J. Michael Dash, "Before and Beyond Negritude," 537.

<sup>38</sup> "Un Clochard M'a Demandé Dix Sous," "Solde," "La Complainte du Nègre," "Réalité," "Cayenne". Four would later be included in the collection *Pigments*, the first of Damas' work to be published outside of the pages of a *revue*. See pages 29, 31, 39, 63. Daniel Racine, *Léon-Gontran Damas l'Homme et l'Oeuvre* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1983), 29.

<sup>39</sup> Daniel Racine, *Léon-Gontran Damas*, 29.

<sup>40</sup> Daniel Racine, "Leon Gontran Damas and Africa," 51.

<sup>41</sup> Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, introduction to *Aimé Césaire*, 2.

1936 due “to poor sales and political pressure.”<sup>42</sup> Though it did not endure, the review brought together the figures who would create Negritude and was an early expression of the movement.

After *L'Étudiant Noir* ended, Damas published *Pigments*, his first collection of poetry, in 1937 in an edition of 500 with a preface by Robert Desnos. Desnos' preface situated Damas as an integral figure in the emerging movement centered around the commonality of African ancestry. Damas claimed that *Pigments* was the source of the Negritude movement and inspired Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*:

Oui, et je vais vous dire un chose que je révèle rarement. Césaire...est venu me trouver dans ma chambre d'étudiant pour me lire son texte. J'étais encore couché, c'était un matin, très tôt. Je l'entends encore: 'Tu me diras dans quelle mesure j'ai été influence par toi.' J'ai été tellement surpris par la beauté de ce poème que je n'ai rien dit. Mais il est certain qu'il a subi à certains endroits mon influence.<sup>43</sup>

At the very least, *Pigments* was the first text to be published out of the Negritude movement.

The collection had influence beyond literary production. After being translated into several African languages, *Pigment's* revolutionary potential was actualized in the Baoulé of the Cote d'Ivoire's refusal to serve in the French army against Germany in 1939, provoked by the collection's language.<sup>44</sup> In the metropole, *Pigments* was seized and suppressed in France by *Le Front Populaire* in 1939 for “atteint à la sûreté intérieure de l'Etat.”<sup>45</sup> The retroactive banning led to a raid at

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<sup>42</sup> A. James Arnold, prologue to *Modernism and Negritude*, 9.

<sup>43</sup> Keith Q. Warner, introduction to *Critical Perspectives*, ed. Keith Q. Warner, 7.

<sup>44</sup> Daniel Racine, “Leon Gontran Damas and Africa,” 54.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

Damas apartment, where police searched for further copies of the collection.<sup>46</sup>

*Pigments* was a manifesto that launched a movement, though Damas did not use the term *négritude* in his poetry.

Damas' next publication was his 1938 ethnographic study of French Guyana, *Retour de Guyane*, which proved no less contentious than *Pigments*. 1500 copies were published following its excerption in magazines. A critique of the fiscally corrupt bureaucracy and the pedagogic abuse of colonialism in French Guyana, the essays were considered so incendiary that the Guyanese government immediately purchased 1000 texts and burned them to prevent their dissemination.<sup>47</sup>

After Damas' work was banned and burned, Césaire published *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, the second seminal Negritude text, in a 1939 issue of *Volontés*. This poem contained the first published use of the neologism *négritude* and is considered the foundational text of the movement.<sup>48</sup> World War II interrupted Negritude's literary production. Mobilized and unable to return to Paris during Germany's occupation, Damas joined the French resistance. At the end of the war he received the Franco-British Cross of Merit and the Commemorative Medal of Liberation for his services.<sup>49</sup> In 1947 Damas edited an anthology of Negritude poetry, *Poètes Noirs d'Expression Français*, followed by a collection called *Poèmes nègres sur des airs Africains* in 1948.

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<sup>46</sup> Keith Q. Warner, introduction to *Critical Perspectives*, 6.

<sup>47</sup> Daniel Racine, "Léon-Gontran Damas: Bibliographical Data," 5.

<sup>48</sup> There is some contention over this fact. Several scholars have claimed this is the first published use of the term, others claim it first appeared in an issue of *L'Étudiant Noir*. It was most likely first published in *Notebook*. See A. James Arnold, prologue to *Modernism and Negritude*, 9. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, introduction to *Aimé Césaire*, 5. for discussion.

<sup>49</sup> Daniel Racine, "Léon-Gontran Damas: Bibliographical Data," 8.

Damas became a political figure in French Guyana during the end of the 1940s. The colony became an overseas department of France in 1946, and in 1948 the Socialist party elected Damas a député. It was as a député that Damas visited Africa for the first time in 1950, as a delegate for the French National Assembly. He was sent to the Côte d'Ivoire to report on the events of 1949. This report, Rapport No. 11348, was published in 1965 and is "referred to today as the bible of the African Democratic Republic Party."<sup>50</sup> Damas served as French Guyana's representative until his defeat in the election of 1952. While a député, Damas married Isabelle Victoire Vécilia Achille in 1949 and divorced her four years later.

During the 1950s and 1960s Damas traveled around the world attending conferences and publishing poetry. His next collection, *Graffiti*, came out in 1952. *Black Label*, a long poem that Damas considered his best work, followed in 1956.<sup>51</sup> *Névralgies*, his penultimate collection, was published a decade later. After marrying Marietta Campos in 1967, Damas moved with her to the United States in 1970, where he taught at Georgetown University. Later, Damas transferred to Howard University where he became a professor of African Literature. He was subsequently appointed Acting Director of the African Studies and Research Program from July 1975 to July 1976. In 1977 his last collection of poetry *Mine de Rien* was published. Damas continued to teach at Howard University though March 15, 1977, when he was admitted to the George Washington University hospital for the removal of a tongue sarcoma. His health deteriorated, and on July 5, 1977 he returned to the

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<sup>50</sup> Daniel Racine, "Leon Gontran Damas and Africa," 56.

<sup>51</sup> "I think my best book is *Black-Label. Pigments* was a manifesto of the movement, but the plain explanation of *Pigments* can be found in *Black-Label* and in *Retour de Guyane*." Léon-Gontran Damas, "Négritude Revisited – An Interview with Léon Damas," *Manna*, in *Critical Perspectives*, ed. Keith Q. Warner, 25.

hospital with a ruptured aneurism. On December 20<sup>th</sup> of the same year, Damas returned to the hospital with pneumonia, where the doctors discovered throat cancer. He stayed at the hospital for the next month until his death on January 22, 1978, at the age of 66. His body was brought back to French Guyana and buried.

### **III. Methodology**

Translation begins with reading the source text, the text to be translated. The meaning gleaned during the initial read-through guides a translator through the lingual complexities of transference from source text to target text. After gaining an understanding of the work, the writing process begins with a translation between languages on the word-to-word scale, while allowing meaning to influence choices of semantics.

Literal, or word-to-word, translations fail primarily for two reasons: they do not transfer “meaning” from the source language or do not consider the syntactical and grammatical changes necessary to translate into the target language. These failings can result in a stilted, encumbered text that does not attempt to accurately translate the work as a whole, but instead relies on the lexical definitions of each word. This is especially true in poetry, which conveys a larger “meaning” than the words themselves literally denote or may lack narrative continuity. A word-to-word rendering of a source text can lose information, especially in the case of idiomatic expressions or “meaning” carrying language. A faithful translation contains the “meaning” of the source text while referring to the source language in its target language.



