

# Masquereading Léon Damas' Mine de riens

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## Résumé de l'article

En Guyane, le « macoumé » est le terme injurieux pour désigner l'homosexuel, supposé ou prouvé. Dans un long passage de *Black-Label*, le poète faisait rimer dans un portrait de lui en « Bel enfant de choeur » les roses « miraculées, immaculées, matriculées » (BL 38). J'y ai toujours entendu le terme mis entre guillemets : « macoumé ». Partant de Masquereading (Marie-Hélène Bourcier) et de l'homotextualité (Jean-Pierre Rocchi), je propose une nouvelle approche de la poésie impudente et immoraliste (Gide lança Damas, après tout). Il aura été un « maskilili », diabolotin amérindien qui n'est jamais là où on l'attend, déjouant les attentes et surtout chaussé de travers.

## Masquereading Léon-Gontran Damas' *Mine de rien*

Kathleen Gyssels

Poetry is not a luxury.

Audre Lorde (*Sister Outsider. Essays and Sketches*)

And if all I know how to do is speak, it is for you that I shall speak. My lips shall speak for miseries that have no mouth, my voice shall be the liberty of those who languish in the dungeon of despair... And above all my body as well as my soul, beware of folding your arms in the sterile attitude of spectator, for life is not a spectacle, for a sea of pain is not a proscenium.

Aimé Césaire (*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*)

### From *Macoumé* to *Maskilili*

**I**n the latter part of *Black-Label* Damas thrice conjures up the figure of a Maskilili who betrays his master, recalling similarities with Christ's betrayal three times by his apostle, Judas. The Amerindian spirit is described as being empty-handed and having disfigured feet that make walking difficult. Most notably, his soft hips feminise his male body:

*Déchainé le Kamougué  
pieds ivres d'hommes  
et non crochus de Klouss  
Maskililis  
mains vives d'hommes  
et non vides  
Maskililis  
de Klouss  
hanches envoûtées d'hommes  
et non molles de Ylouss (sic) Maskililis malins  
chantaient  
dansaient  
l'âme  
l'amour  
la mort la vie de la TERRE-MERE (Damas 1956, 78)*

As Damas prepares to cross the final line that separates life from death, he portrays himself as a Maskilili, the fantastic character who is so central to nightly carnival parades replete with drinking and dancing. Since the Maskilili undergoes sexual change during the performance of his frantic dance, this final rite of passage would also seem to imply a transmutation of male and female physical sexual attributes. It is sequences and links like these that invite a queer reading of Damas' poetry.

Readers are likely to be struck by Damas' many references to "crossing" and "Lines". As a young boy he was psychologically scarred by violent policing of same-sex relations. According to Michael Bucknor, alternative constructions of masculinity have been silenced, and trauma suppressed in a society where traditional black hyper-masculinity

conflicts with the submission of women (xv-xvi). From his early poetry to the posthumous collection, Damas expresses an urge to find the “wholeness” proposed by Bajan author Paule Marshall; to reconcile blackness and maleness. “*Hoquet*,” “*Il me revient*,” and “*Point trop n’en faut*” hint at complex feelings of loss and the incapacity to fully become a man. Allusions to sexual harassment and child abuse are implicit in the title, *Mine de riens*, through *mine*’s double entendre of “minor” and “mine.”

Damas held melancholia and madness<sup>1</sup> at bay on his journey to recover from the fragile, fragmented Self of a colonial, racist and sexually violent society. In *Black Soundscapes White Stages* Edwin C. Hill acknowledges the homophobic climate endured by those who are considered black *ratés* (losers) yet overlooks the black male performance component of the poetic voice (Hill, p. 122). Here *Masquereading* ties in nicely with what J.P. Rocchi refers to as “homotextual” reading: gender ambivalence, indeed, continues to be overlooked in the fictional works of fe/male authors of colour, such as James Baldwin. “Queerolisation” is found in the works of both Damas and James Baldwin. Both transgress Lines: the Colour Line that W.E.B. DuBois identified as the problem of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as class and gender lines (Gyssels 2018). Both propose a fluid, hybrid identity, transcending the “twoness” of the American and European dream, an identity which embraces a multitude of differences and eradicates obstacles hindering individual self-realisation, unfettered by past and present constraints (Perrier, Quintero and Bottero 2018).

In this article, I reread Damas’ poetry through the lens of queer studies. Interlocked themes of masques and carnival – of behaving “other” than one really is – are intrinsically linked with the hardship of the colonial condition and the subjugation of Black people in the Guianas and the Caribbean. His poems subjugate contrasts between Black and White, male and female, dismantle polarities, and plead for a more inclusive, interactive identity such as that permitted in dance, carnival and music. These artistic performances metaphorically demonstrate how African Americans and Afropeans might create a better society for their peoples.

