

The Last Interview: L.-G. Damas speaks to Alan Warhaftig

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The Last Interview: L.-G. Damas Speaks to Alan Warhaftig

As an undergraduate at Stanford, I worked closely with Prof. St. Clair Drake.¹ Most of my summer of 1974 (after my sophomore year) was spent in Trinidad, where I stayed in Laventille with the great-aunt and great-uncle of one of my college friends. There I read the novel, *Minty Alley*, by C.L.R. James,² and was amazed by how accurately it captured the people and culture around me.

In the fall of 1976, Drake arranged for me to visit C.L.R. James in Washington, DC, where he was teaching at Federal City College. We met three times that week and recorded an interview about *Minty Alley* on October 15, 1976. James suggested that I meet Léon-Gontran Damas, who was at Howard University, and on consecutive days the following week (October 20-21), we recorded three hours of conversation.

I was almost 22 when I met Damas, and while I knew a fair bit about the Caribbean from my reading, travels and especially my work with Drake, I was woefully unprepared to interview him. I knew that he was from French Guiana and was one of the three fathers of Négritude, but no more. I had not read his work, which wasn't translated, and my French wasn't adequate for the subtleties of poetry. I'd have been better prepared, but when I left for California, I had no idea that Damas lived in Washington, DC or that I'd meet him.

Damas was initially cautious (see the excerpt re: Lilyan Lagneau, better known as Lilyan Kesteloot), so I established my bona fides, such as they were at 21, by telling him at length about a book project, *Black Diaspora*, on which I was assisting Prof. Drake. Damas had a high regard for Drake but took issue with the term, *black diaspora*, though after listening to that section of the tape at least a dozen times, the basis of his objection was not articulated. He said that he preferred *Transatlantic Africa* or *Africa Abroad*, but for reasons he did not clearly state, "admitted" use of the term *diaspora* for Black Americans.

In 1983, Professor Daniel Racine included a chronology of Damas in an overview of his life and work.³ Presumably the description of this interview came from Damas, the only other person in the room: "*20 octobre: accorde une interview à l'étudiant juif Alan M. Warhaftig dans laquelle il établit une nette différence entre la diaspora juive et la diaspora noire en insistant sur les circonstances religieuses, économiques et historiques.*" Ironic.

In 2012, Professor Kathleen Gyssels of the University of Antwerp pursued this entry in Racine's chronology and contacted me. I shared a copy of the recording with her. We ultimately met in Paris in October, 2018, by which time I had retired from teaching and had time for special projects. I agreed to transcribe the Damas tapes.

1 St. Clair Drake (1911-1990) was an American anthropologist and sociologist best known for *Black Metropolis*, a 1945 landmark study (with Horace Cayton) of the Bronzeville neighborhood in Chicago. He was part of the team, under Alison Davis, which produced *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class* (1941). Drake was interested in Pan-Africanism and advised Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah and leaders of other recently decolonized African nations. He was also interested in the Caribbean – his father was from Barbados. Drake taught at Roosevelt University in Chicago for 23 years and at Stanford University for seven. His final publication was the two volumes of *Black Folk Here and There: An Essay in History and Anthropology* (1987, 1990).

2 C.L.R. James (1901-1989) was a Trinidadian historian, political philosopher, culture critic and *homme de lettres*. Many know him as a leading figure of the Anti-Stalinist Left or as a leading West Indian nationalist who, on the eve of Trinidad's independence in 1962, broke with his former pupil, Dr. Eric Williams, over commitment to the West Indies Federation. Others know James for *The Black Jacobins*, his 1938 history of Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo (Haitian) revolution or *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), an extraordinary blend of autobiography, cricket and reflection on both West Indian and British culture.

3 Racine, Daniel. *Léon-Gontran Damas : l'homme et l'oeuvre*. Présence Africaine, 1983.

The transcription – over 15,000 words – was grueling work, requiring at least 100 hours.⁴ It was a pleasure to hear Damas's voice again, recall his gestures and facial expressions, and at the same time become reacquainted with my much younger self. Damas was 64 when I interviewed him – my age as I was transcribing. I am by no means a Damas scholar; he may have said the same things in prior interviews or writings, but the Racine chronology lists no later interviews, so this may have been his last. Five months later, Damas fell ill; ten months after that, following extended hospitalizations, he died in January, 1978.

