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Daniel L. Racine

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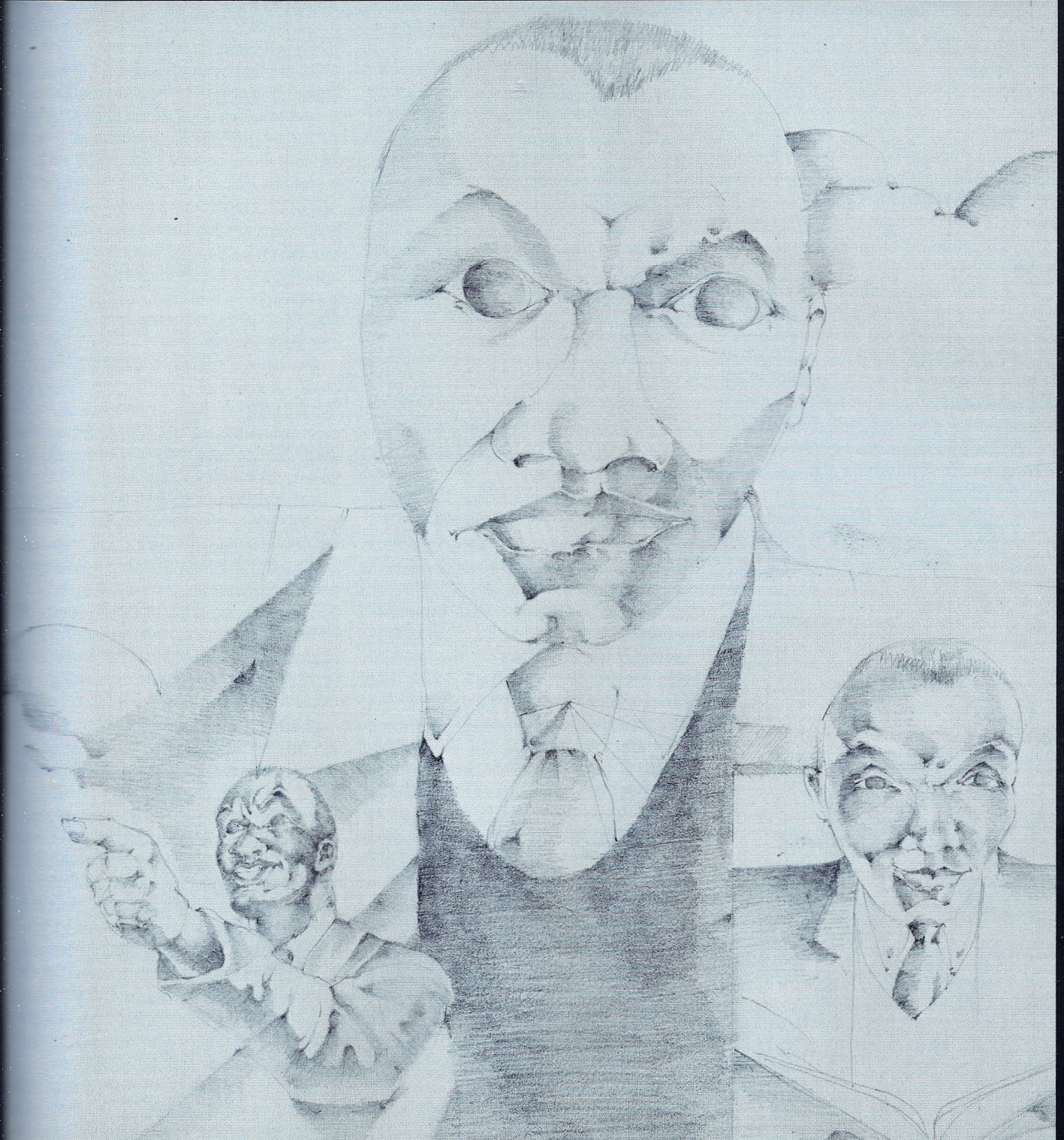
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*“To Leon Gontran Damas,  
herald of Negritude,  
distinguished poet and  
scholar – for the breadth and  
clarity of his vision of  
international African soul.”*



# LEON DAMAS

## A Memorial Dedication

4 By Daniel L. Racine

It was most fitting that the Fourth Annual Conference of Afro-American Writers, sponsored by the Institute for the Arts and the Humanities, was dedicated to Leon Gontran Damas, poet and co-founder of Negritude. Damas was one of the most encouraging members of the Advisory Board of the Institute and his dynamic, creative participation in its activities and particularly its annual conferences, are well known.