In *Comment faire des études-genres avec la littérature : Masquereading*, Marie-Hélène Bourcier proposes a new approach to close reading practices. Inspired by the works of feminists such as Audre Lorde and Monique Wittig (Wittig 2018), she suggests that fiction hitherto labelled as “normal” and written in the heteronormative voice (we think of Diderot’s *La religieuse*, *Sarrazine* and *La Rabouilleuse*. *Un ménage de garçon* by Balzac and *L’immoraliste* by Gide, one of Damas’ mentors [Gyssels 2018]), may contain a queer subtext (Bourcier 2014, Preface).

The heteronormative approach has for too long been locked into Francophone Caribbean criticism. Michael Dash, for example, fiercely rejects a comparative reading of James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* and L. G. Damas’ *Black-Label* (Dash 2011). More recently, Sophie Fuggle’s review of *Locating Guyane* (Fuggle, p. 327)<sup>2</sup> objects to the disproportionate attention given Damas’ queer agenda through the *carnavalesque*. Such criticism is truly regrettable since it is only rarely that works examining the relationship between sexuality and politics in the Caribbean include Guiana, as well as focusing on the annual celebration of Carnival. The latter is the single most important event permitting the crossing of lines and is thus central to the struggle to overcome the substantial obstacles lying in the path of non-racist, non-homophobic, non-sexist Caribbean postcolonial society (MacLeod 2018). *The Crossed-Dressed Caribbean: Writing, Politics, Sexualities* deals principally with Anglo-Caribbean writers, and its choice of Chamoiseau to represent

1 An abbreviated version of this paper was delivered at the CEREP conference, “Altered States, Configuring Madness in Caribbean Literature,” 22-24 April 2015. <http://www.madness.ulg.ac.be/>

2 “This reader’s main criticism of the book lies perhaps with the disproportionate attention given to Léon-Gontran Damas as an almost unique source of what might be termed, following Bill Marshall, a ‘queer’ or ‘queering’ of Guyane. This focus can be read as a desire to apply categories and frames of queerness from outside with less attention, beyond carnival, given to identities and practices taking place in Guyane itself.”

French Caribbean literature is an uninspired one. While Glissant's spiritual son includes a queer character in *Biblique des derniers gestes*, he does not introduce "les travestis Makoumé" (the Makoumé transvestites), a cryptic presence Damas hints at in his childhood portrait (Gyssels 2016). As Véronique Rochais and Patrick Bruneaux (2008) demonstrate, transvestism and carnival go hand in hand in the French Antilles. Christiane Taubira's decision to quote from *Black-Label* and *Névralgies* in the French Assembly significantly underscored the legitimacy of the queer approach (Gyssels 2016; Marshall 2018).<sup>3</sup>

The ephemerally liberating effect of Damas' poetry had no effect on Negritude straightness. As Nadia Chonville demonstrates, "*Mariage pour tous*" prompted fierce controversy among conservatives in Martinique. The matrifocal relationship of mothers and sons dictates that males who do not adhere to codes of Black male performance risk being stigmatised as bad sons (Chonville 2017). It is noteworthy that Thomas Glave's anthology did not include a single French-Guianese voice, even though Glave admitted that Damas' poetry allows for such a reading.<sup>4</sup> The harshness of reality of being Black in a White world, however, is undoubtedly compounded by the impossibility of loving and being loved by someone independent of colour and gender. The need to be loved is highlighted in several poems by Damas' idol, Langston Hughes, from whom he borrows the metaphor of "crossing [the] Line[s]." Take for instance, "Passing":

On sunny summer Sunday afternoons in Harlem  
when the air is one interminable ball game  
and grandma cannot get her gospel hymns  
from the Saints of God in Christ  
on account of the Dodgers on the radio,  
on sunny Sunday afternoons  
when the kids look all new  
and far too clean to stay that way,  
and Harlem has its  
washed-and-ironed-and-cleaned-best out,  
the ones who've crossed the line  
to live downtown  
miss you,  
Harlem of the bitter dream  
since their dream has  
come true. (Hughes, p. 417. Italics mine)

Adopting a literal reading, the "Line" is that separating Black and White neighbourhoods (we think of Detroit, and the "white flight" and "black belt" associated with so many other American cities). A second Line, however, is the Line of desire for somebody of the same sex, with its inherent risk of exclusion from one's community: those queer characters who cross the Line face excommunication. Those who dare not to cross the Line feel forever frustrated: unable to love, unable to fulfil their lives and their "mission" (that is, freeing up the way for those who remain behind the Line). I am not labelling Damas as *gay*, but merely drawing attention to his poetry's heightened sensitivity to the problems of that time, especially for people of colour. Acquaintances, such as the Harlem Renaissance poets

3 See YouTube for her Discourse at the *Assemblée Nationale*, 20 January 2013. The press highlighted the ignorance surrounding Damas' poetry and the unexpected correlation between the topic of her speech with gay marriage, the content of *Black-Label* and "*Grand comme un besoin de changer d'air*". See Gyssels' forthcoming publication (Brill, Ed. Passage(s)).