In retrospect, I am grateful that Damas quickly identified me as a promising rookie and agreed to speak about matters that were important to him; he was extraordinarily kind to me – generous with his time, insights and bibliographic recommendations. I was an unbelievably fortunate young man that such distinguished intellectuals as Drake, James and Damas made time for me when they could have better profited by conferring with each other. They took their teaching responsibility seriously.

I am also grateful to Professor Gyssels; had she not taken the initiative and found me in Los Angeles, the Damas tapes would have remained in the shoe box with the tapes of the other interviews.

* * *

On meeting Lilyan Kesteloot

When Lilyan Lagneau⁵ decided to write her thesis,⁶ she was in contact with Césaire and Senghor; she met them in Rome, at the Second Congress.⁷ I had heard of her – very nice, and so on, and one day she came to my office in Paris, where I was taking care of the Africanization of French Overseas Radio – I was the cultural attaché and counselor. First of all, she told me that she was from Kikwit, *Congo Belge* – the former *Congo Belge*.⁸ That was that period of the Round Table with Lumumba,⁹ and I was in contact with people in Belgium. She's a very...she knows what she wants. She said, "I've come to see you because Césaire and Senghor say that 'there is one man who can, if he wants, give you information.'" And I found that's very, very... I should prefer to have business with a man. 'Cause she's funny, this woman. She was always in my office, in my house. She was... she knew what she wanted. And I found that... I say, that's funny. That would be the first dissertation I shall have.¹⁰ One month later, she said, "I'm surprised that you have a so great admiration for Césaire and Senghor." I said, "What?" "Well, I've been told that many complaints between you and..." I said, "What complaints?" I said, "We are condemned to live together... Who told you that?" That was people talking to divide. As I said in Dakar, "There is no power in the world to divide us because Césaire is Césaire. The success – I'm pleased that he had his success, and he's pleased when I'm a success. With Senghor, it is the same thing.

4 The transcription is being finalized and will hopefully be published in 2020.

5 Lilyan Lagneau is the noted Belgian scholar, Dr. Lilyan Kesteloot, author of *Les écrivains noirs de langue française : naissance d'une littérature*. Her first marriage was to philosopher Marc Lagneau, a professor at the Université catholique de Louvain, who died in 1955.

6 Doctoral dissertation. Dr. Kesteloot received her doctorate in 1961 from the *Université libre de Bruxelles*.

7 The Second Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in Rome, Italy. March 26 - April 1, 1959. Her first meetings with Damas were in 1959.

8 Kesteloot was born in Belgium but lived most of her life, until age 19, in Bukavu (not Kikwit), *Congo Belge*.

9 Patrice Lumumba, the first elected prime minister of the independent Democratic Republic of the Congo. The "Round Table" refers to the 1960 Belgo-Congolese Round Table Conference in Brussels, where the decision was reached that the Congo would become independent on June 30, 1960. At the instigation of Belgium and the United States, Prime Minister Lumumba was assassinated on January 17, 1961 in a coup led by Joseph Mobutu (Mobutu Sese Seko), who would be president of the Congo/Zaire from 1965-1997. In 1966, Aimé Césaire wrote a play, *Une Saison au Congo*, about the last months of Lumumba.

10 The first doctoral dissertation in which he will be cited.

* * *

On the Question of Language (Creole vs French)