As for the Institute, it deserves credit for having fully recognized the value and prestige of a man of the international stature of Damas, to such a point that it let him play an important role in the development and elaboration of its programs. And it was thanks to this unquestionable recognition that Damas, in May 1975, received a plaque from the Institute with the following inscriptions:

*"To Leon Gontran Damas, herald of Negritude, distinguished poet and scholar—for the breadth and clarity of his vision of international African soul."*

Had Damas lived a few months longer, no doubt he would have been among the participants of the writers conference which was held last May. He would have been surrounded by familiar faces and friends; for he knew everyone personally and had read and encouraged their works. The invaluable library that he left shows eloquent evidence of such popularity among Afro-American writers. Just pick at random some of the books out of the shelves and you will read testimonies such as these:

"To my brother and teacher—for our people, love and blackness," March, 1973, signed Don Lee, alias Haki Madhubuti, on a book entitled: *From Plan to Planet*; or this other autograph:

"To Leon Damas, much love for you and your poetry, keep on keeping on, Love": Jayne Cortez, April 27, 1971, on her *Festival and Funerals*; or:

"For Leon Damas, my artistic and political father, for whom I am grateful; with

warm respect and love," June Jordan, 1974, on her volume: *Some Changes*; or again:

"To my friend and brother, Leon, the brilliant elder—a statesman poet who has inspired so many of us and to his beautiful wife, Marietta, my warmest thanks and deepest affection," signed Fredy (for Wilfred Cartey), September 1973, on *The House of Blue Writing*. Here is another one:

"To Leon Damas plus Mrs. Damas, and the past, future work, may the forces of our forefathers keep singing in you in your household. May your fight shine! shine! shine! Happy birthday, happy others, happy always, press on, press on; peace, brother, peace, sister," March 30, 1973, signed Eugene Redmond, on his volume: *Song from an Afro-phone*. Still more:

"Beautiful Leon Damas! The sun walked indoor!" Washington, March 12, 1977: Larry Neal, on: *Hoo-Doo Hollerin' Bebop Ghosts*.

Let us take a few more. Here the words are in French and the translation is: "To the poet, to the friend, to the brother, Leon Damas, with admiration and gratitude," signed, Mercer Cook, on *Black Militant*;

Another testimony in French reads: "To Leon Damas and Marietta, his wife, with admiration of his poetry of Negritude humanity, with respect, gratitude and affection, thanks, brother, thanks, sister, good friends in time of need," Sterling Brown, after a reading at Federal City College, May 22, 1973. The author of this book, *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, is not Sterling Brown, but Stephen Henderson, who also wrote the following on the same volume, September 1973: "To Leon Damas, one of the giants of Negritude, great spirit and poet—Best."

On the anthology entitled *Sounds Freedom Ring*, by Bill Martin, Jr., we find Samuel Allen's autograph next to one of his poems, and he wrote in French: "For Leon Damas, great master of Negritude, friendly," the date is not mentioned.

Still another signature of gratitude is that of Maya Angelou who wrote:

"For the Damas family, thank you for your constant inspiration. Joy!" November 1974, on *Gather in My Name*.

On the last book presented to him at his final public appearance at an exhibit dedicated to him at the Watha Daniel Library in Washington, D.C., by the Institute for the Preservation and Study of African-American Writing, there is the following:

"To Dr. Leon Damas with grateful appreciation for the many outstanding contributions that you have made to our heritage. We honor and respect you this day and always." Lorraine A. Williams, Nov. 2, 1977. The book: *Africa and the Afro-American Experience*.

The list can go on indefinitely and include the names of Langston Hughes, Richard Wright and Countee Cullen, for example. Also, some of the authors of the large number of enthusiastic essays and poems that I have received for the memorial monograph dedicated to Damas—but this is significant enough to show how writers were fascinated by, and attached to his extraordinary personality. He was a central figure who attracted the admiration and respect of everyone, because he was considered as the herald and the symbol of the faith in the humanistic, artistic, and cultural values that gather the Afro-American writers.

