

AFRO-FRENCH WRITERS OF THE 1930's AND
CREATION OF THE "NÉGRITUDE" SCHOOL

BY
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It was in the fall of 1935 that I went to Paris and entered the Sorbonne, carrying with me, among other things, both necessary and superfluous, an autographed copy of Sterling Brown's recently published collection of poems titled *Southern Road*. This small literary gem of the Black experience in the United States was to be one of several links that cemented a friendship between Aimé Césaire, who borrowed it and devoured its contents, and me. At that time the young Martiniquian was a student at Paris' prestigious *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, where he was preparing for the *agrégation*, having already become *licencié-ès-lettres* at the Sorbonne. Césaire's tremendous poetic prowess was yet to reveal itself, but he was already deeply immersed in the literature of the Black experience, especially in the United States.

It was through Césaire that I met another intellectual giant who, like Césaire, was destined to play a preeminent role in the creation of a literature of Black consciousness: Léopold Senghor, who was then a teacher in the *Lycée* of Tours, France, having already passed the difficult examination for the *agrégation*—a necessary academic hurdle for teaching in the French secondary schools. Like Césaire, Senghor, who is a native of Sénégal, West Africa, where he has been serving as President of the Republic of Sénégal since its creation in 1960, was irresistibly drawn to poetry.

It was not until last fall (1969)—here at Atlanta University where he participated in one of CLA President Long's conferences—that I met the third member of the literary triumvirate with which this paper will concern itself, but he was known to me through his works long before I came to meet him personally. That man, also a poet of renown, is Léon Damas of French Guiana, South America, educated at the *Lycée* Schoelcher in Fort-de-France, Martinique, and a con-

temporary of Césaire and Senghor as student expatriates in the Paris of the 1930's.

These three men are the principal architects of the concept of *Négritude*, the chief exponents of Black consciousness among Afro-French intellectuals, and the most authentic interpreters of the Black experience as lived and felt by the sensitive souls of Blacks who use the French language as a medium of poetic expression—as a vehicle of self-revelation.

Aimé Césaire was born on June 13, 1913, at Basse-Pointe, Martinique. Though his father was a *petit fonctionnaire* (lower echelon government employee), his family was poor; and as he puts it in *Cahier*, his mother had to pedal night and day on her Singer sewing machine so as to feed her numerous brood. He characterizes his house as “une petite maison cruelle, dont l'intransigeance affole nos fins de mois . . . une petite maison qui abrite en ses entrailles de bois pourri des dizaines de rats et la turbulence de mes six frères et soeurs.” Césaire has served as Mayor of Fort-de-France, capital of Martinique, and as député from Martinique to the Assemblée Constituante which was responsible for the Constitution of the Fourth Republic in France, and as a member of the Communist Party, which he later abjured and abandoned—but not without damage to his popularity as a writer.

While Césaire probably never experienced personally the pangs of hunger, he felt keenly the hunger, the privations, and the humiliations of his fellow Blacks in Martinique and elsewhere in the French West Indies. Indeed, as Lilyan Kesteloot so cogently puts it, “in order to understand the magnitude of Césaire's anger, one must understand the poverty and wretchedness of his native land,” where liberation from slavery had changed little or nothing of the economic and social plight of Blacks in a land where a small minority of whites enjoyed a prosperity made possible only by the systematic and ruthless exploitation of the black majority—a situation that was acerbated, in the eyes of Césaire, by the rise of a cultural elite of Blacks and mulattoes, the result of three hundred years of colonialization—an elite which existed on the periphery of the society of the *colons*, whom they aped, and which had adopted white middle-class values: money, position, security (of a sort), respectability—the whole bit.

Sent to Paris as a *boursier*, or scholarship recipient, because of his high intelligence and excellent academic performance and promise, Césaire was naturally heir to the cultural legacy in which excellence in the use of the French language was a badge of recognition and acceptance by the French, but he never quite accepted this role fully, nor could he forget the lot of his people back home. Besides, he realized that he was a black man with common ties to all Blacks everywhere—hence, part of their sufferings, humiliations, insults, and agonies. This duality was to torment him until he found effective ways to declare himself, to discover, reveal, and proclaim his true identity. So, with Senghor and Damas, he co-founded *l'Étudiant Noir*, an organ which brought together all the black students in Paris regardless of their land of origin. The credo of this group—and of their publication—may be expressed as follows: “A Black is not a white, and all Blacks have a common background (Africa) and certain common problems growing out of the black experience in a white-dominated world.

l'Étudiant Noir encouraged the reading of Afro-American writers like Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown *et al.* as models to be emulated.