When I went to Haiti in 1944, there was a big tendency to give up on Creole. This idea came from the elite of Port-au-Prince – the urbanized people, though Félix Morisseau-LeRoy translated a Greek play into Creole.¹¹ You had a group of Haitians very, very excited – professors, scholars, poets who intended to develop that... You had a *tentative*¹² made by UNESCO in Haiti's Marbial Valley, and Alfred Métraux¹³ from Paris was in charge. When we asked the students ... what they wanted – either to develop the Creole or develop the French program, all the students said, “We want to learn French. We want to learn French” – or English, perhaps. In any event, they didn't want to learn Creole. They were right because the Haitian Creole is spoken in Haiti – that's not the same Creole spoken in Martinique, in Guadeloupe, or French Guiana. By developing Haitian Creole, it would be a sort of *isolationnisme*. What they had to do is to open schools – to give to the masses a chance to be integrated in the Haitian society. It was a false problem for elites like Jacques Roumain, Christian Beaulieu, and Jacques Stephen Alexis to talk about the necessity of a Creole education program.¹⁴ That's not the way. When, in 1804, Haiti became independent, how do you explain that in the constitution they put, in the first article, that the language of the Republic of Haiti will be the French language. And there is no reason to give up this language. That will be the same thing when former colonies become independent – not only the former French colonies but the British colonies, too. They will maintain the language of the masters. Why? Because English and French are diplomatic languages, commercial languages, international languages, and immediately after the independence of Africa, the newly independent states had to settle their problems in international organizations. They could not go to the U.N. to define or present their problems in Wolof, in Yoruba, in Swahili. Haiti never came in the U.N. to talk in Creole.

* * *

Influences and Imprints

As for myself, I have to tell you that among the three,¹⁵ I've been the most in contact with the Surrealists. I realized rapidly that, to be understood by the masses, I had to live down this *hermétique* expression. This thing is strange, you know. *Pigments* was published by a *Surréaliste* editor, Guy Lévis-Mano, *Editions G.L.M.*, who published André Breton, Paul Eluard – people like that. I never saw Césaire and Senghor in contact with these people. I'd been sent to Guy Lévis-Mano by Robert Desnos, who wrote the preface to *Pigments*, in which Desnos didn't try to present my works as surrealist.

The writer by whom I was influenced most was Charles Baudelaire, but not Baudelaire himself – the translation of Edgar Allen Poe by Baudelaire. Poe played a big, big role in my life – not in Martinique but when I came to France, but I was prepared, perhaps, to absorb Poe. I was interested in Poe by Robert Desnos, and he got...to be a big influence. I was interested by the mysterious novels, the *histoires extraordinaires*, and I remember the first thing I wrote – I wrote poems under the influence of the style of Baudelaire...The first

11 Sophocles' *Antigone*.

12 An anthropological survey.

13 A prominent Swiss anthropologist, author of *Le Vaudou haïtien* (Gallimard 1958)/*Voodoo in Haiti* (Oxford UP 1959). He led the study in the Marbial Valley from 1948-1950. See *Making a Living in the Marbial Valley* (UNESCO 1951)

14 Prof. Michel DeGraff of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology identified Beaulieu and Alexis from an audio excerpt to which he graciously listened. Damas identified them only by surname.

15 Césaire, Senghor and Damas.

novel I wrote – that was a novel based on the *metempsychosis*...¹⁶ That was animals speaking and mountains responding – it was funny. And when I came and I developed my work – I worked my English seriously, and I was reading Poe. I was very, very excited by Poe. And of course, from Poe, I came into summons of one who influenced me – that was Stéphane Mallarmé. [Chuckles] And when I began my road, in *Pigments* you will see the influence, in the first, in perhaps three or four poems – four poems, *surréaliste* poems, but empty poems. One day I was afraid, myself, to continue to write because, of course, I used the *automatique* writing to liberate myself from the *poétique* – French *poétique* style, methods and theories. And chiefly, I suffered to continue to write in *alexandrine*, sonnets, because I could not express my entire feeling, and this *automatique* writing – from my dreams – I was influenced by Etienne Léro...¹⁷ And I've been helped by the poems of Langston Hughes, and that's why the best translations of Langston Hughes will be my translations. I knew the man; I've been in contact with him. We have the same problems, the same...many things in common – rhythm, and I was born by the rhythm.¹⁸ But when you study all these poems, Césaire and Senghor, you will see. Senghor – a few poems are surrealistic.

