

Reshaping Glocal Dynamics of the Caribbean

Relaciones y Desconexiones – Relations et
Déconnexions – Relations and
Disconnections

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Kathleen Gyssels

“A la rubrique de chiens crevés”: Léon-Gontran Damas Facing Memory Wars in Posthumous Poetry

1 French Caribbean ‘k/Not’ of Memory

Fanon’s famous warning in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) was predated by several poems from Guianese poet Léon-Gontran Damas’ (1912–1978) first collection of poems, *Pigments*¹:

Le Juif et moi: non content de me raciaiser, par un coup heureux du sort, je m’humanisais. Je rejoignais le Juif, frères de malheur. Une honte!
De prime abord, il peut sembler étonnant que l’attitude de l’antisémite s’apparente à celle du négrophobe. C’est mon professeur de philosophie, d’origine antillaise, qui me le rappelait un jour: “Quand vous entendez dire du mal des Juifs, dressez l’oreille, on parle de vous.” Et je pensais qu’il avait raison universellement, entendant par-là que j’étais responsable, dans mon corps et dans mon âme, du sort réservé à mon frère. Depuis lors, j’ai compris qu’il voulait tout simplement dire: un antisémite est forcément négrophobe.
(Fanon 1952: 98)

Following Fanon’s call for dialogue between Blacks and Jews, Damas develops in the posthumous collection of poetry his earlier statement uttered in *Pigments*, first published in 1937. Afraid of the mass destruction caused by WWI and threatened by a new war, the young poet wrote in 1937 on a massacre that would be perpetrated by Hitler, without mentioning him. Consider the poem “Bientôt”:

Bientôt
Vous les verrez
Bouffer du Nègre
Sept jours fascistes sur sept (P 51)

1 I refer throughout my analysis to the reedition of *Pigments* and *Névralgies* from 1972 by the abbreviation *P* and *N*, respectively. English translations from *Pigments* are from Lillehei 2011.

For the poet, Blacks and Jews would endure the same treatment by the Nazis who “gobble up Blacks” like they “gobbled up Jews” and this on “seven fascist days / out of seven.” Generally, authors from the French Antilles have avoided tackling the question of the respective victimization of Blacks and Jews, at least in Damas’ generation. The question of mourning, the loss of their respective departed during the Wars is however foregrounded in the poem “SAVE OUR SOULS” (capital letters in the original edition of *Pigments*). In this poem, indeed, Damas warns against a catastrophe that will strike both Blacks and Jews. Together with “Et Caetera,” “SAVE OUR SOULS” testifies to Damas’ pre-war preoccupation and anxiety given the threat of a new World War. Hence his claim to disobey the order to “mobilize,” and not to go fighting the Germans but to fight instead the French colonizer in Senegal (and other colonies). To strengthen the bonds between oppressed groups has also been Fanon’s will. *Peau noire, masques blancs* as well as Damas’ verses might have been taken up by his friend Césaire who, two years later, emphasized in *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*:

Je serais un homme-juif
 Un homme-cafre
 Un homme-hindou-de-Calcutta
 Un homme-de-Harlem-qui-ne-vote-pas (Césaire 1995a: 20)

I shall be the Jew-man
 A kaffir-man
 A Hindu-from-Calcutta-man
 A man-from-Harlem-who-does-not-vote (Césaire 1995b: 84–85)

Illustrative of Fanon’s call for precaution and awareness of the fact that anti-Semitism and racism are two faces of the same “médaille,” Damas pictures this odd reality, hesitant between the singular and plural in his title:

REALITE / S

à la manière
 du Juif
 du Jaune
 pour l’évasion organisée en masse
 de l’infériorité (P 71)

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 (P 63)