Faithfulness is preserved in Lawrence Venuti's Freidrich Schleiermacher-derived concept of a foreignizing translation. This method brings the reader to the author by preserving an element of foreignness from the source text. It acknowledges the target text as a translation and does not aim for complete transparency or autonomy. Foreignization is contrasted with the domestication of a text. In a domestic translation the source text is translated in a transparent and fluid style to minimize any foreignness and to create the illusion the source text was originally written in the target language. Venuti claims this mode is inherently colonial, for it reflects a belief in the superiority of the target language and its culture.<sup>52</sup> It is a betrayal to produce a translation that is divorced from its source; the balance must be kept between foreignization and autonomy.<sup>53</sup>

I employed a foreignizing mode of translation, which acknowledged the source text, to bring the reader to Léon-Gontran Damas' text without attempting to present the poems as if they had originally been written in English. To this end I preserved French words in the poems in an effort to foreignize, to acknowledge their source text and source language. I hope my translations reflect the source poems and acknowledge my role as translator, and through this my judgments and word histories that cannot fail to shade "meaning." My purpose was to translate *Pigments* as faithfully as possible. There may be a few moments of inspiration, but in the totality of this work I strove to bring across the original genius of Damas with as little interference as possible. I translated literally while allowing lexical subjectivity

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<sup>52</sup> Lawrence Venuti, "Local Contingencies: Translation and National Identities," in *Nation, Language, and The Ethics of Translation*, ed. Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 187-189.

<sup>53</sup> This theory is the result of COL 355 "Translation: Theory and Practice" a class I took in the Fall of 2010 at Wesleyan University with Professor Joseph Fitzpatrick.

and the understanding of “meaning” to dictate the necessary breaks from the literalness of the phrase. As well thought out and referenced as a choice may be, it is still a choice of translation. I will necessarily privilege a translation that supports my reading of *Pigments*, but one that relies on the source. This contributes to a faithful translation, the acknowledgment that translation that has taken place.

*Pigments* is a manifesto of Damas’ Negritude. The theme of complicity in assimilation and Damas’ style embody through language the representation of the experience of the colonized mind and body. These motifs and techniques express not only Damas’ conception of Negritude but narrate the experience of the colonized speaker. Through this collection Damas created a Negritude for the Caribbean in the elevation of Africa and the rejection of the colonizing metropole, a Negritude that must be preserved through translation.

The speaker of this collection struggles with assimilation. For though he views it as an unwanted force, it has infiltrated his subconscious and cannot be expunged. The speaker tries to uproot assimilation but his indoctrination “from the cradle”<sup>54</sup> cannot be erased through desire. Subconscious or buried as it may be, the colonial force is part of him and will return. Assimilation is present in Damas’ poetry and its presence must be preserved in translation. In “There are some nights,”<sup>55</sup> the speaker experiences nausea, a physical expression of a mental debilitation; he lies awake at night suffocating on the “bitter odor of blood,” on the colonization that has permeated the very atmosphere as it “jet[s] / from every muted trumpet.” There is no escape; an unwanted culture has “anchor[ed] itself in” the body, and nothing can

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<sup>54</sup> See “Whitewashed” page 51

<sup>55</sup> See page 13.

remove it. The malaise is a remainder of Damas' childhood, of assimilation as the means of advancement, of cultural assimilation of the mind anchored in the body. It is a physical expression of a mental condition, the body's expression of the mind's assimilation into colonialism. The colonial system has left an unforgettable mark in the speaker's subconscious and body.

The colonized figures reject assimilating tendencies in "Hiccups,"<sup>56</sup> a poem that chronicles the childhood indoctrination of a colonized body. The speaker encounters the return of his childhood in a hiccup, an involuntary and unwanted bodily response. The colonizers have invaded his mind and body; assimilatory practices return against his will from the returning habits of his mind and body. During his childhood, the speaker was taught the means of advancing in society by imitating the manners and mannerisms of the metropole, by rejecting the Negritude of a banjo in favor of the European violin. The instruments represent the colonized and colonizers and the former's further division into *negre* and *mulatto*. A culmination in "the *mulattos* do not do that / so leave it to the *negres*" emphasizes the divide between the assimilation privileged *mulatto* and the denigrated *negre*. These poems are a response to the invasive and unalterable aspects of assimilation and colonization, and the speaker's anger and disgust at their presence in him, in his body that manifests these subconscious betrayals. In "True to the Legend,"<sup>57</sup> the speaker remembers his native landscape, "mornes," but has distorted himself to imitate the European ideal. He forces himself into the clothing of the metropole while his body recalls the freedom of his historic culture. The juxtaposition of the

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<sup>56</sup> See page 23.

<sup>57</sup> See page 53.

sentiment expressed through the clothing choices favors the morne country of the Caribbean over European strictures. The subconscious expression of assimilation is a reality with which the speaker struggles, and must be preserved in a translation.

Languages break differently and allow for different phrasal and syntactical formations. Thus the structure of the French lines is impossible to translate with complete faithfulness into the English language. In “Rappel,” the exclamation of “Et flûte” refers both to an instrument and to a colloquial exclamation.<sup>58</sup> The phrase’s position, coming directly after a critique of France, lends itself to being understood as “damn.” But the following line brings “flûte” back to the instrument, a “reed flute.” This language points to the complications and oppressions of colonialism and empire. For the reed flute of the western imagination is not the flute that plays on the mornes “while the good negre / stretches out on his pallet ten to fifteen Factory hours.” I found it impossible to capture the dual meanings of “damn” and “flute” in English and decided to preserve “flute,” I could not translate the two distinctly, as repetition is an integral stylistic element in *Pigments*.

Damas uses repetition to express his understanding of colonization. He repeats an introductory word, usually an article or a preposition, at the start of a series of lines. The repetitions are tied into the drumbeat, the backbone return of a tempo, and count off against the colonizer as well as marking time. “The Negre’s Lament” and “Et Cetera”<sup>59</sup> utilize this technique, where the beat is invoked through the repetition of *de*. “The Negre’s Lament” lists the implements of bodily subjugation of slavery: “of blows of gnarled cord / of bodies charred / of toes to back charred /

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<sup>58</sup> See “Reminder” page 55.

<sup>59</sup> See pages 39 and 71.

of...” And “Et Cetera” lists the human categories of a European war: “of maimed / of burned / of gangrened / of...” The use of repetition pounds out the negativity, the multitudes of betrayals, inflicted upon the colonized by slavery, colonialism, and assimilation. With percussive prepositions the speaker reinforces the losses enacted upon the body and the subconscious, beat out by a drum. It highlights the repetition of assimilation, body and mind, and the history out of which colonialism was born.

Damas’ style is unique among Negritude poets. He is considered the “purest” poet,<sup>60</sup> because his poetry evokes African rhythms and jazz.<sup>61</sup> Stylistically, it expresses the assimilated body, and the refuge and future in the syncopation of African rhythms found in the jazz-like refrains and lines. Damas was heavily influenced by Jazz and its African roots.<sup>62</sup>

Damas employs a colloquial vocabulary to express his thematics, and employs racial stereotypes as well as *mots de la rue*. In “Regard,” the speaker makes “false Chinese eyes.”<sup>63</sup> The discomfort felt at reading those lines is purposeful, purposeful in the same manner as using “negre” to speak of a group, and must be preserved in translation. The use of racial stereotypes and derogatory language forces the reader to confront the roots of those ideas, not just the history of negre but that of other

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<sup>60</sup> “Damas is concise, syncopated, ironical, and probably the most jazz-inspired... To the extent that he is the least European, he is sometimes considered as the purest in their ranks.” A. James Arnold, “Negritude, Then and Now,” in *A History of Literature*, ed. A. James Arnold, Julio Rodriguez-Luis, and J. Michael Dash, 482.

<sup>61</sup> I want to state I have very little training in music and no jazz training at all. So I cannot verify the validity of this claim, nor I can I translate any specificities of jazz beyond the surface and subconscious recognition of certain phrases and the recognizable improvisational standards in some poems. This is a weakness of my translation, but I strove to translate the rhythm of Damas that appears in the source text.

<sup>62</sup> “On aura remarque dans presque tous les textes reproduites dans ce livre, la musique des poèmes de Damas tissés d’allitérations et d’assonances, comme en Afrique noire” “des poètes nègres francophones de ma génération, Damas est, sans conteste, celui qui...a illustre le mieux le rythme nègre que viola!” Daniel Racine, *Léon-Gontran*, 11, 13.