The concept *Négritude* is, therefore, the result of the alienation of a whole race, and it was influenced by black-consciousness writers in the United States. It was the rebirth of pride in color and solidarity in suffering.

Césaire made his literary debut with a collection of poems, *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal* (Paris, 1939), which marks an important date in the history of black consciousness and which, again, according to his biographer, Lilyan Kesteloot, was to “serve as a standard for revolutionary youth for the next 20 years.”

Cahier was published in *Présence Africaine* in 1948. It is at once an epic and a lyric poem in which the alternation of poetry and prose suggests the medieval *chante-fables* and presages Césaire's later work, *Une Saison en Enfer*.

To me, *Cahier* is the *magnum opus* of the Bard of Martinique; it is the manifesto of *Négritude*, in which the term is first used. The work is full of anger, bitterness, resentment—but it is also full of beauty, music, grace and humanity—the humanity of John Donne's “No man is an island . . . any

man's death diminishes me . . .” a sentiment which is everywhere implied in *Cahier*, but is expressed in a later Césaire work, *Et les chiens se taisent*, thus:

Il n'y a pas dans le monde un pauvre type lynché
Un pauvre homme torturé, en qui je ne sois
assassiné et humilié.

In his lament, Césaire achieves universality—and he does so in impeccable French. This happy marriage of form and content sent André Breton, the high priest of French surrealist poetry who wrote the “Préface” to *Cahier* under the title of “A Un Grand Poète Noir,” into a fit of ecstasy, wresting from him the following appraisals of poet Césaire:

Et c'est un noir qui manie la langue française comme il n'est pas aujourd'hui un blanc pour la manier. Et c'est un noir celui qui nous guide aujourd'hui dans l'inexploré, établissant au fur et à mesure, comme en se jouant, les contacts qui nous font avancer sur des étincelles. Et c'est un noir qui est non seulement un noir mais tout l'homme, qui en exprime toutes les interrogations, toutes les angoisses, tous les espoirs et toutes les extases et qui s'imposera de plus en plus à moi comme le prototype de la dignité.

As for his poetic and artistic genius, Lilyan Kesteloot pays him this tribute:

Je ne vois pas dans l'histoire de la littérature française une personnalité qui ait à ce point intégré des éléments aussi divers que la conscience raciale, la création artistique et l'action politique. Je ne vois pas une personnalité aussi puissamment unifiée et à la fois aussi complexe que celle de Césaire. Et c'est là, sans doute, que réside le secret de l'exceptionnelle densité d'une poésie qui s'est, à un degré extrême, chargée de toute la cohérence d'une vie d'homme. (Lilyan Kesteloot: *Aimé Césaire—Poètes d'aujourd'hui* series.)

Cahier d'un retour au pays natal

This poem was written after Césaire finished his studies at the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* in Paris and was preparing to return to his native land. He ruminates on what he remembers and what he expects to find on his return. A few selected passages from *Cahier* follow:

Au bout du petit matin, cette ville inerte et ses au-delà de lèvres, de consommation, de famines, de peurs juchées dans les arbres, de peurs creusées dans le sol, de peurs amocelées et ses fumerolles d'angoisse.

(*At little morning's end, that sluggish town and its outskirts of lepers, of consumption, of famines, of fears cowering in the ravines, of fears perched in the trees, of fears dug in the soil, of fears drifting in the sky, of banked-up fears and its spewing forth of gasses of anguish.*)

Au bout du petit matin, l'échouage hétéroclite, les puanteurs exacerbées de la corruption, les sodomies monstrueuses de l'hostie et du victime, les coltis infranchissables du préjugé et de la sottise, les prostitutions, les hypocrisies, les lubricités, les trahisons, les mensonges, les faux, les concussions—l'essoufflement des lâchetés insuffisantes, l'enthousiasme sans ahan aux poussis surnuméraires, les avidités, les hystéries, les perversions, les arlequinades de la misère, les estropiements, les prurits, les urticaires, les hamacs tièdes de la dégénérescence. Ici la parade des risibles et scrofuleux bubons, les poutures de microbes très étranges, les poisons sans alexitère connu, les sanies de plaies bien antiques, les fermentations imprévisibles d'espèces putrescibles.