One realizes how *Pigments* paves the way for transcending the Black community’s fight for “visibility” (cf. Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, 1952) by stressing solidarity with other minorities. In his posthumous poetry only delivered in 2012, Damas weaves this “knot of memory” even more tightly by bringing to the surface that (although victimized by the same system, namely Nazism) Blacks nevertheless suffered from neglect in the postwar commemorations and in the different cultural remembrances of the victims of Holocaust. Their under-representation was explicitly yet polemically addressed in “A la rubrique des chiens crevés”² (“Obituaries for Dead Dogs”), and the oblivion of Blacks who were imprisoned or died in concentration camps remains a neglected domain of research. One also has to recall that some of Damas’ close friends had been deported to the camps. Befriending Jews, his first editor Guy Lévis Mano had survived the camps, while Desnos, mistaken often to be a Jew, was deported for his anti-communist journalism and died shortly after Theresienstadt had been liberated by the allied forces. Damas expressed his solidarity with the Jews; likewise, other Black artists in France would call for a cross-cultural resistance across the borders of ethnicity and nationality in the Republic and abroad.³ We may assume that Césaire’s famous *Cahier* (1939) and his subsequent essay *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1955) have benefited from Damas’ insights and call for a joint struggle against racism and anti-Semitism:

Oui, il vaudrait la peine d’étudier, cliniquement, dans le détail, les démarches d’Hitler et de l’hitlérisme et de révéler au très distingué, très humaniste, très bourgeois du xx^e siècle qu’il porte en lui un Hitler qui s’ignore, qu’Hitler l’habite, qu’Hitler est son démon, [...] ce qu’il ne pardonne pas à Hitler, ce

2 The excerpts from “A la rubrique des chiens crevés” (*Mine de riens*, retitled *Dernière escale*) have been translated by Christine Pagnouille (University of Liège) whom I wish to thank for her precious help. Damas’ friend Christian Filostrat posted the entire collection with its original title, *Mine(s) de riens*, on Academia Link. Accessed January 5th, 2017. *Dernière escale* was published belatedly in 2012 by Sandrine Poujols and Marcel Bibas, in Paris, Ed. Regard du Texte. I refer to that latter edition by the abbreviation DE.

3 “Croyez-m’en” (N 85) is an audacious poem as it adds poignant symbolic resonance to the mourning of the collective “We” through the loss of the single victim Desnos. Robert Desnos stands as symbol for all the people who perished in the camps: “tous mes amis morts en celui qui avait nom Robert / Robert DESNOS.” (N 85, italics K.G.) The caps stress the haunting effect of calling out the beloved’s name, part of the ritual of the Jewish kaddish, in which the prayer sums up the names of the departed.

n'est pas *le crime* en soi, *le crime* contre l'homme [...] c'est le crime contre l'homme blanc [...] et d'avoir appliqué à l'Europe des procédés colonialistes dont ne relevaient jusqu'ici que les Arabes d'Algérie, les coolies de l'Inde et les nègres d'Afrique. (Césaire 2004: 13–14)

Victims of the White racist, who tries moreover to put the Jew against the Black by portraying the first as intellectually superior whereas the latter is associated with physical power and sexual hyperactivity, both Fanon and Damas in their respective ways take it to task to deconstruct the “raciology” or preservation of denigrating myths. Biopolitics and racial theories (Gobineau, Lévy-Bruhl) have been instrumentalized to oppress ethnic minorities. One has to recall in this respect that Fanon himself conceived his pages on “the Jew and I” in *Peau noire, masques blancs* as a comment on Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Réflexions sur la question juive* (1946) (*Anti-Semite and Jew* [1948]). Like many other (Jewish) intellectuals, Sartre polarized the Jew as Other, thereby opposing Black and Jew. Yet Fanon would fiercely reject this essentializing dichotomy established by the Jewish existentialist who became a spokesperson, through his preface to Senghor’s 1948 *Anthology*, for the colonized of the French empire. One might explain Sartre’s sympathetic yet somewhat simplistic antagonism (the intelligent Jew *versus* the physically strong Black, Gilman 1996) by his own position of Jew as outsider or “paria” (in the sense of Hannah Arendt) as well as by an autobiographic projection of what Buisine aptly called *Laideurs de Sartre*. Fanon also disagreed on Sartre’s comparison because, as Fanon argued most convincingly, Jews are capable of hiding their Jewishness, while the Black cannot pass for White and cannot merely gain respect in the gaze of the White man by his physical force. The Black will always try to hide his blackness without succeeding in a complete “appropriation” of the mimetic Other. These fundamental assumptions and strivings are, as Hurley rightfully observes, translated in Damas’ poetry, which springs from a repressed speech act by a Black subject eager to let his voice be heard alongside and in the choral of other oppressed voices (Hurley 2000: 123).