<sup>63</sup> See page 61.

oppressed groups as well. The poet wants to evoke the same discomfort he feels at assimilation through language and poetry, and brings the reader to understand the constraint of ingrained meaning, and the fight against that which has been indoctrinated since birth. Employing a term with a derogatory history multiple times in a work allows the term to achieve new meaning for the reader through the estrangement and reengagement precipitated by the iterations. Negritude is not limited to a particular category of race, but, while based in Africanness, allows for the possibility of other races.

I found it difficult to translate the French words relating to Negritude, race, and geography, culturally specific terms. The struggle was between wanting to translate literally and culturally and understanding that the movement engendered in many of these words the cultural meanings they took on through the course of the twentieth century. After attempting to translate, I found the best recourse was in leaving the words untranslated with an explanation in the introduction; the loss of their cultural specificity was too great in an English rendering.

“Nègre” is the essential first word. Literally translated *nègre* is a variant of black, which is itself best translated by the French *noir*. The problems of transferring *nègre*'s meaning are twofold. Firstly, *nègre* is a culturally specific word and relies on other racial terms in French for its meaning. And these terms were categorically specific:

before the Second World War the French had three words to designate individuals or things belonging to the black race. The most euphemistic was ‘Noir’ (noun or adjective). The most derogatory was ‘négro.’ In between, on a sort of neutral and objective ground was the word ‘nègre,’ used both as a noun or as an adjective (as in ‘l’art nègre’)...For the general public, ‘noir’ and ‘nègre’ may well have been interchangeable, but the very civilized and very

complexed Antilleans considered themselves as 'Noirs,' the 'nègres' being on that distant continent, Africa.<sup>64</sup>

The culturally specific categories of French racial terminology defy a faithful translation. And *Pigments* contains other terms for people of African descent, "Limbé" refers to "poupées noirs," translated as "black dolls."<sup>65</sup> *Noir's* inclusion as an identifying noun in *Pigments* prohibits the translation of *nègre* as "black." Nor does English have a loanword for *nègre*, like "mulatto," borrowed from the romance languages' *mulâtre*. Thus, in the Caribbean *nègre* had a pejorative connotation that most closely translates into English with the word "nigger," a derogatory word in its English context. But "nigger" rests in the American cultural conception of the United States' racial history, not the Caribbean or the French empire's racial relationship to its colonies.<sup>66</sup>

The second difficult in translating *nègre* was its reference to the movement. Negritude comes from the French *négritude*, a neologism adopted into English. Aimé Césaire coined the term in *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*, and its roots are in the term *nègre*.<sup>67</sup> To divorce the term for the movement from the self-identifying noun that Damas uses divorces any prior knowledge of the movement from this word, and renders it merely pejorative, though reclamatory. An English reader of this text should be able to grasp the connection between the noun with which Damas refers to the African-Caribbean body, culture, and history in his poetry and the name of the movement itself, the connection between *Negritude* and *nègre*. By not translating

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<sup>64</sup> Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, introduction to *Aimé Césaire*, 27.

<sup>65</sup> See page 35.

<sup>66</sup> A. James Arnold, prologue to *Modernism and Negritude*, 5-6.

<sup>67</sup> A variation on *nègre* was first used in *L'Étudiant Noir*, *nègreries*, but it was not until the publication of *Notebook* in 1939 that the neologism *Negritude* was first used. Léon-Gontran Damas, "Entretien Avec Léon-Gontran Damas (Washington, mai 1977)," Daniel Racine, in *Léon-Gontran Damas*, 193-194.

*nègre*, a translator deemphasizes the derogatory cultural meaning of *nègre* but acknowledging the roots of Negritude in it. A reader who does not know French may not understand the connection between “nigger” and “Negritude,” as they are not obviously related. And even readers who know French may miss the association between the two words in translation. Because of these issues, I chose to leave *nègre* untranslated to contain this connection by addressing the issue in this introduction, thus connecting a derogatory, nigger-like meaning to “negre” and “Negritude.”

Other translators have not been consistent in their translations of individual poems from *Pigments*. In Norman Shapiro’s “S. O. S.,” *nègre* is translated as both “nigger” and “black.”<sup>68</sup> For her translation of the same poem, Marie Collins translated *nègre* as “Negro.”<sup>69</sup> Ellen Conroy Kennedy chose “black” in her translations.<sup>70</sup> This disagreement of terms shows the extent to which *nègre* can be translated, and the difficulty of translation presented by in this word. There is no consistent precedent for translating *nègre* in the extant compilations.

There are two other words that have not been adopted into the English lexicon and which I left untranslated. These words are *marronnage* and *morne*.<sup>71</sup> *Marronnage* emerged in the French language to describe slaves who had run away in the Caribbean, *marrons*, and formed their own communities.<sup>72</sup> Instead of translating *marronnage* as “runaway community,” I decided to leave it untranslated. Translating

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<sup>68</sup> Norman Shapiro, *Négritude: Black Poetry from Africa and the Caribbean* (New York: October House, 1970), 49.

<sup>69</sup> Marie Collins, *Black Poets in French* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1972), 17.

<sup>70</sup> “Hiccups,” Ellen Conroy Kennedy, *The Negritude Poets: An Anthology of Translations from the French* (New York: Viking Press, 1975), 50.

<sup>71</sup> See “Shine” page 57, “True to the Legend” page 53, “So Often” page 41.

<sup>72</sup> Aimé Césaire, “Notebook of a Return to the Native Land,” in *Aimé Césaire*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, 402.



*marronnage* as a “runaway community” is inaccurate because of the cultural differences between the American and Caribbean slavery systems. In the American system, a runaway slave evokes the Underground Railroad and efforts to reach the freedom of the North. In the Caribbean, the geography prevented this kind of escape, so *marronnage* refers to the phenomenon of small communities of runaway slaves who banded together in an attempt to survive both the geographical circumstances and the colonizing forces that sought, and mostly succeeded through development, to subdue and reclaim these people.<sup>73</sup> In French Guyana, *marronnage* refers to small camps of runaway slaves in the jungle along the border.<sup>74</sup> This history of independence and community is not encompassed in “runaway communities.” *Morne* is equally geographically specific, but it refers to a particular land formation.<sup>75</sup> A “morne” is a basalt based “round hill or small mountain” in the Caribbean, a geographic characteristic foreign to Europe.<sup>76</sup> Given the specificity of these words and Negritude’s ties to place and place’s relationship to history, I thought it important to leave these words in their original language.

While dealing with the inherent destructive and generative properties of translation, I became too aware of the truth of *traduttore traditore*, the Italian expression that suggests “to translate is to betray.” It is necessarily a violent act to cleave a target text from a source text, and while the target text should remain foreignizing and recall the source, a truly faithful translation is impossible to achieve.

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<sup>73</sup> Bridget Jones, “French Guiana,” 389.

<sup>74</sup> Léon-Gontran Damas, *Retour de Guyane*, 26-27.

<sup>75</sup> There is a precedent for not translating *morne*, in Eshleman and Smith’s translation of *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. Aimé Césaire, “Notebook,” 34-85.

<sup>76</sup> Oxford English Dictionary Online, s.v. “morne, n.2,” November 2010. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.wesleyan.edu:7790/view/Entry/122283?rskey=v16hlL&result=2&isAdvanced=false> (accessed February 19, 2011).

What I found instead is that the most faithful translation translates the words and meanings of the source text, but preserves some aspect of its foreignness. For the value of a translation is in the importation of knowledge and ideas from other cultures, aided by loanwords and neologisms.

## **Pigments**

ce n'est pas une joie pour moi de présenter L.-G. Damas, le poète nègre qui est fier d'être nègre, c'est un honneur à l'intégrité humaine que je revendique; et je le remercie amicalement du fond du cœur

Robert Goffin, preface to the 1962 edition of *Pigments*.