(*At little morning's end, the strange stranding, the exacerbated stinks of corruption, the monstrous sodomies of the sacrificial offering and of those who struck the sacrificial victims, the insuperable wall of prejudice and of stupidity, the prostitutions, the hypocrisies, the lewdnesses, the treasons, the lies, the forgeries, the concussions—the panting of insufficient cowardices, the tireless enthusiasm with supernumerary "utterings," the avidities, the hysterias, the perversions, the buffooneries of wretchedness, the crippings, the itches, the nettle-rashes, the tepid hammocks of degenerescence (insipient degeneracy). Here the parade of the ludicrous and scrofulous boils, the putridness of very strange microbes, the poisons without known antidote, the sanies (pus) of very old sores, the unforeseeable fermentations of putrescible sorts.*)

After describing the sumptuous manner in which Christmas was habitually celebrated in the affluent setting of the home of a rich white *colon* (planter), Césaire turns his attention to Christmas in his own house, where Christmas was just another routine, humdrum day of work and austerity.

Au bout du petit matin, une autre petite maison qui sent très mauvais dans une rue très étroite, une maison minuscule qui abrite en ses entrailles de bois pourri des dizaines de rats et la turbulence de mes six frères et soeurs, une petite maison cruelle dont l'intransigeance affole nos fins de mois et mon père fantasque grignoté d'une seule misère, je n'ai jamais su laquelle, qu'une imprévisible sorcellerie assoupit en mélancolique tendresse ou exalte en hautes flammes de colère; et ma mère dont les jambes pour notre faim inlassable pédalent, pédalent de jour, de nuit, je suis même réveillé la nuit part ces jambes inlassables qui pédalent la nuit et la

morsure âpre dans la chair molle de la nuit d'une Singer que ma mère pédale, pédale pour notre faim et de jour et de nuit.

(*At little morning's end, another little house which smells very bad, in a very narrow street; a tiny house which shelters in its entrails of rotten wood dozens of rats and the turbulence of my six brothers and sisters; a cruel little house whose intransigence maddens our month-ends, and my temperamental father consumed by a single misery, I have never known which one, which an unforeseeable sorcery lulls into melancholy tenderness or exalts into high flames of anger; and my mother, whose legs for our tireless hunger pedals, pedals by day and by night; I am even awakened at night by those untiring legs which pedal by night and by the sharp bite in the soft flesh of the night of a Singer which my mother pedals, pedals for our hunger both by day and by night.*)

Césaire is convinced that the peculiar contribution of Blacks to Western culture is that they have known suffering, privation, hunger—experiences which in the main are unknown to the white man. Says he:

Ceux qui n'ont inventé ni la poudre ni la boussole
Ceux qui n'ont jamais su dompter la vapeur ni
l'électricité
Ceux qui n'ont exploré ni le mers ni le ciel
Mais ils savent en ses moindres recoins le pays de le
souffrance.

(*Those who have invented neither gun powder nor
the compass
Those who have never known how to tame steam or
electricity
Those who have explored neither the seas nor the sky
But they know every nook and cranny of suffering. . .*)

The poet turns prophet as he gazes into his crystal ball:

Paysan frappe le sol de ton daba
dans le sol il y a une hâte que la syllabe de
l'événement ne dénoue pas
je me souviens da la fameuse peste qui aura lieu l'an 3000 . . .
je me rappelle la grande peste qui dépeuplera l'ouest
et les contestations des journaux savants
au loin la terre et le ciel conspiraient dans la
langueur économique d'un crocodile les lèvres percées
frappe paysan je suis ton frère. . .