4 Unpublished talk at "Going Caribbean" international conference (Lisbon: 2-4 November, 2009) and "Locating Guyane" conference (University of London in Paris: July, 2013). See *Locating Guyane* (Wood and MacLeod, eds. 2018).

Langston Hughes, Claude McKay and Countee Cullen, made Damas aware of the double dilemma of being coloured and non-heteronormative. *Gay Re-Readings of the Harlem Renaissance Poets* examines this ambiguity in depth (Woods 1993).

Analysis of the construction of black masculinity in French-Caribbean fiction is relatively recent. Jarrod Hayes' *Queer Roots for the Diaspora* calls for "deconstruction" of the performances of black manhood in Martinique and Guadeloupe (Hayes, p. 47), while Charlotte Hammond's *Entangled Otherness: Cross-Gender Fabrication in the Francophone Caribbean* (2018) notes that the fraught relations between race, sex and gender are often depicted as "amusing, crazy, not serious" (Spear, p. 151). Mockery, derision and dismissal aside, however, widespread taboos are real and ever-present, with an abundance of pejorative terms for male homosexuals: *Makoumé* (Creole, Antilles), *Rasta battyman* (Jamaica) and *micici* (Haiti).

René Depestre, Haitian advocate of "*géolibertinage*," negotiates another definition of manhood amid the complex masculinity questions in the French Antilles, French Guiana and Haiti. Poinsoot rereads Depestre's *Mât de cocagne* as a potentially queer text. Its hypersexual narrative is deconstructed to propose an alternative for heteronormativity in a country where being gay or bisexual is highly stigmatized (Couti and Grant 2019). In Barbados, for instance, the "Bullers" and "Battyboys" risk isolation as they are exposed to HIV and other diseases.

In that respect, one notices that the poet often speaks of his solitude and feeling or being isolated in terms of suspected sickness: the "*lazaret de son cœur*" (the leprosy of his heart) and the time of waiting in vain to be loved is called a "*quarantaine*" (quarantine). In other words, through poetic imagery, the close links between slavery, leprosy, the penal colony and the internment of lepers knot a fundamental malaise of the black male body in this specific location of French Guiana as place of origin for Damas' quest for happiness. The islands of French Guiana and New Caledonia have often served during French colonial rule as "places of confinement" for the morally and bodily deranged elements, the criminals and the sick (Fougère 2018).

The discrimination against gays and lesbians in France's Overseas Departments, as well as in Haiti and the Americas (Latin America, Brazil, North America) weighed heavily on Damas, who was aware that the punishments awaited Blacks charged with the "crime" of non-normative behaviour included hanging. The hanging of the "inverted man," and those deemed "abnormal" and "sick" in medieval Italy and Europe are conflated with the trauma of lynching. *L'écot de la race*, an unfinished manuscript left by Damas, hints at the etymology of *fagot*, a reminder that victims were also burned to death. *Pigments* is replete with images of lynching and violent death by burning as in "*Complainte du Nègre*": "*Corde nouveaux / de corps calcinés / de l'orteil au dos / calcines*," images which become his "Obsession" (Damas 1972, 19). It looks almost as if Damas forces us to watch the photographs or "*cartes postales*" of lynchings in the Deep South: the metonymous alliteration and syncopated rhythms of "*âcre odeur de sang / jaillissant / de toute trompette bouchée*" (25) converge to form the striking image of blood clots being thrust from open wounds in the body's unnamed (private?) parts. Lynching photographs constructed and perpetuated white supremacist ideology by creating permanent images of helpless, powerless and even emasculated men of colour. These images gained further cultural force because they co-existed within a host of conventions and assumptions about photography, including the expectation that photographs revealed objective truth. The interlocked/entangled metaphor of rope and faggots ("*écots*") strenuously denounces the mistreatment of non-heterosexual (white or black) fe/males. *Black-Label* stresses that one can be hanged for simply *wanting* to cross the Line:

A Negro  
 was hung  
 this morning  
 at dawn  
 guilty of having wanted  
 to cross the Line (Damas 1956, translation mine)

The fear of being caught and punished for a mistake, sexual misconduct, or an allegedly sexual act of violence that impacts Black men's performance and sexuality (impotent or devoid of "desire") resonates in "*désirs comprimés d'un bel enfant de cœur*." It echoes, moreover, in the title of Damas' unpublished anthology, *L'écot de la race*. Damas' two-fold perspective, melding concealed realities with interlocked assaults on the Black fe/male, may be considered in three stages: early poems, later poems and posthumous poetry.