# THEY CAME THAT NIGHT

For Léopold-Sedar Senghor

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

since 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

# ILS SONT VENUS CE SOIR

Pour Léopold-Sedar Senghor

Ils sont venus ce soir où le

tam

tam

roulait de

rythme

en

rythme

la frénésie

des yeux

la frénésie des mains

la frénésie

des pieds de statues

DEPUIS

combien de MOI MOI MOI

sont morts

depuis qu'ils sont venus ce soir où le

tam

tam

roulait de

rythme

en

rythme

la frénésie

des yeux

la frénésie

des mains

la frénésie

des pieds de statues

## CAPTATION

The frail perfume  
of the woman who brushes past me  
on her path of indifference  
brings me back to the morning of our error

New furrow  
of elusive mute incantations  
in the pursuit of a semblance of dream  
resonates  
                  sadness of a day that does not stop being  
only a little more weary  
the death knell  
of our dream

The exorcised flesh  
carves  
                  crumbles  
                                  and eats  
the memory  
revived  
standing  
at every semblance of dream

And in my bed of enthusiasm  
wet like you  
the woman with frail perfume  
who brushed past me  
on her path of indifference  
answered me  
in a grand noise of sated senses

## CAPTATION

Le parfum frôle  
de la femme qui me frôle  
dans son chemin d'indifférence  
me remet au matin de notre erreur

Sillon nouveau  
d'incantations fugitives muettes  
à la poursuite d'un semblant de rêve  
résonne  
                  tristesse d'un jour qui n'en finit d'être  
à peine plus las  
le glas  
de notre rêve

La chair exorcisée  
entame  
                  émiette  
                          et mange  
le souvenir  
ravivé  
debout  
de tout semblant de rêve

Et dans mon lit d'enthousiasme  
mouillée comme toi  
la femme au parfum frôle  
qui m'a frôlé  
dans son chemin d'indifférence  
m'a répondu  
dans un grand bruit de sens repus

IN MEMORY OF G. M.

Leaning on yesterday's unsatisfied desire  
from where the sporadically stubborn incense came to us  
the tide was low  
every flight of flamingoes without importance  
and the voice of the lighthouse miles away  
stronger  
than the twilight fire  
of the mangroves

For a long time  
for a long time your hands will shout to break with all calculation  
with the hours  
these hours by the end of which  
we were  
two pressed lemons

Against the exaggeration  
of the sand's servility  
of the Cove's almond trees  
of the mosquitoes  
of the cane toads  
of the fireflies who did not understand  
the demonstration  
I gave years of efforts  
of the vertical thickness  
of all the Eiffel Towers



## À LA MÉMOIRE DE G. M.

Accoudés au désir de la veille insatisfait  
d'où nous venait l'encens sporadiquement têtue  
la marée était basse  
tout vol de flamants sans importance  
et la voix du phare à des milles  
plus forte  
que l'incendie crépusculaire  
des palétuviers

Longtemps  
longtemps tes mains s'époumonneront à rompre avec tout calcul  
avec les heures  
ces heures au bout desquelles  
nous étions  
deux citrons pressés

Contre l'exagération  
de la servilité du sable  
des amandiers de l'Anse  
des moustiques  
des crapauds-bœufs  
des lucioles qui ne comprenaient pas  
la démonstration  
j'ai donné des années d'efforts  
de l'épaisseur verticale  
de toutes les Tours Eiffel

## OBSSESSION

A taste of blood comes to me  
a taste of blood rises in me  
irritates my nose  
my throat  
my eyes

A taste of blood comes to me  
a taste of blood fills me  
my nose  
my throat  
my eyes

a taste of blood comes to me  
acridly vertical  
like  
the pagan obsession  
of censers

## OBSSESSION

Un goût de sang me vient  
un goût de sang me monte  
m'irrite le nez  
la gorge  
les yeux

Un goût de sang me vient  
un goût de sang m'emplit  
le nez  
la gorge  
les yeux

un goût de sang me vient  
âcrement vertical  
pareil  
à l'obsession païenne  
des encensoirs

## NEURALGIA

Neuralgia of a running faucet  
fills the pitcher of my concierge  
that a rainbow inhales

Close the neuralgia of the running faucet  
fills the pitcher of my concierge  
that a rainbow inhales

Remove from the running faucet  
the pitcher of my concierge  
that a rainbow inhales

Or cut from the hand to the elbow  
the rainbow that inhales  
the pitcher of my concierge  
that the neuralgia  
of a running faucet fills

## NÉVRALGIE

Névralgie d'un robinet qui coule  
emplit le broc de ma concierge  
qu'un arc-en-ciel aspire

Fermez la névralgie du robinet qui coule  
emplit le broc de ma concierge  
qu'un arc-en-ciel aspire

Enlevez du robinet qui coule  
le broc de ma concierge  
qu'un arc-en-ciel aspire

Ou coupez de la main jusqu'au coude  
l'arc-en-ciel qui aspire  
le broc de ma concierge  
qu'emplit la névralgie  
d'un robinet qui coule

## ENOUGH

Enough of blues  
of piano hammering  
of muted trumpet  
of madness stamping its feet  
to the satisfaction of rhythm

Enough of sessions of so much swing  
around the rings  
annoyed  
by shouts of wildcats

Enough of leaving  
of licking  
of bootlicking  
and  
of an attitude  
of hyperassimilateds

Enough for an instant  
of an easy-going life  
and of desires  
and of needs  
and of selfishnesses  
of individuals.

## TRÊVE

Trêve de blues  
de martèlements de piano  
de trompette bouchée  
de folie claquant des pieds  
à la satisfaction du rythme

Trêve de séances à tant le swing  
autour de rings  
qu'énervent  
des cris de fauves

Trêve de lâchage  
de léchage  
de lèche  
et  
d'une attitude  
d'hyperassimilés

Trêve un instant  
d'une vie de bon enfant  
et de désirs  
et de besoins  
et d'égoïsmes  
particuliers.

## THERE ARE SOME NIGHTS

For Alejo Carpentier

There are some nameless nights  
there are some moonless nights  
when up to the point of clammy  
suffocation  
the acrid odor of blood  
overcomes me  
jetting  
from every muted trumpet

Some nameless nights  
some moonless nights  
the pain that inhabits me  
oppresses me  
the pain that inhabits me  
suffocates me

Nameless nights  
moonless nights  
when I would have liked  
to be able to no longer doubt  
so nauseously obsessed am I  
by a need to escape

Nameless  
moonless  
moonless  
nameless  
moonless nights  
nameless nameless  
when disgust anchors itself in me  
as deep as a beautiful Malay's dagger.



## IL EST DES NUITS

Pour Alejo Carpentier

Il est des nuits sans nom  
il est des nuits sans lune  
où jusqu'à l'asphyxie  
moite  
me prend  
l'âcre odeur de sang  
jaillissant  
de toute trompette bouchée

Des nuits sans nom  
des nuits sans lune  
la peine qui m'habite  
m'opresse  
la peine qui m'habite  
m'étouffe

Nuits sans nom  
nuits sans lune  
où j'aurais voulu  
pouvoir ne plus douter  
tant m'obsède d'écoeurement  
un besoin d'évasion

Sans nom  
sans lune  
sans lune  
sans nom  
nuits sans lune  
sans nom sans nom  
où le dégoût s'ancre en moi  
aussi profondément qu'un beau poignard malais.

## POSITION

For J. D.

The days themselves  
have taken the shape  
of African masks  
indifferent  
to any profanation  
of quicklime  
that a piano  
flatters  
repeating the old tune  
of sighing moonlight  
any size  
in the shrubbery  
gondolas  
et cetera

## POSITION

Pour J. D.