(*Peasant, strike the earth with thy daba.
In the soil, there is a haste that the syllable of the
event does not unravel.*

I remember the famous plague that will take

place in the year 3000 . . .
 I recall the great plague that will depopulate the West
 and the claims of the learned journals.
 In the distance, the earth and the sky conspired in the
 economic languor of a crocodile with pierced lips.
 Strike, peasant, I am thy son. . .)

Césaire's poetry is, as André Breton tells us, "belle comme l'oxygène naissant (beautiful like nascent oxygen)."

It is in this work (*Cahier*) that the term *Négritude* is first used and introduced to the literary public. The personal experience that gave birth to the term occurred on a Paris streetcar where Césaire was a passenger. Before this incident, it may be assumed that Césaire considered himself by education, culture, and dress a black Frenchman, an "assimilé."

Seated in front of him in a Paris streetcar, on this particular day, was a grotesquely homely, awkward, uneasy, and nervous Black whose appearance, ill-fitting clothes, and manner elicited the snickers and derision of all the white passengers who observed him. He was an obvious misfit in this environment . . . and he realized it and suffered from that realization. Hence, his nervousness. Césaire, who blended so well with his surroundings in terms of dress, manners, and composure, was at first so embarrassed that he would have vanished into thin air or gone through the floor if such had been possible. Said he, "Moi je me tournai, mes yeux proclamant que je n'avais rien de commun avec ce singe (I turned away, my eyes proclaiming that I had nothing in common with that monkey)." He later referred to this momentary reaction as *ma lacheté retrouvée* (my refund cowardice), for the more he thought about the incident the more he realized that his lot and that of the hapless Black were one and the same. Their background was Africa, they were black, not white, and in this setting, as everywhere in the world of that day, Blacks were looked down upon, were even considered by many to be sub-human. The masses of Blacks were peasants and laborers, economically deprived, exploited, tolerated, or hated by the whites. Thus reasoning, Césaire, in a sudden reversal of his manner of looking at his people, came to the conclusion that the common heritage of injustices and land of origin, along with the cultural heritage of Blacks generally, constituted what, for the want of a better

term, he called *Négritude*. And, as if in a profession of religious faith or in a religious conversion, he exclaimed, "J'accepte, j'accepte tout cela . . . toute cette négritude." From that point on, he behaved in accordance with that proclamation; and his poetry reflects his *Négritude*.

II

The second member of the triumvirate of Afro-French writers of the mid-1930's, Léopold Sédar Senghor, was born in 1906 of rather well-to-do parents in the town of Joal, Sénégal, which he celebrates in a poem of childhood reminiscences titled "A Joal" (*Chants d'ombre*). He is of the Sérère tribe. After secondary studies at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, in Paris, where he met Césaire, his friend, he prepared for the ultra difficult *agrégation de grammaire* at the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*. When I met him in 1935-36, he was teaching in the *Lycée* of Tours, France, being the first African to teach in a French *lycée*. He saw service in the French Army, was taken prisoner by the Nazis in 1939, and spent time in a concentration camp, from which he escaped (a poem, "Camp 1940," tells of his experience in the war).

In 1945, M. Senghor was named *député* from *Sénégal* to the National Constituant Assembly which drew up the Constitution for the Fourth Republic in France (1946-1958). (As his and Césaire's guest, I was able to witness, as an observer, one session of the Constituant Assembly, in the summer of 1946.) Senghor was elected chairman, in the Assembly, of the committee charged with the responsibility of seeing that the new Constitution was drawn up in perfect French—a tribute to his recognized mastery of that language. In the Assembly, Senghor was a member of the Socialist Party (*le Parti Socialiste Français*). In 1946, he founded the publication *Condition Humaine*, and in 1947, *Présence Africaine*. In 1948, he founded the *Bloc Démocratique Sénégalais* and left the French Socialist Party. Later he was to found the *Bloc Progressiste Sénégalais* (in 1956, when he was mayor of Thiès); and in 1958 he founded *l'Union Progressiste Sénégalais*. When Sénégal won its independence in 1960, he was elected the first President of the *République du Sénégal*. He still serves in that high post today, ten years later. (In Dakar, ironically

enough, he resides in the mansion which once served as official residence of the Governor General of French West Africa.)