I remember when I was in Paris with Robert Desnos on Saturdays; we were invited there, and we'd always bring drinks or wine. And Youki¹⁹ was preparing the meal – roast beef...And we used to arrive at 7 or 8 and stay until 5, 6 in the morning – to drink and to talk. Each one was to bring a bottle of wine or cognac, or something like that, because you had not only the *café littéraire*, but during the resistance, during the occupation, we used to meet in the homes of people like that. Jean-Louis Barrault, himself, created afterwards on Wednesdays something for *Les Grands Augustins*, but it was for the theater...²⁰ And Barrault was helped by Desnos. He had no money at the time. Desnos gave two *préfaces* in his life – one for my *Pigments* and one for Barrault's play, *Numance*,²¹ adapted from Cervantes, and he wrote a big *préface*.

* * *

On C.L.R. James

I've known C.L.R. James for 40 years. We met in France when he was writing *The Black Jacobins*.²² I used to go with him to *La Bibliothèque Nationale* to help him to make translations, to discover documents. We are friends from...1936. I discovered James, first of all, by *Minty Alley*.²³ I read *Minty Alley* in France. I brought James once to Desnos's house – Robert Desnos, who prefaced *Pigments*.²⁴ He was a perfect gentleman.

16 *Metempsychosis* refers to the supposed transmigration of the soul at death into a new body of the same or different species.

17 Etienne Léro (1910-1939). Martiniquais writer, one of the group that produced the one-issue journal, *Légitime Défense*. He died in Paris from wounds suffered while fighting for France in WWII.

18 *Born or borne?*

19 Youki Desnos (1903-1966?), wife of Robert Desnos. She was an artists' model and then a gallery owner. Formerly known as Lucie "Youki" Badoud. Her first husband was the Japanese-French artist Léonard Tsuguharu Foujita (*Book of Cats*), whom she left for Desnos.

20 *Le Grenier des Augustins*, in a 16th century building in the *rue des Grands-Augustins*, was a theater company founded by Barrault and his wife, Madeleine Renaud, in 1936. It would later become Pablo Picasso's studio, where *Guernica* was painted.

21 *Numantia*, produced by Barrault in 1937, was based on a short story by Miguel de Cervantes. It was the first large production by his theater company.

22 *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* was published in London by Secker & Warburg in 1938.

23 Written in 1927, *Minty Alley* is a seminal work of Trinidadian "barrack yard fiction," in which the life of working class people is depicted, in this case through the limited point of view of a young middle class observer. It was the first novel by a black West Indian published in England, issued in London by Secker & Warburg in 1936.

24 *Pigments*, Damas's first book of poetry, was published in Paris in 1937 by Guy Lévis-Mano (*Editions G.L.M.*) with a preface by Desnos.

Minty Alley – I used to see that it was a “novel of the backyard.” With V.S. Naipaul that would be *Miguel Street*. The same situation you will find in Martinique, in Haiti. *Minty Alley* would be a good movie. I began to translate that, you know. Sometime ago. I sure wish I’d finished...To reconstitute²⁵ the West Indian atmosphere, I didn’t translate “*La ruelle à la menthe*.” I put “*La ruelle au pilibo*.” The *pilibo* is made in the backyard in all the West Indies.²⁶ But *Minty Alley*, because you have the influence of the East Indians who use mint. But that’s a tremendous book.

* * *

On the Use of *Diaspora*²⁷

I don’t agree with the term *diaspora*...When the Jews were obliged to leave their country...That was in the name of their faith, and for many reasons they found support in their Bible.²⁸ But our problem²⁹ was not a discussion, a religious discussion. That was a transfer of population. More important than the last transfer of population during the Second World War. That was a transfer of population – 20 million. 200 million died.³⁰ That was a deportation. I prefer the term, *Transatlantic Africa*, you understand, *Africa Abroad*, to *diaspora*, but I admit for the Black Americans, the Negro Americans, I admit the term *diaspora*. They received a religious education – from the Bible. I understand, but that’s not valuable for all the other people.³¹

Diaspora is a very important event in the life of humanity.... It’s not the same. We cannot compare what is not comparable. We have to stop that. That’s the second edge of the problem for the Black people to use this word. They don’t realize what the Jews suffered from that. In the *Diaspora*, the conditions of living of those people has been awful. In the *Diaspora*, the Jew preserved his own identity, his own faith. We had not the possibility to do that. We have been uprooted; we have been dismembered, and we have been obliged to accept conditions which have never been done/made to the Jews. We have been obliged to adapt ourselves to the new environment everywhere. And everywhere we have been obliged to adopt the language.