Les jours eux-mêmes  
ont pris la forme  
des masques africains  
indifférents  
à toute profanation  
de chaux vive  
qu'encense  
un piano  
répétant la rengaine  
d'un clair de lune à soupirs  
tout format  
dans les halliers  
gondoles  
et cætera

## THE WIND

For Henriette and Jean-Louis Baghio'o

On the ocean

black night

I awoke

enamored

without grasping anything

of all that the wind told

on the ocean

black night

Either the wind repeats its lesson for tomorrow

or the wind sings of buried treasures

or the wind says its evening prayers

or the wind is a cell of madmen

on the ocean

black night

while a boat treads the foam

and goes

goes its slutty way.

on the ocean

black night

## LE VENT

Pour Henriette et Jean-Louis Baghio'o

Sur l'océan

nuit noire

je me suis réveillé

épris

sans jamais rien saisir

de tout ce que racontait le vent

sur l'océan

nuit noire

Ou bien le vent repasse sa leçon du lendemain

ou bien le vent chante des trésors enfouis

ou bien le vent fait sa prière du soir

ou bien le vent est une cellule de fous

sur l'océan

nuit noire

pendant qu'un bateau foule l'écume

et va

va son destin de roulure.

sur l'océan

nuit noire

## IN INDIAN FILE

And the hooves  
of the beasts of burden  
that hammer out in Europe  
the still uncertain dawn  
remind me  
of the strange self-denial  
of full  
early morning trays  
that give rhythm in the Antilles  
to the hips of the women bearers  
in Indian file

And the strange self-denial  
of full  
early morning trays  
that give rhythm in the Antilles  
to the hips of the women bearers  
in Indian file  
remind me  
of the hooves  
of the beasts of burden  
that hammer out in Europe  
the still uncertain dawn

## EN FILE INDIENNE

Et les sabots  
des bêtes de somme  
qui martèlent en Europe  
l'aube indécise encore  
me rappellent  
l'abnégation étrange  
des trays<sup>1</sup> matineux  
repus  
qui rythment aux Antilles  
les hanches des porteuses  
en file indienne

Et l'abnégation étrange  
des trays matineux  
repus  
qui rythment aux Antilles  
les hanches des porteuses  
en file indienne  
me rappellent  
les sabots  
des bêtes de somme  
qui martèlent en Europe  
l'aube indécise encore

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<sup>1</sup> Terme anglais passé dans le langage créole et gardant le même sens : plateau à légumes, à gâteaux, en bois, de forme rectangulaire, à bords très relevés.

## WHILE WAITING

Axles shout their fatigue at white gloves  
that do not give a damn  
in so many winks  
by ambulance  
from red lips  
and so on

Before arriving at the cylindrical smokes  
at the rave antennas  
and  
epileptic coos  
first  
bindings of a virgin wisdom  
and then and then  
a napkin  
that sponges toes  
shaped  
like barley sugar

Another cop to fill the ear  
of a head-ache for the unemployed  
bellies that  
the International swells  
without metronome

Story of a third floor  
the young bride finally grabbed hold  
of a dog  
in the need to open up to someone

And the thug whistles the latest  
without speaking of the scruples of waking  
three hours late.



## DANS SON ATTENTE

Des essieux crient leur fatigue à des gants blancs  
qui s'en balancent  
à tant d'oeillardes  
par ambulance  
de lèvres rouges  
et la suite

Avant d'arriver aux fumées cylindriques  
aux antennes à javas  
et  
roucoulements d'épileptiques  
d'abord  
des reliures d'une sagesse de puceaux  
et puis et puis  
une serviette  
qui éponge des orteils  
en forme  
de sucre d'orge

Encore un flic pour remplir l'oreille  
d'un casse-tête à chômeurs  
ventres que gonfle  
l'internationale  
sans métronome

Histoire d'un troisième étage  
la jeune mariée enfin s'est emparée  
d'un chien  
dans le besoin de s'ouvrir à quelqu'un

Et le voyou siffle la nouveauté  
sans parler des scrupules d'un réveil  
avec trois heures de retard.

## HICCUPS

For Vashti and Mercer Cook

And in vain I swallow seven gulps of water  
three to four times a day  
my childhood returns to me  
in a shaking hiccup  
my instinct  
like the cop the thug

Disaster  
tell me about the disaster  
tell me about it

My mother wanting a son with good table manners  
Hands on the table  
bread is not cut  
bread is broken  
bread is not wasted  
bread of God  
bread of the sweat of your Father's brow  
bread of bread

A bone is eaten deliberately and discreetly  
a stomach should be polite  
and no polite stomach  
burps  
a fork is not a toothpick  
do not blow your nose  
openly  
in public  
and then sit up straight  
a well brought-up nose  
does not wipe a plate clean

And then and then  
and then in the name of the Father  
of the Son  
of the Holy Ghost  
at the end of every meal

And then and then  
and then disaster  
tell me about the disaster  
tell me about it

My mother wanting a noteworthy son

If you do not learn your history lesson  
you will not go to mass  
Sunday  
in your Sunday best

This child will be the disgrace of our name  
this child will be our in the name of God

Shut up  
Did I or did I not tell you that you must speak French  
the French of France  
the French of the French  
the French French

Disaster  
tell me about the disaster  
tell me about it

My Mother wanting a son  
his mother's son

You did not greet the neighbor  
your dirty shoes again  
and do not let me catch you in the street  
on the grass or the Savannah  
in the shadow of the War Memorial  
playing  
hanging out with So-and-So  
with So-and-So who was never baptized

Disaster  
tell me about the disaster  
tell me about it

My Mother wanting a son very do  
very re  
very mi  
very fa  
very sol  
very la  
very si  
very do  
re-mi-fa  
sol-la-si  
do

I hear that once again you did not go  
to your vi-o-lin lesson  
A banjo  
did you say a banjo  
what did you say  
a banjo  
you really said  
a banjo  
No sir  
    you must learn that we do not allow in our home  
neither ban  
nor jo  
nor gui  
nor tar  
the *mulattos* do not do that  
leave it to the *negres*

## HOQUET

Pour Vashti et Mercer Cook

Et j'ai beau avaler sept gorgées d'eau  
trois à quatre fois par vingt-quatre heures  
me revient mon enfance  
dans un hoquet secouant  
mon instinct  
tel le flic le voyou

Désastre  
parlez- moi du désastre  
parlez-m'en

Ma mère voulant un fils très bonnes manières à table  
Les mains sur la table  
le pain ne se coupe pas  
le pain se rompt  
le pain ne se gaspille pas  
le pain de Dieu  
le pain de la sueur du front de votre Père  
le pain du pain

Un os se mange avec mesure et discrétion  
un estomac doit être sociable  
et tout estomac sociable  
se passe de rots  
une fourchette n'est pas un cure-dent  
défense de se moucher  
au su  
au vu de tout le monde  
et puis tenez-vous droit  
un nez bien élevé  
ne balaye pas l'assiette

Et puis et puis  
Et puis au nom du Père  
                  du fils  
                  du Saint-Esprit  
à la fin de chaque repas

Et puis et puis  
et puis désastre  
parlez-moi du désastre  
parlez-m'en

Ma mère voulant d'un fils mémorandum

Si votre leçon d'histoire n'est pas sue  
vous n'irez pas à la messe  
dimanche  
avec vos effets des dimanche

Cet enfant sera la honte de notre nom  
cet enfant sera notre nom de Dieu

Taisez-vous  
Vous ai-je ou non dit qu'il vous fallait parler français  
le français de France  
le français du français  
le français français

Désastre  
parlez-moi du désastre  
parlez-m'en

Ma Mère voulant d'un fils  
fils de sa mère

Vous n'avez pas salué voisine  
encore vos chaussures de sales  
et que je vous y reprenne dans la rue  
sur l'herbe ou la Savane  
à l'ombre du Monument aux Morts  
à jouer  
à vous ébattre avec Untel  
avec Untel qui n'a pas reçu le baptême

Désastre  
parlez-moi du désastre  
parlez-m'en

Ma Mère voulant un fils très do  
très ré  
très mi  
très fa  
très sol  
très la  
très si  
très do  
ré-mi-fa  
sol-la-si  
do

Il m'est revenu que vous n'étiez encore pas  
à votre leçon de vi-o-lon  
Un banjo  
vous dites un banjo  
comment dites-vous  
un banjo  
vous dites bien  
un banjo  
Non monsieur  
vous saurez qu'on ne souffre chez nous  
ni ban  
ni jo  
ni gui  
ni tare  
les *mulâtres* ne font pas ça  
laissez donc ça aux *nègres*

## A TRAMP ASKED ME FOR TEN SOUS

Me too one fine day I took out  
my tramp  
rags

Me too  
with eyes that hold out  
a hand  
I pimped  
for the whore of poverty

Me too I was hungry in this goddamned country  
me too I believed I could  
ask for ten sous  
out of pity for my hollow  
belly