Senghor's poetic career began with the publication of *Chants d'ombre* in 1945, and it covers a 25-year span that includes a half dozen important collections, including *Nocturnes*, which won for him the *Prix International de Poésie* in 1963. Poet-Politician Senghor has given us, perhaps, the best definition of *Négritude*: "le patrimoine culturel, les valeurs et surtout l'esprit de la civilisation négro-africaine." He is, no doubt, the most eloquent spokesman for the concept of *Négritude*, of which Césaire and he were the principal creators.

Unlike Césaire, Senghor is devoid of bitterness against European colonizers. For understandable reasons based on their different backgrounds, Senghor is tolerant and forgiving while Césaire is angry and vindictive. Senghor preaches a new Afro-French humanism that grafts what is best in African culture onto what can best be adopted from French and European culture so as to form this new humanism. As both a practicing Catholic and an ardent disciple of the Catholic philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, he envisions a new humanity of brotherhood and mutual respect deriving from a blending of cultural heritages. He is, therefore, both poet and prophet. But his inspiration is Africa. As a poet he sings of the pride of being black and African with remarkably melodious ease, matched by a deep and melancholic serenity. Senghor's song is the saga of Africa—of the Africa of the past, with its folkways and traditions; of Africa of the present, with its pride and problems; of Africa of the future, with its promise of the universal brotherhood of which he dreams and for which he labors so assiduously. Yet in so doing, he is *one* with the simplest, most humble peasant, for whose liberation he has so long sung and slaved:

"J'ai choisi mon peuple noir peinant, mon peuple paysan."

To poet Senghor, Africa is the beloved Fatherland of unequaled and mystic beauty:

"Oui, c'est bien l'aïeule noire, la claire aux yeux violets sous ses paupières de nuit."

In lyrical lines of rare beauty and rhythm, Senghor succeeds

in evoking the secret soul of the Dark and Mysterious Continent:

"Les tamtams, dans les plaines noyées, rythment ton chant, et ton vers est la respiration de la nuit et de la mer lointaine."

With the prudence and patience characteristic of his people, Senghor conceals any bitterness he might have felt toward Europe and refers to the white race as "la superbe des races heureuses."

As for France, if the Senegalese bard harbors any resentment towards the former oppressors and exploiters of his Fathers, through whom he addresses France, he tactfully subdues it; and his appeal to his ancestors is clothed in tolerant patience as regards "les seigneurs de l'or et des banlieues." He sees the hand of God in the defeat of France in 1940, and he asserts that his own participation in the war was the occasion of a "replanting of fidelity" to France. Obviously, like the Fathers whom he addresses, Senghor has not allowed his heart to become hardened by hate, and his dream of eventual human brotherhood fills his heart with hope:

Soyez bénis, mes Pères, soyez bénis!
 Vous qui avez permis mépris et moqueries, les offenses
 polies, les allusions discrètes,
 Et les interdictions et les ségrégations.
 Et puis vous avez arraché de ce coeur trop aimant les
 liens qui l'unissaient au pouls même du monde.
 Soyez bénis, qui n'avez pas permis que la haine gravelât
 ce coeur d'homme.
 Vous savez que j'ai lié amitié avec les princes proscrits
 de l'Esprit, avec les princes de la Forme,
 Que j'ai mangé le pain qui donne faim de l'innombrable
 armée des travailleurs et des sans-travail,
 Que j'ai rêvé d'un monde de soleil dans la fraternité de
 mes frères aux yeux bleus.

(Blessings on you, my Fathers, blessings on you!
 You who have suffered scorn and mockeries, the polite
 offenses, the discrete allusions
 And the prohibitions and the segregations.
 And then you tore from this too loving heart the links
 which joined it to the pulse of the world.
 Blessings on you, who have not allowed hate to imprint
 itself on this heart of man.
 You know that I have become friendly with the proscribed
 princes of the mind, with the princes of Form,

*That I have eaten of the bread that gives hunger to the
numberless army of workers and unemployed,
That I have dreamed of a world of sunshine in the
fraternity of my blue-eyed brothers.)* ("Le Retour
de l'Enfant Prodigue," *Chant d'ombre.*)