Despite his friendly relationship with all of them, he was the man for whom the audience would stand up when he entered an auditorium and the one who was listened to with the greatest attentive awe, with the expectation that his deep prophetic voice would always have some important message to communicate for the future or something to reveal about the struggling experience of the past. One of these messages was that Black artists had to use their talents to communicate the cultural tradition, values and potentialities of their race to the modern world, and they must also protect their works and their rights by a strong union of their own.

I remember Damas talking about his pioneering efforts in the 1930s—to gather and unite all Black students in Paris un-

under the banner of Negritude. He was one of the first to realize that Black people, regardless of their geographical origins, were brothers and shared in the same unacceptable condition. This seems so obvious today, but one must remember that one of the most successful works of slavery and colonialism was the division of Black people. So much so that the West Indians and the Guyanese would consider themselves superior to the Africans, whom they despised and avoided even when they were students at the same university. The superiority complex was mainly based on lighter pigmentation and the degree of civilization and assimilation received by the uprooted group from the colonialists.

Damas was one of the first to be aware of the dangers of division and alienation that was created by Western colonialism. He made it a point to expose it and this was one of his deepest commitments. From the beginning, he was a committed writer, a militant. He founded and edited the famous review, *The Black Student*, which sought to unite all Black students who read his messages and who expressed their ideas without hypocrisy and with authenticity. Thus Damas invited them to be themselves in their writings and their attitudes, to resist a borrowed or imposed culture. In other words, his message was to be Black and be proud of it.

The revolutionary publication which was proposing such a change in attitude was confiscated by the authorities in France, then annihilated to such an extent that no copy of it is to be found today. But its message awoke the consciousness of many Blacks—never to be forgotten. As a result, Damas lost his scholarship, and even some support from his bourgeois family. He experienced long periods of privation; he was obliged to take odd jobs in order to survive and continue his studies.

Damas' acute racial awareness led him to drop law and study Black culture instead at the Institute of Ethnology. At the same time, he mingled with American writers such as Langston Hughes, Jean

Toomer, Countee Cullen and other members of the Harlem Renaissance whose works he read and translated before he published his own. His first volume of poetry, *Pigments*, was published in 1937. It was a work of protest—if not revolt—against a situation, a condition or even a world in which he—of African descent with slave ancestors—did not feel quite comfortable. In several of his poems, Damas expressed discontent for having been alienated from his native African culture, in order to assimilate and to be assimilated to a strange European culture. He felt ridiculous. Hence the famous poem, "Solde," translated as "Bargain" in English. The opening lines read:

*"I feel ridiculous  
in their shoes  
in their dinner jacket  
in their shirt front  
in their stiff color . . ."*

Damas, therefore, wrote such poems to claim the culture where he belonged, to return to African values, to those Black dolls which he so pathetically begs to get back in his poem, "Limbe" ("Blues" in English). For example: the space that was his, the custom, the days, the life, the singing, the rhythm, the toil, the footpath, the water, the hut, the fire-blackened ground, the wisdom, the words, the palavers, the elders, the tempo, the beat . . .

*Pigments* is also a cry of indignation because of injustice against Black people, a condemnation of racial prejudice, colonialism, imperialism and all sorts of exploitation. It is an exhortation of Black people from all over the world—to solidarity, as he already had expressed in *The Black Student* review.

In another volume of verse, *Black Label*, Damas uses his talent to convince the world, including his own people, that the Negro is the embodiment of primal humanity and there is pride to be Black:

*"For beauty is Negro  
and Negro wisdom,  
for endurance is Negro  
and Negro courage*

*for patience is Negro  
and Negro irony  
for charm is Negro  
and Negro magic  
for love is Negro . . ."*

When Damas became conscious of the injustice suffered by race and of the necessity of having it rehabilitated, he started expressing his feelings in prose and in poetic form, without thinking of any movement, be it Negritude or otherwise. In fact, the term Negritude was first used by Aime Cesaire in his *Return to my Native Land*, partially published in 1939, two years after *Pigments*. When World War II came, the Black militant students of Paris—like many other people—were mobilized and dispersed; all their literary activities and publications were discontinued. After the war, Cesaire's book was published in 1945, by a Parisian publisher. And in 1947, Damas edited the first anthology of overseas writers—most of them Black and some Vietnamese. Leopold Senghor published in his turn, the *Anthology of Negro and Malagasy Poets*, with the preface, "Black Orpheus," by Jean-Paul Sartre. It was Sartre who first talked of the so-called Negritude movement. During the same period, more precisely in 1947, the now prestigious review *Presence Africaine* was founded by Alioune Diop of Senegal, with the collaborations of Senghor, Cesaire, Richard Wright and Paul Hazoume. Its goal was to diffuse all literary and cultural writings susceptible to "define the African originality and to hasten its integration in the modern world." (Alioune Diop, *P.A.*, Nov.-Dec. 1947, p. 7.) A few years later, Lilyan Kesteloot decided to gather information, mainly through Damas, Cesaire, Senghor and the contributors of *Presence Africaine*, to write a doctoral dissertation entitled: *Black Writers in French: A Literary History of Negritude*. The dissertation was defended at the University of Brussels in 1961, with the presence of Damas and Cesaire. It had confirmed the birth of a new literary movement: Negritude.