Me too  
to the end of the eternity of their  
cop boulevards  
how many nights did I have to  
get lost  
me too  
with hollow eyes

Me too  
I was hungry with hollow eyes  
me too I believed  
I could ask for ten sous  
with hollow  
belly  
eyes  
until the day when I was  
fed up  
with seeing them mock  
my tramp rags  
and laugh  
at seeing a negre  
with hollow belly eyes



## UN CLOCHARD M'A DEMANDÉ DIX SOUS

Moi aussi un beau jour j'ai sorti  
mes hardes  
de clochard

Moi aussi  
avec des yeux qui tendent  
la main  
j'ai soutenu  
la putain de misère

Moi aussi j'ai eu faim dans ce sacré foutu pays  
moi aussi j'ai cru pouvoir  
demander dix sous  
par pitié pour mon ventre  
creux

Moi aussi  
jusqu'au bout de l'éternité de leurs  
boulevards à flics  
combien de nuits ai-je dû  
m'en aller  
moi aussi  
les yeux creux

Moi aussi  
j'ai eu faim les yeux creux  
moi aussi j'ai cru  
pouvoir demander dix sous  
les yeux  
le ventre  
creux  
jusqu'au jour où j'en ai eu  
marre  
de les voir se gausser  
de mes hardes de clochard  
et se régaler  
de voir un nègre  
les yeux ventre creux

## SALE

For Aimé Césaire

I feel ridiculous  
in their shoes  
in their tuxedo  
in their dress shirt  
in their collar  
in their monocle  
in their bowler hat

I feel ridiculous  
with my toes that were not made  
to sweat from morning to evening's undressing  
with swaddling that weakens my limbs  
and lifts from my body its loincloth beauty

I feel ridiculous  
with my neck a smokestack  
with these headaches that stop  
every time I greet someone

I feel ridiculous  
in their drawing rooms  
in their ways  
in their bows  
in their multiple need for monkey-antics

I feel ridiculous  
with all they talk about  
until they serve you in the afternoon  
a little warm water  
and some rheumy cakes

I feel ridiculous  
with the theories they season  
to the taste of their needs  
of their passions  
of their instincts open at night  
like a doormat

I feel ridiculous  
among them accomplice  
among them pimp  
among them cut-throat  
hands frightfully red  
with the blood of their ci-vi-li-za-tion

## SOLDE

Pour Aimé Césaire

J'ai l'impression d'être ridicule  
dans leurs souliers  
dans leur smoking  
dans leur plastron  
dans leur faux-col  
dans leur monocle  
dans leur melon

J'ai l'impression d'être ridicule  
avec mes orteils qui ne sont pas faits  
pour transpirer du matin jusqu'au soir qui déshabille  
avec l'emballage qui m'affaiblit les membres  
et enlève à mon corps sa beauté de cache-sexe

J'ai l'impression d'être ridicule  
avec mon cou en cheminée d'usine  
avec ces maux de tête qui cessent  
chaque fois que je salue quelqu'un

J'ai l'impression d'être ridicule  
dans leurs salons  
dans leurs manières  
dans leurs courbettes  
dans leur multiple besoin de singeries

J'ai l'impression d'être ridicule  
avec tout ce qu'ils racontent  
jusqu'à ce qu'ils vous servent l'après-midi  
un peu d'eau chaude  
et des gâteaux enrhumés

J'ai l'impression d'être ridicule  
avec les théories qu'ils assaisonnent  
au goût de leurs besoins  
de leurs passions  
de leurs instincts ouverts la nuit  
en forme de paillason

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

Limbé<sup>2</sup>

For Robert Romain

Give me back my black dolls  
so they dispel  
the image of pale whores  
merchants of love who stroll back and forth  
on the boulevard of my ennui

Give me back my black dolls  
so they dispel  
the eternal image  
the hallucinatory image  
of stacked large-assed puppets  
whose miserable mercy  
the wind carries to the nose

Give me the illusion I will no longer have to satisfy  
the sprawling need  
of mercies snoring  
beneath the world's unconscious disdain

Give me back my black dolls  
so that I can play with them  
the naïve games of my instinct  
which has remained in the shadow of its laws  
my courage recovered  
my audacity  
I become myself once again  
myself once more  
out of what I was Yesterday  
yesterday  
                  without complexity  
  yesterday  
when the hour of uprooting came

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<sup>2</sup> *Limbé* is a Creole word meaning “spleen” or “blues.” Lilyan Kesteloot, “Léon Damas: *Pigments*,” in *Black Writers in French*, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974), 131.

Will they ever know this rancor in my heart  
Opened to the eye of my mistrust too late  
they stole the space that was mine  
the custom  
the days  
the life  
the song  
the rhythm  
the effort  
the path  
the water  
the huts  
the smoke gray earth  
the wisdom  
the words  
the discussion  
the elders  
the cadence  
the hands  
the tempo  
the hands  
the stampings of feet  
the ground

Give me back my black dolls  
my black dolls  
black dolls  
black  
    black

Limbé

Pour Robert Romain

Rendez-les moi mes poupées noires  
qu'elles dissipent  
l'image des catins blêmes  
marchands d'amour qui s'en vont viennent  
sur le boulevard de mon ennui

Rendez-les moi mes poupées noires  
qu'elles dissipent  
l'image sempiternelle  
l'image hallucinante  
des fantoches empilés féssus  
dont le vent porte au nez  
la misère miséricorde

Donnez-moi l'illusion que je n'aurai plus à contenter  
le besoin étale  
de miséricordes ronflant  
sous l'inconscient dédain du monde

Rendez-les moi mes poupées noires  
que je joue avec elles  
les jeux naïfs de mon instinct  
resté à l'ombre de ses lois  
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 cœur  
À l'œil de ma méfiance ouvert trop tard  
ils ont cambriolé l'espace qui était mien  
la coutume  
les jours  
la vie  
la chanson  
le rythme  
l'effort  
le sentier  
l'eau  
la case  
la terre enfumée grise  
la sagesse  
les mots  
les palabres  
les vieux  
la cadence  
les mains  
la mesure  
les mains  
les piétinements  
le sol

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

## THE NEGRE'S LAMENT

For Robert Goffin

They gave it back to me  
life  
more heavy and weary

My todays gaze upon my yesterdays  
with large eyes that roll with rancor  
with shame

The days inexorably  
sad  
have never stopped being  
in memory  
of what was  
my truncated life

Still lasts  
my stupor  
from the past  
of blows of gnarled cord  
of bodies charred  
of toe to back charred  
of dead flesh  
of brands  
of red-hot iron  
of broken arms  
under the whip that unleashes itself  
under the whip that leads on the plantation  
and makes the sugar refinery drink the blood of my blood of blood  
and the pipe of the foreman show off to the sky.

## LA COMPLAINTE DU NÈGRE

Pour Robert Goffin

Ils me l'ont rendue  
la vie  
plus lourde et lasse

Mes aujourd'hui ont chacun sur mon jadis  
de gros yeux qui roulent de rancoeur  
de honte

Les jours inexorablement  
tristes  
jamais n'ont cessé d'être  
à la mémoire  
de ce que fut  
ma vie tronquée

Va encore  
mon hébétude  
du temps jadis  
de coups de corde noueux  
de corps calcinés  
de l'orteil au dos calcinés  
de chair morte  
de tisons  
de fer rouge  
de bras brisés  
sous le fouet qui se déchaîne  
sous le fouet qui fait marcher la plantation  
et s'abreuver de sang de mon sang de sang la sucrerie  
et la bouffarde du commandeur crâner au ciel.