### I. Early poems (*Pigments*)

In Damas' early poems, the obstacles to Black manhood are hidden. The subtle, yet provocative matrifocal voice that interrogates the mute male child about his absence at violin class unleashes the verbal, physical and sexual assault on the *fils du père* by an authority figure. Indeed, in "*Hoquet*", the "whitened" mother seems to be asking her son why he is giving up "vi-o-lin" lessons. Those lessons, it is intimated, more closely resemble "violent" lessons that assault the integrity of the young male:

*Il m'est revenu que nous n'étiez encore pas  
 à votre leçon de vi-o-lon  
 Un banjo  
 Vous dites un banjo  
 comment dites-vous  
 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* (Damas 1972)

In "Poetry and the Typosphère in Léon-Gontran Damas," Carrie Noland emphasises that the cavity of the violin is rendered almost visible by the typographic characters, the spacing of which evokes the yawning zero ("-o-") in the middle of the *violon*. This vowel is literally the hole in the heart of the mute son; he who lost his voice (Noland, p. 124): the underlying trauma is *viol*, or rape. Damas' recollection of the terrible mistreatment by his teacher dictates his poetic voice as he conflates imagery associated with swallowing liquids against one's will and hiccups of repressed memory. The shameful deeds leading to his discontinuing "vi-o-lin" lessons emerge in recurrent clusters of denial and eruption ("*Il me revient*").

How important is this tale of emasculation for future generations? The *Moynihan Report* stresses links with the Black family structure, while the post-Morrison school of thought claims that the effects of slavery on the White family may have been equally profound and destructive. Investigations in the French Caribbean have yielded similar conclusions. Jacques André's *L'inceste focal dans la famille noire antillaise* (1987), for example, confirms what is strikingly lacking in works of fiction. Male Antillean authors have tended to avoid the interplay between Blackness and masculinity, whether legitimised

or object (Bucknor XXIII): The exception to this is the early *Négritude* poet, Damas, who does address the problem, albeit obliquely.

The queerness continuum ranges from stark machismo (Raphaël Confiant) to masculine femininity (Daniel Maximin). Desperate efforts to represent the in-between zone of masculinity and femininity lack conviction, displaying rather what the Jamaican-born homosexual militant, Thomas Glave, calls “preciousness” (Glave 2013, 141). He is referring to the “refusal” of writers to “engage with what, in our violent, glorious, detonating and ever-renewing world, our world of geopolitics and constant scrabbles for power and dominion, so undeniably is.” Patrick Chamoiseau’s Goncourt Prize winning novel, *Texaco*, describes Marie-Sophie Laborieux as “une femme à deux graines” (a woman with balls), while Confiant caricaturises gender by fashioning grotesque males and females (Chandler 1999). Damas, who adheres to Fanon’s theory of psychopathology with respect to the Colour Line and gender issues, nevertheless balks at an outright admission that there is homosexuality in Martinique.

Damas’ poetry testifies to the very real grief and sorrow that result from strong gender oppositions that exacerbate sharp divisions between the sexes in a racist society. Creole culture, which is largely dominated by men, perceives the feminisation of male identity – in Confiant’s fiction in particular – as weakness (Burton, p. 226). Homosexual identity is taboo in French-Caribbean literature and the topic is avoided in Bonnie Thomas’ series of interviews with prominent Antillean novelists. Stahl correctly points out that the greatest division in the Antilles remains gender: “[M]asculine culture... constructs itself through such practices as gambling, drinking, and the repudiation of the feminine through violence and rape” (Stahl, p. 670).

Black men’s macho behaviour is encouraged through its glamorisation, even today, in many popular Caribbean art forms. This reaction can be traced to the enduring humiliation and sexual anxiety associated with masters’ dominance and centuries of colonial rule.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to the many novels and essays portraying Caribbean men as violent, dominant and macho, and Caribbean women as weak, subservient and obedient,<sup>6</sup> Damas’ poetry proposes a non-stereotypical masculinity and anti-machismo that might possibly be confused with homoerotic desire. Sharron Holland comments on the origin of black gayness: “What makes the queer is black female influence and/or identification... Masculinity is always in danger of being corrupted by close proximity to its perceived opposite – the feminine” (Holland, p. 388). Butler’s chapter, “Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen’s Psychoanalytic Challenge,” also privileges context: “The disjunctive ordering of the human as ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ takes place not only through a heterosexualising symbolic with its taboo on homosexuality, but through a complex set of racial injunctions which operate in part through the taboo on miscegenation” (Butler, p. 167).

In “*Hoquet*,” sexual harassment is offered as a plausible reason for becoming mute. The inability to answer back and to answer the mother’s questions could have its origins in a traumatic event that happened at that same “viol-in” lesson. The recalcitrant pupil, who no longer wants to play the “viol-in” has, in fact, been “commodified” as an instrument to be played by a (white?) music teacher or possibly a priest. Beginning with “*Hoquet*,” Damas’ “*cri ravalé*” (suppressed cry) will forever un/lock him, affecting his freedom to speak out, to “*s’ébattre avec un tel*” (to romp and play with someone), or to make love (fe/male).