If there is melancholy in Senghor's song, there is the powerful certainty of the vitality of his native Africa. While he is a Christian keenly aware of the necessity of world brotherhood, he is also an African who is unwilling to renounce his personality as an African. Then, too, he is a Frenchman who has given proof of his patriotism and loyalty by serving his country of adoption in time of war. Strange duality—a comprehensible but painful schizophrenia. Yet he does not choose to be completely assimilated to French culture (he counsels his fellow Blacks to assimilate, but not to be assimilated, "assimiler, non être assimilés"). He believes that Africa has a valuable contribution to offer a mechanical civilization on the verge of self-destruction. Africa has vitality, rhythm, gaiety, and a wealth of spiritual insights which have escaped a speed-crazed, technology-oriented society. France, too, he feels, can offer much to Africa. They can thus be mutually beneficial. "Prière aux Masques" (*Chants d'ombre*) is a melodious manifesto of Poet Senghor's credo:

Voici que meurt l'Afrique des Empires—c'est l'agonie d'une
princesse pitoyable—
Et aussi l'Europe à qui nous sommes liés par le nombril.
Fixez vos yeux immuables sur vos enfants que l'on commande,
Qui donnent leur vie comme le pauvre son dernier vêtement.
Que nous répondions présents à la renaissance du Monde;
Ainsi le levain qui est nécessaire à la farine blanche.
Car qui apprendrait le rythme au monde défunt des machines
et des canons?
Qui pousserait le cri de joie pour réveiller morts et orphelins à
l'aurore?
Dites, qui rendrait la mémoire de vie à l'Homme aux
expoirs éventrés.
Ils nous disent les hommes du coton, du café, de l'huile,
Ils nous disent les hommes de la Mort.
Nous sommes les hommes de la Danse, dont les pieds
reprennent vigueur en frappant le sol dur.

*(Here dies the Africa of Empires—it is the agony of a
pitiful princess—
And also the Europe to which we are attached by our umbilical
cord.*

*Fix your immovable eyes on your children who are commanded,
Who give their lives as the pauper gives his last garment.
May we answer present at the rebirth of the World;
Just as the leaven is necessary to white flour.
For who would teach rhythm to the defunct world of machines
and cannons?
Who would utter the shout of joy in order to awaken the dead
and orphans to the dawn?
Say, who would return the memory of life to Man of vanquished
hopes.
They call us the men of cotton, tobacco, and oil.
They call us men of Death.
We are men of the Dance, whose feet regain vigor on striking the
hard soil.)* (*Chants d'ombre.*)

I shall terminate the treatment of Senghor with the opening lines of his beautiful and majestic poem, "Femme Noir," which is as much a hymn to Mother Africa as it is a tribute to black womanhood:

Femme nue, femme noire
Vêtue de ta couleur qui est vie, de ta forme qui est beauté!
J'ai grandi à ton ombre; la douceur de tes mains bandait
mes yeux.
Et voilà qu'au coeur de l'Été et de Midi, je te découvre,
Terre promise, du haut d'un haut col calciné,
Et ta beauté me foudroie en plein coeur, comme l'éclair d'un aigle.
*(Nude woman, dark woman,
Clothed in thy color, which is life, in thy form which is beauty!
I grew up in thy shadow; the gentleness of thy hands bandaged
my eyes.
And, lo! in the heart of Summer and Noon I discover thee,
Promised Land, from the height of a calcined hill,
And thy beauty smites me in the middle of my heart, like the
flight of an eagle.) . . .* (*Chants d'ombre.*)

III

I shall conclude this paper with a brief note on the third member of the triumvirate under consideration here, and with the citing of two of his short poems in the *Négritude* vein.