## SO OFTEN

So often my sense of race frightens me  
like a dog barking in the night  
at some  
approaching death  
I always feel ready to foam with rage  
against what surrounds me  
against what prevents me  
from ever being  
a man

And nothing  
nothing could calm my hate as much  
as a beautiful pool  
of blood  
made  
by these sharp cutlasses  
that strip bare  
the mornes of rum

## SI SOUVENT

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

Et rien  
rien ne saurait autant calmer ma haine  
qu'une belle mare  
de sang  
faite  
de ces coutelas tranchants  
qui mettent à nu  
les mornes à rhum

S. O. S.

At that moment only  
will you all understand  
when they get the idea  
soon they will get that idea  
to want to gobble themselves up some negre  
like Hitler  
gobbling up Jews  
seven fascist days  
out of  
seven

At that moment only  
will you all understand  
when their superiority  
will stretch itself out  
from one end to the other of their boulevards  
and then  
you will see them  
truly they do whatever they want  
no longer content to laugh with an uneasy index finger  
when a negre goes by  
but  
coldly beat up  
but  
coldly take down  
but  
coldly lay out  
but coldly  
beat up  
take down  
lay out  
and  
cut off the sex of the negres  
to make them into candles for their churches

S. O. S.

À ce moment-là seul  
comprendrez-vous donc tous  
quand leur viendra l'idée  
bientôt cette idée leur viendra  
de vouloir vous en bouffer du nègre  
à la manière d'Hitler  
bouffant du juif  
sept jours fascistes  
sur  
sept

À ce moment-là seul  
comprendrez-vous donc tous  
quand leur supériorité  
s'étalera  
d'un bout à l'autre de leurs boulevards  
et qu'alors  
vous les verrez  
vraiment tout se permettre  
ne plus se contenter de rire avec l'index inquiet  
de voir passer un nègre  
mais  
froidement matraquer  
mais  
froidement descendre  
mais  
froidement étendre  
mais froidement  
matraquer  
descendre  
étendre  
et  
couper leur sexe aux nègres  
pour en faire des bougies pour leurs églises

## FOR SURE

For sure I will be  
fed up  
without even waiting  
for things  
to take on  
the air  
of a ripe camembert

So  
I will put my foot in it  
or simply  
my hand on the collar  
of everything that pisses me off in large print  
colonization  
civilization  
assimilation  
and the rest

Meanwhile  
you will often hear me  
slam the door



## POUR SÛR

Pour sûr j'en aurai  
marre  
sans même attendre  
qu'elles prennent  
les choses  
l'allure  
d'un camembert bien fait

Alors  
je vous mettrai les pieds dans le plat  
ou bien tout simplement  
la main au collet  
de tout ce qui m'emmerde en gros caractères  
colonisation  
civilisation  
assimilation  
et la suite

En attendant  
vous m'entendrez souvent  
claquer la porte

SOON

Soon

I will not only have danced

soon

I will not only have sung

soon

I will not only have rubbed

soon

I will not only have soaked

soon

I will not only have danced

sung

rubbed

soaked

rubbed

sung

danced

Soon

## BIENTÔT

Bientôt

je n'aurai pas que dansé

bientôt

je n'aurai pas que chanté

bientôt

je n'aurai pas que frotté

bientôt

je n'aurai pas que trempé

bientôt

je n'aurai pas que dansé

chanté

frotté

trempé

frotté

chanté

dansé

Bientôt

## WHITE NIGHT

For Sonia and Georges Gavarry

My friends I waltzed  
waltzed like my ancestors  
the Gauls  
never waltzed  
to the point that my blood  
still beats  
to the Viennese

My friends I waltzed  
waltzed my whole childhood  
wandering on  
some blue Danube  
white Danube  
red Danube  
green Danube  
pink Danube  
white Danube  
red  
green  
pink  
whichever

My friends I waltzed  
waltzed  
madly waltzed  
to the point that often  
often  
I thought I had my hand around the waist  
of uncle Gobineau  
or of cousin Hitler  
or of a good Aryan that gums his old age  
on some park bench

## NUIT BLANCHE

Pour Sonia et Georges Gavarry

Mes amis j'ai valsé  
valsé comme  
jamais mes ancêtres  
les Gaulois  
au point que j'ai le sang  
qui tourne encore  
à la viennoise

Mes amis j'ai valsé  
valsé toute mon enfance  
vagabondant sur  
quelque Danube bleu  
Danube blanc  
Danube rouge  
Danube vert  
Danube rose  
Danube blanc  
rouge  
vert  
rose  
au choix

Mes amis j'ai valsé  
valsé  
follement valsé  
au point que souvent  
souvent  
j'ai cru tenir la taille  
de tonton Gobineau  
ou de cousin Hitler  
ou de bon aryen qui mâchonne sa vieillesse  
sur quelque banc de square

## WHITEWASHED

For Christiane and Alioune Diop

Can it be that they dare  
call me whitewashed  
when everything in me  
aspires only to be negre  
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 negre  
like my Africa that they have robbed

## 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  
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

## TRUE TO THE LEGEND

Hair that I smooth  
that I resmooth  
that shines  
now that it costs me  
to have it kinky

In a long woolen shell  
my neck disappears  
my hand gets worked up  
and my toes remember  
the warm exhalation of mornes

And my being frozen

And gas lamps  
make sadder still  
these nights at the end of which  
westernly  
my shadow advances  
true to my legend  
of monkey-man



## PAREILLE À LA LÉGENDE

Des cheveux que je lisse  
que je relisse  
qui reluisent  
maintenant qu'il m'en coûte  
de les avoir crépus

Dans une longue carapace de laine  
mon cou s'engouffre  
la main s'énerve  
et mes orteils se rappellent  
la chaude exhalaison des mornes

Et mon être frigorifié

Et becs de gaz  
qui rendent plus tristes  
ces nuits au bout desquelles  
occidentalement  
avance mon ombre  
pareille à ma légende  
d'homme-singe

REMINDER

For Richard Danglemont

There are some things  
of which I was able not to lose  
all memory

And bullying in bamboo  
for every fallen mango  
during the indigestion  
of every bite of the history of France

And flute

Reed flute  
playing slaves' airs on the mornes  
while in the savannahs  
oxen ruminant wisely  
while around  
zombies lurk  
while the Factory owners  
ejaculate  
while the good negre  
lays down on his pallet ten to fifteen Factory hours

## RAPPEL

Pour Richard Danglemont

Il est des choses  
dont j'ai pu n'avoir pas perdu  
tout souvenir

Et brimades en bambou  
pour toute mangue tombée  
durant l'indigestion  
de tout morceau d'histoire de France

Et flûte

Flûte de roseau  
jouant sur les mornes des airs d'esclaves  
pendant qu'aux savanes  
des bœufs sagement ruminent  
pendant qu'autour  
des zombies rôdent  
pendant qu'ils éjaculent  
les patrons d'Usine  
pendant que le bon nègre  
allonge sur son grabat dix à quinze heures d'Usine

# SHINE

For Louis Armstrong

With some others  
from nearby  
with some others  
only a few  
I have guarded until now  
on the roof of my hut  
the conical ancestral faith

And the automatic arrogance  
of masks  
of quicklime masks  
never was able to remove anything ever  
from a more hideous past  
standing upright  
at the four corners of my life

And my face shines with the horrors of the past  
and my frightful laugh is made to repel the specter of greyhounds tracking the  
marronnage

and my voice that sings for them  
is gentle to ravish  
the sad soul  
of their por-

no-  
gra-  
phy

And my heart keeps watch  
and my dream which feeds itself on the noise of their  
de-

gen-  
er-  
ation

is stronger than their brandished  
clubs of filth

## SHINE

Pour Louis Armstrong

Avec d'autres  
des alentours  
avec d'autres  
quelques rares  
j'ai au toit de ma case  
jusqu'ici gardé  
l'ancestrale foi conique

Et l'arrogance automatique  
des masques  
des masques de chaux vive  
jamais n'est parvenue à rien enlever jamais  
d'un passé plus hideux  
debout  
aux quatre angles de ma vie

Et mon visage brille aux horreurs du passé  
et mon rire effroyable est fait pour repousser le spectre des lévriers traquant le  
marronnage

et mon voix qui pour eux chante  
est douce à ravir  
l'âme triste  
de leur por-  
no-  
gra-  
phie