Damas’ most anthologised poem describes the various components of colonial education, with the mother figure complicit with the master’s rule. She teaches her son

5 Popular Caribbean art forms deconstruct machismo (Carnaval and music). cf. Aparicio, 1994.

6 Zobel’s short stories and novels, forged by women, offer a sharp contrast and an alternative to the *macho-cultus* featured in *bildungsromane* such as *La Rue Cases-Nègres*, *Annie John*, *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* and *Cric Crac Monkey*.



good table manners, encourages him to master the master's tongue, to play the violin, to pray to God, and to suppress the urge to challenge black "masculinity." The mother matriarch models a subaltern subject (Spivak 1988), someone who learns to control his desires. In "*Hoquet*," the "*fils du père*" or "*fils du Père*" (son of God, the father) has literally lost his tongue, becoming the ideal, submissive, quiet young "choir boy." His therapist has to beg him to speak aloud about this "*désastre/parlez-moi du désastre/parlez-m'en*" (disaster/talk to me about this disaster/talk to me about it). Through constant repetition, the silenced voice begs a third person (the reader) to speak on its behalf about the impossibility of breaking the silence and assuming one's subjectivity. The key experience in Damas' ontological suffering (and stammering) seems to have been this inability to express himself and his body freely. It is as if the mother has physically cut out her son's tongue. This violent image of emasculation resurfaces elsewhere in *Pigments*. "*Obsession*" mentions that the taste of blood irritates the nose, eyes and throat, that it is a vertical power which rises to the point of "madness." Elsewhere, images of "*trompette bouchée*" (muted trumpets) ("*Trêve*") link physical violence to the male black body to sublimated blues music. The "muted trumpet" might also allude to black sexual performance and impotency. In "There are nights," this same image links lynching to an impossible *jouissance*:

There are nights with no name  
there are nights with no moon  
when a clammy  
suffocation  
nearly overwhelms me  
the acrid smell of blood  
spewing  
from every muted trumpet (Damas 1972, 25, trans. Conroy-Kennedy, p. 46)

In "*S.O.S.*" the male's amputated organ becomes a relic, a candle lit by racists in their White churches. Damas is haunted by the trauma of lynching, proof positive of a hypocritical American society in which Ku Klux Klan members both pray to God and murder Black men.<sup>7</sup> According to Diane Fuss, the adoptive mother not only mutilates the "negro-child's voice, imposing psychic violence by attempting to exclude Blacks from the very self-other dynamic that makes subjectivity possible," (Fuss, p. 21) but she also denies him the possibility of striving for masculinity. Instead of attempting to sing in falsetto in imitation of the female voice (cf. Farinelli, *Il castrato* or Balzac's *Sarrazine*, 1830), "*le bel enfant de chœur*" from *Black-Label* keeps his mouth shut or speaks with a faggot's voice. His feminisation is exacerbated by the close bond between mother and son, a connection so intimate and so strong that he becomes a sexless creature, an angel who stays close to his mother – someone who replaces the father so often absent in Caribbean literature. In Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, "wild instincts" create a protagonist who is out of control and a [potential] criminal (*voyou*).<sup>8</sup> Ambiguous *jouissances* in "Bientôt" offset suffering and sorrow: "*trempe*" and "*frotté*" are references to drinking (putting one's tongue in the alcohol, rubbing lips against the glass) and sexual intercourse or carnal relations. These

7 The image of emasculation of the Black man at the hands of the White mob is hinted at in *Save Our Souls*: "froidelement étendre, mais froidelement matraquer / descendre / étendre /et/ couper leur sexe aux nègres/pour en faire des bougies pour leurs églises". The image appears in Maryse Condé's neo-slave-narrative *Moi, Tituba... sorcière noire de Salem* (Condé 1986, 37). Tituba is traumatized by the view of her deceased mother hanging with her protruding tongue resembling a purple penis. Condé equates the lynching of black men to the insolent female slave whose words condemned her: Tituba of Salem, at least in her re-invention, was executed for resisting her White master's attempted rape and answering back. (See Gyssels 2010).

8 It is striking that Césaire, too, begins *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939) with a robust exorcism followed by a prayer. This common motif and format is employed to beg forgiveness for multiple grievances and criticism: "*Va-t-en, lui disais-je, gueule de flic, gueule de vache, va-t-en je déteste les larbins de l'ordre et les hanneçons de l'espérance.*" »



“movements” or actions are repeated at speed (understood through the rhythm of the stanzas), yet it is unclear if the subject has enjoyed them. Ambiguity reigns as well in a long sequence evoking a drunken evening of dancing and flirting, with in/voluntary sexual relations independent of age, genre, class, and so forth (cf. *infra* “*Point trop n’en faut*”).

## II. Later poems (*Névralgies*)

*Névralgies* (1966) exposes the taboos and ostracism surrounding the bisexual and homosexual desires of Black male sexuality. The gay African-American writer, James Baldwin, fled segregated American society because he believed Paris and Europe to be much more “civilised” in their acceptance and understanding of non-Whites and non-heterosexual identity. He discovered, however, that other forms of sexuality and other ethnic groups were problematic on the continent, including in France, a country with a reputation for being progressive regarding racial intermingling and sexual behaviour (McBride 1999). Poor Blacks were denied opportunities in the “City of Light” and commonly subjected to racial discrimination, exclusion and overt hostility (Bouson 2000).