Having stopped publishing after *Névralgies* (1966), Damas responds in posthumously published poetry in stringent ways to another controversial issue: the memory wars or the ways in which Blacks and Jews are remembered after the Second World War, and how the private and collective losses are endured in an ongoing competitive memory war which blocks a collective, consensual mourning. Chronologically, Damas was the first to warn against genocidal violence before the war, knotting the massive killings by the Nazis of European Jewry and the ways ‘negroes’ were treated in the Deep South and the Caribbean archipelago (like generations before on the plantations). His preoccupation first of all with the lack of monuments and memorials can already be

traced in *Névralgies*, written after WWII. Addressing the non-existence of monuments for the deceased in his own country, he writes “Sur une carte postale,” in which he regrets the patriotic appeal of the rare “Monuments aux Morts” erected on the French-German border (Gyssels 2014a). Discussing the lack of memorials for the victims of fascism in the *métropole* and in the colonies, Damas knew he would once again raise controversial issues and decided not to publish “A la rubrique des chiens crevés” and other long poems kept in Washington in form of a manuscript typed by his wife, Marietta Campos, entitled *Mine de riens*. Nevertheless, he continued for his own well-being to write poetry which would cure him of the indifference of the dominant culture towards the Other, the marginalized visible or invisible *Strangers in the land* (Sundquist 2005). Haunted by the death of millions of soldiers and citizens and the atrocities of WWI and WWII, having lost some of his best friends in the death camps, and traumatized by his two earlier works seized for their insolent character (both *Pigments* and *Retour de Guyane*), Damas goes one step further in “A la rubrique des chiens crevés.” The poem tackles the inequality between similarly harmed communities when it comes to the healing of the wounds of European/colonial history and even memorial industry. In the third poem of *Mine de riens*, problematic issues of the discrepancy between the collective Black’ and ‘Jewish’ memory and commemoration are clearly delineated as strictly separate experiences: that of ‘the Jew’ and that of ‘the Black.’ To bring these two experiences together was (and *remains*) quite inconceivable, as Jewishness and Caribbeanness appear to be mutually exclusive. Damas deplored the paucity of “Monuments aux Morts” erected to pay respect to Black veterans killed during WWI and even more so during WWII. In sharp contrast to the legitimate yet omnipresent attention in the late seventies to the erection of statues and monuments for the victims of the Holocaust, the “tirailleurs sénégalais,” and the “enfants des colonies” who got wounded and died both under the French or allied flags, the Black marines in the States were barely remembered. What reminded of their war effort was very often the popular poster “Y a Bon Banania” which Senghor, Césaire, Damas, Tirolien, Maran, and so many of their generation found offensive. The laughing tirailleur sénégalais would indeed become the single popular response to the Black presence in the armies, overshadowing their grief and loss. Not only Damas denounces the primordial place accorded to the Jewish victims in ‘memorial space’ he also alludes to the Bible to explain how such a discrepancy could occur over time and in the Christian/Western world. In his “A la rubrique des chiens crevés,” the poet stages a “Nègre-à-talents” who is accused of behaving as a deranged and therefore dangerous fool, a “mad-nigger” who is transported to the psychiatric hospital. Confused and mistaking vertical towers for palm trees, the colored man is associated with primitivism and wilderness, in short, with irrational behaviour:

Climbing the Eiffel Tower, he reclaims to receive “une (one/a).” His claim to obtain “une” refers to his wish to receive a medal or a similar sign of distinction. This desire is clarified, however, only at the poem’s end. So, let me first quote some part of this five pages long poem to make my point:

A la rubrique des chiens crevés
de la toute dernière
du quotidien du soir la Croix Verte
organe de la Ligue Internationale des Pur-Aryens
paraissant à Paris Rue de la Grande Truanderie
[...]
Avec l’aide des pompiers alertés
il à été déperché de notre Tour Eiffel
ou [...]
il avait accoutumé de grimper
toujours les dimanches après vêpres
étage par étage étage par étage
comme au cocotier original [...] (DE 28)

In what follows, the reader sees a sarcastic sketch of a troublemaker. He gets a clear picture of the reason of his protest, namely the frustration not to have obtained nor ever been decorated with a sign of distinction:

[...]
à moins d’en obtenir sur le champ lui aussi
Une (DE 29)
[...]
Après qu’il lui eut été mis les menottes
puis conduit au Commissariat du Quartier du Champs de Mars
il fut en flagrant délit triple
d’outrage à la pudeur
de folie des grandeurs
de manie de la persécution
transporté nu comme un ver
à l’Hôpital Psychiatrique Sainte-Anne
Rue Cabanis Numéro Un [...] (DE 29)

With wit and sarcasm, Damas seems to sketch “un fait divers” which could very well allegorically portray his own position and condition: a lonely lunatic “talented negro” who climbs the Eiffel Tower to cry out his vindications but who is at once arrested for the unrest he causes in the Republic. Not only does Damas deal with the ways of remembrance of the wars’ black victims, he accuses the law makers and physicians of diagnosing each trouble maker as insane and therefore worthy of being committed or imprisoned. The madman who climbs the Eiffel Tower claims something which the poet lacks to make explicit

and which appears to be a “(black) star.” To cry out for this right in the very heart of the French capital is worse than a scandal, it is a crime. The references to existing places (the “Champ de Mars,” which refers to a battle ground, is actually one of the poet’s addresses during his years of residency in Paris) reinforce the impression of an incident which may make the front-page in a local newspaper. A solitary act of rebellion and protest against the unequal attention and ostracism, against the deliberate obscuring and omission of Black veterans, and by extension, all colored victims, becomes a criticism of the war of memories. Also, the vile racist portrayal encompasses the entire group to whom he belongs:

De l'enquête à laquelle il a été minutieusement procédé
il est clair que notre Nègre
se serait rendu fou furieux de jalousie
[...]
de voir seuls les Juifs
distingués des autres
gratifiés d'une étoile jaune
jour seuls d'un compartiment de la Régie des Transports en Commun
seuls invités à défilé le samedi en colonnes par deux
[...]
de l'Etoile au Père Lachaise ([DE 31–32](#))

After having used six times the pronoun “Une” in italics the poet makes clear the seventh time that the anaphor refers to “une étoile jaune.” ([DE 32](#)) At that stage, the poem sarcastically recalls Fanon’s (and Sartre’s) in/distinctness between Jew and Gentile. Only the “yellow star” can mark the Jew as Other. But following that, he continues by exploring Biblical sources to explain this treatment for the ‘children of Cham’. On the page, the poet literally draws a double line between this present-day pathetic spectacle offered by an ill/disciplined “Negro” and a remote past, between the society in the post-Shoah period and the Biblical time:

.....
.....
Cette histoire
[...]
n'est pas sans rappeler celle
[...]
à des millénaires d'intervalles
[...]
d'un autre nègre à particule
[...]
répondant alors au nom depuis célèbre
de Si

de SIMON

de SIMON de CYRENE (*DE 32–33*)

He notably brings in a Biblical character: Simon of Cyrene, changing his name into “Si-Non” (playing on the French “sinon”). If not entirely erased in Judeo-Christian iconography, Simon of Cyrene who helped Jesus to carry his cross to Golgotha is a minor hagiographic character. Although this Black man helped Jesus in his ordeal and was hanged next to him, he has not been “remembered” in the holy scripts and Christian theology, the poet seems to tell us here. While from Biblical times onwards, Blacks and Jews have walked together to Golgotha, Damas recalls how the “children of Cham” have been erased from literature and consequently from History. This “curse of the black race” was already referred to in “Contre notre amour qui ne voulait rien d’autre,” (*N 106–107*) in which forbidden love on the grounds of racial segregation is a dominant theme (*Brown 1992*). In other words, the postcolonial poet and critic Damas reveals the responsibility of Christianity in the oppression and displacement of millions of people. Faith and religious iconography are therefore shunned as lies and hypocrisy. The Old (and New) Testament is put forward as one of the major explanations for the lack of recognition and understanding between the children of Cham and their masters. Given the fact that a minor number of slave owners in the Caribbean had Jewish origins, the poet problematizes the involvement of Jews in the enslaving of Africans.⁴ Instead of preaching love and understanding between different people and different ethnicities, be it Blacks and Whites, or even Blacks and Jews, the word of Jesus is held to forbid intermarriage and racial mixing. Damas’ poem “Contre notre amour” designates the Bible as one of the sources for the curse of his fellow (Black) people and the prohibition to love the ones he, the speaker, truly desires.