But the Jews were threatened by something. That was not our case. People came in Africa and took us – with the complicity of Africans themselves, you know. We have been uprooted. You had families, members of a family – one in Louisiana, another one in Pernambuco.³² The members of the same family could not pretend to belong to the same

25 Presumably *restore*.

26 *Pilibo* is a candy specific to Martinique. The impulse to change the novel’s title was well-intended but ill-conceived, as mint can be an herb, a flavor or a scent, not just a candy.

27 *Diaspora* is derived from the Greek verb διασπείρω (*diaspeirō*), which means “I scatter” or “I spread about.” It has been used to describe the dispersions of various populations throughout history, though *diaspora* is most commonly associated with Jewish migration.

28 Damas states that Jews fled to the *Diaspora* as a religious choice, akin to the Mayflower Pilgrims who left for Holland after the Church of England was established, violating their belief the each congregation had its own covenant with God with no need for a bureaucratic intermediary. In fact, the Jews fled in fear of their lives – to avoid persecution and possibly death because of their religion. Their flight may have been prescient but was hardly voluntary. Edouard Glissant presents this problematic analysis far more coherently in “Reversion and Diversion,” which appears in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (translated by Michael Dash), Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989, 14-26.

29 People of African ancestry who were involuntarily transported to the New World.

30 Both the 20 million and the 200 million appear to refer to the Atlantic Slave Trade, but his estimate of 20 million is high and 200 million extremely high. On a PBS website, Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. cites the Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, which estimates that 12.5 million Africans were shipped to the New World: 10.7 million survived and 1.8 million died. Others died in Africa and upon arrival in the New World.

31 Damas did not make clear why the term *diaspora* was acceptable for use by African Americans but not by others of African ancestry around the world.

32 A state in northeast Brazil.

family afterwards. One was Spanish; another one was French. Another one was English, Portuguese, Dutch and so forth. And French. Can we talk about *diaspora* in this sense?

* * *

Alienation, Culture and the *Négritude* Movement

I was born in French Guiana. I've not been authorized to learn Portuguese, and that would be very useful for me – French Guiana is at the border of Brazil. We had nothing in our program to learn Dutch, and I have nearby, in my neighborhood, that's Dutchmen – you understand – that would be helpful for us. We could, in this way, tear down the artificial borders created by the colonization. They wanted us to learn English – to demonstrate that, first of all, the French system of education was better than the British one. And to demonstrate that an Afro-Latin Negro has nothing to do with an Afro-Anglo-Saxon Negro: to oppose us. And to demonstrate our superiority, the superiority of the French people.

We knew more of France than of French Guiana. I never had the opportunity, until I arrived in France, to learn the history of French Guiana. I didn't know the geography of French Guiana. I knew all the names of the rivers in France; I knew nothing of myself, of my own country. I knew the names of the plants; I knew the seasons of France... We were alienated; we were *depersonalized*, and that's the word of Senghor at the same time we were creating this *Négritude* Movement. Senghor said at this moment, – he wrote in the newspaper in France. He said, "We have to assimilate the culture and civilization – occidental – of the French, but we have not to be assimilated to them."

The statement of Senghor was, "*Assimiler – non être assimilé.*" He develops this position. He said, "You give us – you impose upon us your civilization. Please allow us to take what we want of this civilization, and we shall retribute to you the rest."³³ He said, "When I was young, I was fed with the milk of a camel – camel milk. I don't think that I became a camel and had a change of sex." He put this formula in 1944. We didn't coin just the word – but we had to give a sense, to give an idea, a concept to this word, a philosophy to this movement, and we developed many, many, many, many, many formulas like that – to give a content to the *Négritude* Movement...

33 Speaking to the French.