Damas’ poetry sought to bridge the gap between Whites and Blacks – especially between White women and Black men – through dismantling taboos associated with bodily contact with the other “race.” He explores “unspeakable thoughts,” which are today the subjects of gender and queer studies. It is ultimately through the collective masquerade of carnival – a noun etymologically linked to *carne levare* or “*enlever la viande*” (to take meat out), and the celebration of the flesh through enormous banquets and the pleasures of the body. Abundant rejoicing after a dark period of Winter in Europe was manifested in “*fêtes charnelles*” (flesh celebrations) once the “*carême*” is over. In the New World, the carnivals and Mardi Gras are huge celebrations of food, excessive drinking, dancing and sex.

More than once, transgender issues come to the fore. Disguise, transgression, subversion and change of identity (class, race, gender) are ritualised during these days of collective ecstasy (Mauffret 2005, 2019). In *The Site of Memory*, Toni Morrison points to the absence of an interior life in slave narratives and the “peculiar phase of Slavery [which] has been kept veiled”: the story of sexual abuse. Poetry, however, rips away the veil drawn over “proceedings too terrible to relate” in the aftermath of slavery (Morrison, p. 91). Traumatic events related to harassment and the repression of feelings of hurt, “shame” and of being dirty, are ‘repeated with a difference’ (Gates, H.L., Jr.) in “*Il me souvient*” from *Névralgies*:

*Il me souvient encore  
Il me souvient encore  
de l’année foutue  
où j’eusse  
pu  
tout aussi bien  
sucrer le pouce  
et l’index  
du sorcier en soutane  
au lieu de l’avalier  
l’hostie  
ma foi  
mon dieu  
mes mains jointes* (Damas 1972, 86)<sup>9</sup>

9 I still remember / I still remember / the botched year / when I could / as well / have / sucked the thumb / and forefinger / of the cassocked sorcerer / instead of swallowing / the wafer, / my faith, / my god, / my joint hands (Damas 1972, 86). The many depravations and suffering, sexual and other, associated with the French ex-penal

The poem's striking allusion to child abuse conveys the purulence and abject *jouissance* of the perpetrator through phonetic interplay: "*j'eusse pu*" recalls both *jus* (juice) and *pus* (pus). Both are associated with bodily fluids, with the latter related to sickness as well, a reminder that homosexuality was considered a disease as well as a criminal act. The use of the rare literary *subjonctif plus-que-parfait* (past subjunctive tense) seems to privilege the orality of the verse. The semantic choice of *foutu* and the periphrastic naming of the priest ("*sorcier en soutane*"; a wizard in a cassock) invokes the White male perpetrator abusing his coloured choir boy. *Out of Africa* (Zabus 2013) demonstrates that the authority and power of priests and schoolmasters in colonies, orphanages and boarding schools included sexual exploitation of their pupils. "*Il me souvient*" in *Névralgies* shares notable attributes with the famous "*Hoquet*" in *Pigments*.

### III. Posthumous poems

Bodily experiences are once more centre stage in *Mine de riens*.<sup>10</sup> Days of carnal joy are the only time men and women have permission to ignore the strictures of society. Marshall and MacLeod correctly identify the *Bal Paré Masqué*, where the *nèg gros sirop* and the *nèg farine* wander the streets of Cayenne, as more or less a gay parade. Indeed, the *bal paré masque* exhibition held this year in Brussels convincingly demonstrated that it is essentially a spectacle of cross-dressing.<sup>11</sup> The colourful parade offers a wealth of transvestism, or "*mariages burlesques*";<sup>12</sup> a centuries-old French-Guianese folklore practice that today contests and criticises Guiana's racial, class, gender and other inequalities. In Cayenne, the Touloulou figure is always a man dressed up as a woman (Marshall 2018) is particularly vulgar and obscene (*Parée masquée*).<sup>13</sup> Damas' posthumous poetry describes the characters that incarnate fantasies of gender disguise, assume identities and behave in ways which are not permitted during daylight. As noted by Roland Barthes in *S/Z* and *Incidents*, it is often in unpublished texts that the disempowerment and frustration of "dreams deferred" (Hughes) find expression. In "*Point trop n'en faut*," Damas interweaves racial and/or sexual oppression, and his poems on miscegenation may be read through the lens of forbidden love, or homosexuality. According to Gregory Woods, the fact that most published critical readings deal only with the racial issue does not preclude that a poem may – and indeed should – be read as referring to sexuality as well (Woods, p. 127). Damas' "*Point trop n'en faut*" alludes to extreme caresses; the final (ultimate) ones, and the most daring:

*Point trop n'en faut*  
*n'en faut point trop*  
*à l'extrême*  
*à l'extrême-onction*

---

colony by slaves and their offspring are inextricably linked with the strong influence of the Catholic Church. Such a cocktail of miscegenation, same-sex taboos and abuse of minors is reflected in the title, *Mine de riens*. Young children are misled and treated as "black dolls" (see De Groof & Gyssels 2015) by the very adults upon whom their parents seem to rely. The current focus on penal colonies in European, American and Australian media exposes them as a heterotopic space where "Disasters" ("*Hoquet*") take place and the guilty go unpunished. Repressed traumas such as these inevitably produce depression and distress in the perpetrated.