Furthermore, repeating over and over again the enigmatic pronoun “une,” from stanza to stanza, without explicitly naming its referent, forces the reader to fill in the void, gradually obliged to accept the poet’s stigma: the yellow or the (non-existing) black star. Moreover, the sarcastic poet leaves the interpretation open: Is the star meant to serve as a “tribute”, as Serge Doubrovsky ironically recalled when he was awarded the Légion d’honneur, traumatized by the yellow star he had to wear as a child (Doubrovsky in *Bishop 2010: 8*)? Or does it refer to a reward that the mentally diseased patient claims, a sort of “médaille

⁴ The migrations and settlement of Jews in this region remain marginal, nevertheless Nation of Islam leader Farrakhan used this argument to denounce and accuse the complicity between the Jews and the slave traders and their involvement in the plantation economy in Surinam and the Caribbean islands. The poet seems to argue in between the lines that a league of Christian European nations as well as a number of Jewish settlers in neighbouring Dutch Guiana and the Lesser Dutch Antilles enslaved Africans.

d’honneur” for services to “la mère-patrie”? Is it meant to remind us of the stars worn by Jews during the Second World War? In fact, Damas addresses the unequal attention in the French Republic paid to efforts of citizens from various origins and horizons that Christine Taubira would state four decades later in *Rendez-vous avec la République*:

L'égalité des droits s'applique aussi à la mémoire. Non pour une mémoire égale [...], mais pour un droit égal à la mémoire. Parce qu'on pressent bien qu'il suffit que les pouvoirs publics s'obstinent dans la dénégation, laissent prospérer les inégalités et se jouent des rivalités pour que la concurrence des victimes et la guerre des mémoires dégénèrent en concurrence des mémoires et guerre des victimes. (Taubira 2007: 11)

Anticipating Taubira’s struggle for the Memory Laws and for the resolution of the ethnic and racial conflicts in the Republic, Damas’s poem, polemical and stunning, reads like a medical discourse in which the very claim made by the lonely voice of the solitary Black or Amerindians diagnosed as madness and fury. The poet addresses issues of commemoration and reparation alongside the subaltern communities of Jews and Blacks in the Fourth and Fifth Republics. By the same token, the fact that the memory of Shoah victims and survivors has received far more attention than Blacks and their offspring who still await communal redemption is sketched in the hilarious portrait of the “Nègre-à-talents” who climbs the Eiffel Tower to ask “Une” (“One”). Claimed vehemently by the paranoid jaybird, the pronoun “Une” then comes to refer to an injection of morphine that calms down the nervous patient who is then transported to the psychiatric hospital “St. Anne, Canabis Street, Number One, Paris thirteen, Bad omen” (DE 29–30). Moreover, the news of this incident is published in a “Gazette,” as the voice of the “Ligue internationale des Purs-Aryens”: The poet shows the conspiracy of ultra-right winged and also ultra-leftist affiliations, both despised equally. The statement is crystal clear: denouncing the lack of attention in the French Republic to the Black victims of the war, he stresses the disproportionate celebrations and commemorations in a war of / on memory. Damas underlines the dissymmetrical assignment between the Jew (exemplary for the suffering and the victimization) and the Black (never-ending discussion as to the question who suffered most as well as to the accorded attention in museum spaces). When compared to the Jewish victims, the Black and Colored victims remain invisible in the collective efforts to honor the memory of those who suffered.

Yet the very fact that Damas withdraws this and other polemical poems from publishing is explicable given the controversies he would once more spur. We have to remember that Damas’ first two publications (*Pigments* and *Retour de Guyane*) harmed his reputation and had been banned because they were