Leon-G. Damas was born in 1912 at Cayenne, French Guiana, South America, but he was educated at the *Lycée Schoelcher* in Fort-de-France, Martinique, and in Paris as a contemporary of Césaire and Senghor. As an impecunious student, "he lived intensely the intellectual and material tragedy of the struggling

poor student as well as the moral tragedy of his race." His poetry is, unlike that of Césaire and Senghor, unsophisticated—using everyday words, often coarse and vulgar words—usually the language of the people. The first example is the poem, titled "Limbé":

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 fessus
dont le vent porte au nez la misère
miséricorde

Donnez-moi l'illusion que je n'aurai plus à contenter
le besoin étale
des 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
rester à l'ombre de ses lois
recouvrer mon courage

mon audace
me sentir moi-même
nouveau moi-même de ce que hier j'étais
hier

sans complexité
hier

quand est venue l'heure du déracinement

Le sauront-ils jamais cette rancune de mon coeur
à l'oeil 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 lese mains
les piétinements le sol

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

*(Give me back my black dolls.
Let them dispel the image of the livid tarts of the merchants
of love
who come and go on the boulevard of my boredom.*

*Give me back my black dolls.
Let them dispel
the never-ceasing image,
the hallucinating image,
of the heaped puppets
whose pitiable wretchedness the wind brings to
the nostril.*

*Give me back the illusion that I shall no longer
have to satisfy
the meat-stall need
of the mercies roaring
under the unconscious disdain
of the world.*

*Give me back my black dolls that I may play with them
the naive games of my instinct,
to remain in the shadow of its laws,
to recover my courage,
my audacity,
to feel myself
(a) new myself of what yesterday I was
yesterday
without complexity;*

*yesterday,
when came the hour of the uprooting.
Will they ever know this rancor of my heart
to the eye of my mistrust too late opened?
they have (burgled) ransacked the space that was mine,
the custom, the days, the life
the song, the rhythm, the effort,
the path, the water, the cabin
the gray, fertilized earth;
the wisdom, the words, the palaver,
the old
the cadence the hands, the measure the hands,
the trampling the soil.*

*Give me back my black dolls—
my black dolls,
black dolls,
dolls.*

“Solde,” a final example of Damas’ poetry in the *Négritude* vein, must suffice.

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’emmaillotage 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 leurs formules
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 égorgé les mains effroyablement rouges
du sang de leur civilisation.

*(I have the impression of being ridiculous
in their shoes in their tuxedos;
in their stiff shirt-front, in their collar,
in their monocle, in their derby hat.*

*I have the impression of being ridiculous
with my toes which are not made for
perspiring from morning to night, which undresses*

*with the swaddling which weakens my limbs
and takes away from my body its fig-leaf beauty.*

*I have the impression of being ridiculous
with my neck like a factory smoke-stack
with my head-aches which stop
each time I greet someone.*

*I have the impression of being ridiculous
in their drawing rooms, in their manners,
in their bowing, in their formalities,
in their multiple need of imitations.*

*I have the impression of being ridiculous
with all that they recount
until they serve you in the afternoon a little hot water
and some cold cakes*

*I have the impression of being ridiculous
with the theories that they season
to the taste of their needs, of their passions,
of their instincts opened at night in the form of a doormat.*

*I have the impression of being ridiculous
among them, accessory among them, pimp
among them, a cutthroat with frightfully bloody hands,
with the blood of their civilization.*

In conclusion, each of these poets is an artist, a master craftsman; and the works of the three may be characterized as variations on a common theme. Yet each one is different from the other in style and approach to social philosophy. What gives them common ties and a oneness of theme is their blackness, their *Négritude*. Césaire possesses to a high degree what André Breton calls “the power of transmutation,” the ability to transform even the uglinesses of life into exquisite beauty—a beauty which defies the sometimes difficult-to-understand surrealistic verbiage in which it is clothed. Senghor excels in the art of capturing the rhythms of his native Africa, combining often several art forms in the process: native African musical instruments, the dance, drums, and certain other musical instruments like the trombone and the trumpet, to the accompaniment of which much of his poetry is written and read. Damas evokes native and universal imagery through the use of the language of the people, both in French and in Créole, as he relates to the life, experiences, and ambitions and loves of the French West Indies.

All three poets sing, for the most part, in a minor key. Theirs is a sad and tragic song. But, as we are reminded by the nineteenth-century French Romantic poet, Alfred de Musset, in his "Nuit de Mai":

Les plus désespérés sont les chants les plus beaux,
Et je sais d'immortels qui sont de vrais sanglots.

(The saddest songs are the most beautiful songs,
And I know some, ~~great~~ which are true sobs.)

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Immortal ones