Et veille mon cour  
et mon rêve qui se nourrit du bruit de leur  
dé-  
gé-  
né-  
rescence  
est plus fort que leurs gourdins d'immondices  
brandis

## GOOD MANNERS

For Etienne Zabulon

No one yawns at home  
like they yawn at their home  
with  
a hand over the mouth

I want to yawn without la-di-da  
my body crooked  
in the perfumes that torment the life  
that I made for myself  
from their winter dog muzzle  
from their sun that could  
not even  
warm  
the coconut water that was gurgling  
in my belly when I woke up

Let me yawn  
hand  
there  
on my heart  
at the obsession of everything on which  
in a single day I  
turned my back

## SAVOIR-VIVRE

Pour Etienne Zabulon

On ne bâille pas chez moi  
comme ils bâillent chez eux  
avec  
la main sur la bouche

Je veux bâiller sans tralalas  
le corps recroquevillé  
dans les parfums qui tourmentent la vie  
que je me suis faite  
de leur museau de chien d'hiver  
de leur soleil qui ne pourrait  
pas même  
tiédir  
l'eau de coco qui faisait glouglou  
dans mon ventre au réveil

Laissez-moi bâiller  
la main  
là  
sur le cœur  
à l'obsession de tout ce à quoi  
j'ai en un jour un seul  
tourné le dos

## REGARD

For Jacques Howletti

When later on  
when later on my eyes  
my eyes will narrow

When later on  
when later on I will have  
false Chinese eyes

When later on  
when later on  
everything will have left me  
everything will have left me even theory  
even fallen theory

When later on  
when later on  
down will slide  
down will slide the stick  
that supports the old bodies

Will you buy me  
will you buy me say  
some flowers  
whatever  
so that to the corner bistro  
so that to the corner bistro  
I can go  
revive the hearth  
of a large glass of Bordeaux



## REGARD

Pour Jacques Howleti

Quand sur le tard  
quand sur le tard mes yeux  
mes yeux se brideront

Quand sur le tard  
quand sur le tard j'aurai  
de faux yeux de Chinois

Quand sur le tard  
quand sur le tard  
tout m'aura laissé  
tout m'aura laissé jusqu'à la théorie  
jusqu'à la théorie choir

Quand sur le tard  
quand sur le tard  
suivra la pente  
suivra la pente le bâton  
qui soutient les vieux corps

M'achèterez-vous  
m'achèterez-vous dites  
des fleurs  
que sais-je  
pour qu'au bistrot de l'angle  
pour qu'au bistrot de l'angle  
j'aille  
ranimer l'âtre  
d'un grand verre de bordeaux

## REALITY

To have up to now done nothing  
destroyed  
built  
dared  
in the manner  
of the Jew  
of the Yellow Man  
for the organized mass escape  
from inferiority

In vain I search for  
the hollow of a shoulder  
where I can hide my face  
my shame  
of  
the  
Re  
al  
i  
ty.

## RÉALITÉ

De n'avoir jusqu'ici rien fait  
détruit  
bâti  
osé  
à la manière  
du Juif  
du Jaune  
pour l'évasion organisée en masse  
de l'infériorité

C'est en vain que je cherche  
le creux d'une épaule  
où cacher mon visage  
ma honte  
de  
  la  
  Ré  
    a  
      li  
      té.

## THEY KNEW

They knew so well how to  
knew so well how to do things  
things  
that one day we screwed everything  
we screwed everything up ourselves  
screwed everything up ourselves completely

That they should have known so well how to  
known so well how to do things  
things  
that one day we should have screwed everything  
we should have screwed everything up ourselves  
screwed everything up ourselves completely

Though it would not take much  
though not much  
much  
for finally in one day everything to go  
everything to go  
to go  
according to our own race  
our own race

Though it would not take much  
though not much  
not much  
not much

## ILS ONT

Ils ont si bien su faire  
si bien su faire les choses  
les choses  
qu'un jour nous avons tout  
nous avons tout foutu de nous-mêmes  
tout foutu de nous-mêmes en l'air

Qu'ils aient si bien su faire  
si bien su faire les choses  
les choses  
qu'un jour nous ayons tout foutu  
nous ayons tout foutu de nous-mêmes  
tout foutu de nous-mêmes en l'air

Il ne faudrait pourtant pas grand'chose  
pourtant pas grand'chose  
grand'chose  
pour qu'en un jour enfin tout aille  
tout aille  
aille  
dans le sens de notre race à nous  
de notre race à nous

Il ne faudrait pourtant pas grand'chose  
pourtant pas grand'chose  
pas grand'chose  
pas grand'chose

## SOME BALLS FOR ROULETTE

For nothing but the functioning  
of cannon  
shell  
bullet factories  
the war  
it  
it will come soon  
to get drunk again to the Marseillaise  
of smoking flesh

And every Creusot  
will work nights  
at ready ovens

And all the Schneiders  
will fill up their pockets with balls  
for Roulette  
thanks to the new functioning  
of cannon  
shell  
bullet factories  
the war has come  
to get drunk again on the Marseillaise  
of smoking flesh

## DES BILLES POUR LA ROULETTE

Rien que pour le fonctionnement  
d'usines à canons  
obus  
balles  
la guerre  
elle  
elle va bientôt venir  
s'enivrer encore à la marseillaise  
de chair fumante

Et chaque Creusot  
travaillera des nuits  
des fours à bloc

Et tous les Schneiders  
s'empliront les poches de billes  
pour la roulette  
grâce au fonctionnement nouveau  
d'usines à canons  
obus  
balles  
venue la guerre  
s'enivrer encore à la marseillaise  
de chair fumante

## ON A POSTCARD

Let every nook cranny of France  
be  
a War Memorial

Let the white childhood  
grow in their memorable shadow  
living brainwash  
of a revenge to be taken

Let the German imbecile  
swear he will skin a Frenchman  
and make the skin  
into robes

The French imbecile  
swear he will skin a German  
and make the skin into robes

Let be all patriotic élan  
for dark beer  
for Pernod fils  
but what good dynamite  
will blow up the night  
the monuments like mushrooms  
which also grow  
at home



## SUR UNE CARTE POSTALE

Passe pour chaque coin recoin de France  
d'être  
un Monument aux Morts

Passe pour l'enfance blanche  
de grandir dans leur ombre mémorable  
vivant bourrage de crâne  
d'une revanche à prendre

Passe pour le crétin d'Allemand  
de se promettre d'avoir la peau du Français  
et d'en faire  
des sauts de lits

Pour le crétin de Français  
de se promettre d'avoir la peau de l'Allemand  
et d'en faire des sauts de lit

Passe pour tout élan patriotique  
à la bière brune  
au pernod fils  
mais quelle bonne dynamite  
fera sauter la nuit  
les monuments comme champignons  
qui poussent aussi  
chez moi

ET CETERA

*Facing the German menace, the  
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  
of face wrecked  
of arm amputated  
of intoxicated  
and so on and so forth  
et cetera future veterans

Me  
I say to them shit  
and some other things too

Me I ask them  
to put away the  
machetes  
the fits of sadism  
the feeling  
the sensation  
of dirtiness  
of atrocities yet to be done

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"

## 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  
à tout ce que le Sénégal peut accoucher  
de combattants sénégalais futurs anciens  
de quoi-je-me-mêle futurs anciens  
de mercenaires futurs anciens  
de pensionnés  
de galonnés  
de décorés  
de décavés  
de grands blessés  
de mutilés  
de calcinés  
de gangrenés  
de gueules cassés  
de bras coupés  
d'intoxiqués  
et patati et patata  
et cætera futurs anciens

Moi  
je leur dis merde  
et d'autres choses encore

Moi je leur demande  
de remiser les  
coupe-coupe  
les accès de sadisme  
le sentiment  
la sensation  
de saletés  
de malpropretés à faire

Moi je leur demande  
de taire le besoin qu'ils ressentent  
de piller  
de voler  
de violer  
de souiller à nouveau les bords antiques  
du Rhin

Moi je leur demande  
de commencer par envahir le Sénégal

Moi je leur demande  
de foutre aux « Boches » la paix

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