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When Damas began to express his views on Black culture—his reluctance to be assimilated or “whitewashed,” and so forth—he was unaware of being the founder of a movement which was going to spread as it did. If anything, he was perhaps confident that, sooner or later, he would be able to convince some people of the ideas which he himself had inherited from his conversations with, or his readings of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance. He was also well acquainted with Alain Locke’s philosophy of the *New Negro: An Interpretation*. Damas and his associates, who had also read several publications by other Africanists, only intended to spread this philosophy in their circles through their writings. Yet, they experienced moments of discouragement because their literature was not always taken seriously and the only way they thought they could fight for their ideas was to enter the political arena. Hence Damas, Césaire and Senghor became “Deputés,” representing their respective territories in the French Parliament, during the same period.

On his last public appearance, Damas said that students should be doing more research about the political aspect of Negritude, which he felt was neglected. The spectacular success of the Negritude writers only came after they had been struggling politically for the liberation of Black people. At the same time, it cannot be denied that the literary seed of the Negritude movement had grown in the intellectual world and had an important role on the liberation of Africa.

In conclusion, I present two contrastive ironic situations:

First, by 1939, Damas’ *Pigments* had been translated into several languages, including Baoule, an African language of the Ivory Coast. Because the Baoule tribe had read or heard *Pigments* in their own language, they revolted against the colonial authority to such an extent that they refused to be mobilized to fight in the French army against the Germans. As a consequence, *Pigments* was banned in

France and parts of Africa as a “risk against the internal and external security of France.” Moreover, the French police received orders to search Damas’ apartment in Paris and seize and destroy all the remaining copies of the book.

Second, in 1978, the French National Library in Paris was a few months ago organizing a comprehensive exhibit on the theme of Negritude on the occasion of the official visit of President Senghor to France. Also, the French Embassy in Washington, D. C. reportedly received instructions to get in touch with Mrs. Damas and get whatever books or documents (of Damas) available in order to complete the Negritude exhibit. Strange irony of posthumous recognition, a late victory, but a victory indeed! □

*Daniel Racine, Ph.D., is associate chairman and director of the Graduate Program, Department of Romance Languages, Howard University. He is also the official biographer of Dr. Leon Damas, who died in Washington, D. C. on January 22, 1978 at the age of 65.*

## EXCEL

*The ongoing campaign of Jesse L. Jackson, national president of the Chicago-based Operation PUSH, to instill in the minds of today's youth a measure of respect for the values of education, brought hundreds of participants to the campus of Howard University in May.*

*The occasion was a three day conference, which was jointly sponsored by PUSH (People United to Save Humanity), Howard University, and the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.*

*In the foreword of the 20-page program—signed by HEW Secretary Joseph A. Califano, Jr., Howard University President James E. Cheek, and Jackson—the following three points were noted as being the objectives of the conference for “Mobilizing for Excellence in Education,” EXCEL.*

*To define the EXCEL proposition in broad terms in order that Black, poor, and other minorities may share equally and fully in the mainstream of American life.*

*To provide a participatory forum where representatives from selected cities can obtain information, skills, and the appropriate orientation to return to their cities and make preliminary plans to begin a Project EXCEL program in their communities.*

*To bring together scholars, educators, community and national leaders, and students to discuss the methods by which disadvantage students of all races and ethnic backgrounds can achieve basic skills and attain academic excellence.*

*Among the nationally prominent personalities who participated were educators, sociologists, psychologists, community organizers, politicians and media persons.*

*The culminating event was a “Challenge” address by Jackson. An excerpt follows.*

*The Editor*