regarded as overtly anti-colonialist and anti-French. Yet in 2012, the Centennial year⁵ of Damas' birth, the long awaited collection *Mine de riens* finally came out. In "Mocking Bird" (*Mine de riens*), Damas discusses the master narrative (the Bible) as a way of legitimizing racism. He did so too in an earlier poem, "Contre notre amour qui ne voulait rien d'autre" (*Névralgies*), which draws on the "curse of Cham" (*Genesis*), a narrative that offers an explanation for the Black's servitude and slavery.⁶ But also the racial prejudice and defense of race mixing is hailing back to the Old Testament's Prophets who would have strongly prohibited marriages outside the religious and ethnic community. In the poet's view, it is the Christian faith which is responsible for racism and slavery, for the prohibition of mixed marriages, and many of the actual impasses (Brown 1992). Ironic and readily mocking the lessons of Catholicism and Christianity, the poet with the Biblical name refers to his own road full of obstacles to wholeness and plenitude.⁷ In a reverse projection of Saul on the road to Damascus, on which the saint had his illumination, the poet Damas writes against Christianity, not gaining but loosing his faith on the road to Damascus. Damas realizes the hypocrisy the Christian church and Catholicism imposed upon the African transplanted masses to the Americas. The Biblical canvas is again functional in rewriting Christ's Passion. As already mentioned, Jesus would not carry the cross alone but would be assisted by a forgotten figure, a colored man named Simon de Cyrène. Not only can "Syrène" be pronounced as "sirène" (alarm) and lead to the verb "cirer" (to make shiny, to make blinking), which Damas has exploited in "Shine" (*P* 65–66); it also alludes to "Rien à cirer", an idiomatic expression synonymous to the English "That's not my business," or even "I don't give a shit. Written probably after the Second World War, Damas, like Fanon, witnessed how soldiers of color suffered discrimination and disloyal treatment because of their pigmentation. He might also have seen some ragtimers and jazzmen, White or Black, wear a star in solidarity with the oppressed Jews during the Vichy regime (Cyrulnik 2012: 197). Those who got killed in the service of the French Republic have not been equally honored in the various rituals of commemoration. The colonial fracture (Bancel/Lemaire/Blanchard 2005) neatly divided each of the Republic's minori-

5 In the same year, I organized a conference to commemorate Damas and his oeuvre in Cayenne, "Léon-Gontran Damas, poète patrimonial et postcolonial." <http://www.e-karbe.com/livres/centenaire-de-leon-gontran-damas-un-colloque-international-a-cayenne-les-19-et-20-avril-2012>.

6 See Goldenberg 2003 on this matter.

7 In French, the name Damas is identical with the name of the city of Damascus; the poet's name resonates with the biblical reference to the road to Damascus, where Paulus had his illumination.

ties into separate groups, isolated one from another, each group yearning for the recognition of the departed. The lack of recognition given to Jews and blatantly more so to Blacks after the Second World War is denounced in this poem, which Damas again refrained from publishing. In a sort of self-censorship, the poem did not surface until more than 34 years after his death. The climate of violent anti-Semitism that reappeared quickly in the first decennium after the war (Essed/Hoving 2014) probably added to Damas’ discretion and fear to publish. This and other poems date probably from the late 60s and 70s, a period when France started to come to terms with the dark chapters of Occupation and Vichy. Convincingly, the gaps of France’s cultural memory and the oblivion of the darker skinned ‘children’s of the Republic’ are rendered in this poetical yet strong trial against the falsification of history with regard to the sacrifices paid by black and non-white soldiers, on the one hand, and the victims of the death camps, on the other. By stitching the fate and destiny of the “Nègre-à-talents” into the wider Biblical pattern, the afore-mentioned Simon de Cyrène is put next to Jesus. As a muted sound, a silent *sirène* haunting Damas’ spirit, the ordeal of this Black figure forces him to account for this and other hidden figures in history. Both suffered at the hands of the Romans, yet the forgotten ‘hero’ or ‘idol’ is the Black man. The poem thus makes a bold statement about *multidirectional memory* (Rothberg 2010), knotting “interrelated histories of Empire and colonialism.” (Silverman 2010) Damas more than once shows the analogy between two racisms and by doing so aligns himself with Senghor, who defended the fraternity among Ethiopians in *Hosties noires*.⁸ In this collection, he comes to terms with issues of cultural memory, memory wars, and memorializing the dead and the use of the respective national victims as a way of patriotic, nationalist propaganda preparing the next “revenge” (cf. Gyssels 2014a). In other words, the poet hints at the differentiation or segregation of victims by race as a pernicious way of feeding nationalist, and by extension, racist statist discourses. He also conjures up realities of a divided Republic in which all minorities are not dealt with equally when it comes to commemorating Blacks and Jews who perished during WWII. Translating Fanon’s concerns into poetry, Damas tackles the vexed relationship between Blacks and Jews,⁹ thereby building a bridge between two discriminated/marginalized

8 Ethiopia resisted both against colonialism and fascism under the emperor Haile Selassie, who symbolized the double legacy as descendant of King Salomon and the Queen of Saba.