10 *Dernière escale* was retitled by Sandrine Pujols and Marcel Bibas in a "bibliophilic edition" (Pujols 2012, Introduction. Paris: Regard du Texte, 2012). A pirated version was placed online by Damas' friend Christian Filostrat. <https://sites.google.com/site/httpwwwleondamasminederien/home>.

11 <https://brussels-star.com/2019/04/20/au-royaume-des-touloulous-au-musee-du-masque-jusquau-21-avril/>

12 In *Mascarades et Carnavals* (2011) Véronique Rochais and Patrick Bruneteaux treat this parody as confirming stereotypes of genre and male domination.

13 A beautiful book of photojournalism by Anne Guillou with pictures by Laure Chatefrou. Reviewed in *Une saison en Guyane*. <http://www.une-saison-en-guyane.com/extras/portfolios/portfolio-paree-masquee/>.

The caress the despicable priest permits himself with respect to the child may be interpreted as the Christian ritual of giving a final sign over a dying individual. Addicted to rum (of note the pun with respect to latin: “seculo/ rum”), he is the abject perpetrator of the obscenities to which his filthy garments attest:

Point trop n'en faut  
*n'en faut point trop*  
*de secula*  
*seculo*  
*rum*  
*sous peine*  
*pour l'homme de corvée de ciboire*  
*à la soutane un rien frangée*  
*effilochée*  
*la bedaine avancée*  
*la voix de fausset sucrée*  
*la mine à la fois réjouie et éplorée*  
*le regard torve*  
*de voir*

At this juncture of the long litany a second character, a male nicknamed Nika, appears. Damas adopts a grotesque rhythm to recount the many places that sordid deeds may take place without being noticed nor witnessed. Masquereading is not only free associative play with respect to the reader, but the poet himself has “masked” the incident, a matter which is not made clear:

Zotobré  
*alias Pétépié*  
*alias Nika*  
*jouer à Lazare au tombeau*  
*que ressuscite en projection d'un an l'autre*  
*le grand écran du Ciné-Théâtre-Bouffes*  
*de Dame Paul-Pierre Endor*  
*Habitant-Propriétaire*  
*de terrains terres*  
*fonds achalandage*  
*commerce étalage*  
*enseigne montre*  
*magasin boutique*  
*vitrine échoppe*  
*devanture attirail*  
*bazar barraque (sic)*  
*vivier resserre*  
*grenier chai*  
*écurie grange*  
*dépôts hangards (sic)*  
*greniers mansardes*  
*poulaillers et réduits à cette misère sans*  
*omettre*

*foncière*  
*meublée*  
*garnie*  
*Casino* (Damas 2012, 36)<sup>14</sup>

While the emphasis is on places (all kinds of places), the Casino refers to a “hot place” in Cayenne, a dance hall situated in the “Rue du 14 juillet” where those kinds of “*bals parés masqués*” regularly took place (Selbonne 2013). Albert Béville (Paul Niger), observing the scene as a bystander, praised this evening of dancing from which he, himself, felt cut off. In Damas’ rewriting, the poet oscillates from the décor to the dancer and the body, depicting both the ecstasy and disease felt by Ti Balcon. Is this young boy being forced to act as a Touloulou in order to disrupt the cross-dressed dancer who is masking his true (biological) gender, thus transforming the artistic performance?

*Casino*  
*Ti-balcon – la serre*  
*Casino*  
*Ti-balcon sert-à-tout*  
*Casino*  
*Ti-Balcon fourre-tout*  
*Casino*  
*Ti-Balcon fait-tout*  
*Casino*  
*Ti-Balcon faitout*  
*Casino*  
*Ti-Balcon dansé-dansé*  
*Casino*  
*Ti-Balcon souépié*  
*Casino*  
*Ti-Balcon roumin*  
*Casino*  
*Ti-Balcon frotté*<sup>16</sup>  
*Casino*  
*Ti-Balcon contré*  
*Casino*  
*dans le danser du danser*  
*du frotté frotté*  
*du frotté – frotté sans contree*  
*contré ké ouéye*  
*nika nika*  
*tafia à dilo*  
*Casino*  
*Ti-Balcon*  
*D’où partaient les vidés*  
*ceux des haut-parleurs*  
*ceux des beaux parleurs*  
*ceux masques du Carnaval de bastringues en rut*  
*de l’Epihanie (sic) au Boibois du Mercredi des Cendres* (Damas 2012, 37-38)

As at the end of *Black-Label*, carnival once again emerges as a moment of collective ecstasy. Sexual activity – normal and abnormal, voluntary and forced – may also be taking

14 Albert Béville’s, alias Paul Niger’s poem “Ti Baleon” was published in the 12.4 issue of *Présence Africaine*, 1951, 159-160.

place on the side-lines of the “*bal public*.” The priest is one of the two main characters, the other being *Ti Balcon*. This latter character seems at first sight to be a male child (“*Tr*” means little, and is also a term of affection; “*balcon*” is the spot from which one gazes at the spectacle). He may indeed be being observed by the poet, who takes on the role of a voyeur enjoying the spectacle of the cross-dressed Touloulou from a distance before moving in with the dancers, merging with the “cavaliers” and linking up with female partners:

*Là, au milieu de la foule, au rythme des instruments, elles se connectent à la musique, à leur partenaire, à elles-mêmes. Le costume est un doux complice pour se laisser porter par les mouvements de leur corps dans un anonymat rassurant. Devenir touloulou est une expérience sensible et intime qui réveille le désir de se dépasser et d'explorer de nouvelles manières d'être. Comment ne pas imaginer cette vibration résonner encore, au-delà de la période du carnaval, dans le corps des femmes ? Touloulou incarne une figure féminine capable de se réinventer et de s'affirmer. Il est à la fois personne et toutes les femmes. Parée masquée*<sup>15</sup>

In “*Bientôt*,” verbs reflect the ambivalent passive behaviour of a dancer reduced to a toy, a black doll (“*Limbé*”). The dancer is being touched, rubbed (“*frotté*”), even physically molested in the process of doing exactly what is asked of him:

*Bientôt  
je n'aurai pas que dansé  
bientôt  
je n'aurai pas que chanté  
bientôt  
je n'aurai pas que frotté*<sup>16</sup>  
*bientôt  
je n'aurai pas que trempé  
bientôt  
je n'aurai pas que dansé  
chanté  
frotté  
trempé  
frotté  
chanté  
dansé  
Bientôt (Damas 1972, 55)*

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

15 Anthropologist Anne Guillou has mounted a number of exhibitions focusing on the phenomenon in the Antilles and Europe. *Parée masquée*. <http://www.une-saison-en-guyane.com/extras/portfolios/portfolio-paree-masquee/>

16 “Le frotté” refers to the making of cocktails, and “trempé” is a kind of cheap rum — *clairin* (peasant rum), macerated with spices and wood fragments (so-called erection wood, which is claimed to be an aphrodisiac; an Antillean Viagra).

I will not only have danced  
 sung  
 rubbed  
 soaked  
 rubbed  
 sung  
 danced  
 Soon (*Pigments* Trans. A. Lillehey, p. 74)

There are several possible interpretations. The poem may reference the scandalous exploitation of millions of Caribbean men and women, including their sacrifices during two World Wars. Or it could simply refer to Carnival, a celebration of joy, happiness, freedom of expression and the escape from societal constraints and conventions by means of masks. At the same time, the poet may be ripping off his own mask and testifying to his feeling of being an instrument in the hands of French colonial perpetrators. The homotextual “charge” is clearly justified as both the adult and the adolescent characters seem to be of the same sex (“*Ti-Balcon*”).

In acknowledging “multiple interpretations” (as Mallarmé believed the Symbolists’ poetic vision to be), I have attempted to engage with the conviction of Damas’ former student, the Trinidadian novelist, Merle Hodge. He insists that Damas’ love poems evolve “towards hermetic poetry” and that themes of transmigration and metempsychosis “seem to shed light on a number of his decidedly esoteric poems” (Hodge, p. 132). Other critics point to Platonic attributes in a number of Damas’ works (Cornille, p. 28), as well as drawing attention to the indecisiveness of his writings (Lane, p. 84-86). Lane refers to Jacques Derrida’s concept of “iteracy” and Judith Butler’s “performativity of gender” when exploring Damas’ criticism in a poem such as “Shine,” which appeared in *Pigments*. Dedicated to Louis Armstrong, the poem questions our reading of jazz performances as entertainment. Damas condemns our disgusting hunger for the Black body and voice, which he qualifies as the “*por-no-gra-phié*” (a word he dismembers) of the Western world. He denounces the racist, sexist and homophobic treatment of Black male fugitives.

Like the Maskilili, the shamanic spirit who bridges the physical and supernatural worlds, who moves in and out of places and who crosses Lines, the poet portrays himself in an Epiphany, conjuring up his own tres/passing in both a literal and figurative sense. He sees himself as one of the protagonists of Mardi Gras – *Roi Valal*, or Maskilili – who is caught and who dies at the end of Carnival (it is believed that *Roi Valal* was burnt at the stake). We are thus brought back to themes of fire and lynching, and forcefully reminded of the punishments awaiting all those who dare to cross Line/s.

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