9 Recent works try to put the record straight, posthumously rectifying omissions and oblivions by defenders of hybridity and the symbioses of cultures in the Caribbean, such as Glissant: Nicole Lapierre’s *Causes communes. Des Juifs et des Noirs* (2011: 194) herald

groups. Similarly to Fanon, Damas fought for making public obfuscated realities of the Republic's recent past.

2 “Miles Ahead”

Damas pointed out years ago the competition that exists among communities to honor and reconstruct respectful memories of their past. The risk of such competition is that suffering becomes hierarchical. Fortunately, Christiane Taubira, the former French Minister of Justice and an important heir to Damas's legacy, has firmly warned against such outrageous anti-Semitic acts. Falling herself prey to racist attacks, Taubira's vote for the 'Mariage pour tous' (marriage for gays and lesbians) has raised scandal by quoting moreover from *Black-Label* (1956) and “Grand comme un besoin de changer d'air” (*Névralgies*). The day after, journalists wondered: “Who was this Damas she has been reciting by heart?” Unlike other politicians who attempt to ‘normalize’ their backgrounds when entering the political arena, the Minister of Justice from Guiana, empowered by a political mandate, proudly embraces *her* as well as *other's otherness*. Her open embrace of otherness in French society has fueled her unapologetic and determined stance in French politics. However, her appreciation for Négritude does not mean that this identity is in any way a full representation of her. Just as she refuses to identify with a particular political party, so too does she refuse to box herself into a particular racial identity. She refuses to limit herself by categorizing herself as one or the other; quoting from Damas' *Black-Label*, she emulates his struggle to have interracial love and other kinds of relationships, such as same-sex desire, destigmatized. Her fight for the laws, for gay

Glissant as most important mediator between Blacks and Jews, precisely in a chapter on the Schwarz-Bart. Yet in several of his essays, Glissant partakes in the vexed relationship between Blacks and Jews and has not always been very tactful in stressing similarities and differences. This is not to say that I accuse the Martinican author and critic (as some will readily conclude) of anti-Semitism, but rather that I question that some intellectuals (consciously or not) fail to find common ground between Blacks and Jews and yet cannot avoid questioning the troubled relationship. While Schwarz-Bart defines himself as *Luftmensch*, he regrets to say he found no spiritual family in the French Caribbean (Schwarz-Bart 2009: 203). In spite of their praise of creolisation and rhizomatic identity, the religious component (even if the neighbor next door is a non-religious Jew) who coauthored *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes* (1967), dedicated to both Aimé Césaire and Elie Wiesel, was quite overlooked. While André Schwarz-Bart was from the outset fighting the uneven reciprocity of white (Jew) and black partnership when it came to paying tribute to the victims of the Shoah and the transatlantic slave system in the New World, his contribution to French Caribbean literature has been silenced by Confiant, Chamoiseau and Glissant (Gyssels 2013).

marriage, for the preservation of Amerindian tribes and their territory make her an heir of the forgotten Damas. Miles ahead of subsequent generations of Martinican Manifestos, “miles and miles away from his native land”, the genuine idealist always “thirst[y] for justice” (in Lydia Cabrera’s memory, [Cabrera 1980: 2](#)) paid a high “prize of the ticket” (Baldwin’s title, which we can read alongside Damas’ collections, [Baldwin 1985](#)). Both, Damas and Taubira, have a rather contested place in literary history and in the political arena respectively. They shared the conviction that there should be no discrepancies in the commemorations between different ethnic groups or religious communities in the democracies of Europe and America as well as elsewhere; both defended the right to claim hybrid, “hyphenated identities,” and an equal attention to the Republic’s multi-ethnic makeup and the sacrifices paid by the colonized populations in defending the nation during the wars. Both Damas and Taubira have strived to make a utopian world without lines of color, race, class, gender, or religious affiliation as factors of segregation and discrimination.

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