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# "GIVE ME BACK MY BLACK DOLLS": DAMAS' AFRICA AND ITS MUSEIFICATION, FROM POETRY TO MOVING PICTURES

MATTHIAS DE GROOF AND KATHLEEN GYSSELS

## Résumé

Dans cette contribution, nous lions la poésie de Damas à un film expérimental, « Rendez-les moi », réalisé par Matthias De Groof et basé sur le poème « Limbé ». En offrant une interprétation de « Limbé » concernant la muséification d'artéfacts africains, notre réévaluation de Damas est cadrée par le film comme intervention artistique. Le travail de Kathleen Gyssels ira au-delà de la manière dont l'expérimentation visuelle tente de galvaniser la vision artistique de Damas, et aborde la figure des *Poupées Noires* comme métaphore de discrimination genrée qui par-là transcende les antagonismes classiques propres à la Négritude.

## Abstract

This essay links Léon-Gontran Damas' poetry to Matthias De Groof's experimental film, *Rendez-les moi*, based on Damas' poem "Limbé." By offering an interpretation of "Limbé" in relation to the museification of African artifacts, the film frames the re-evaluation of Damas as artistic intervention. Kathleen Gyssels goes beyond the way the visual experimentation tries to galvanize Damas' artistic vision and focuses on the figure of Damas' "black dolls" as a metaphor for gendered discrimination, thereby moving beyond classic antagonisms of Négritude.

The work of the relatively undervalued Négritude poet Léon-Gontran Damas allows for an inter-artistic dialogue. This contribution links Damas' poetry to an experimental film, *Rendez-les-moi* (2013), directed by Matthias De Groof, one of the authors of the present article, and based on Damas' poem "Limbé" (in *Pigments*; 1937). Preceding the artist statement on the film, Kathleen Gyssels provides a useful context for the film. Rather than expediently recycling Damas' anti-colonial poetry, De Groof's film tries to deploy aesthetics to render Damas' poetry a performative speech act, albeit fictionally. The trans-medial aspects of the film—poetry, music, sculpture—aspire towards a freeing of colonized artefacts from the discursive strictures of colonial frameworks and institutions. By offering an interpretation of "Limbé" as an intervention into the museification of African artefacts, the film participates in a re-evaluation of Damas and Négritude. This study does not aim at recasting our understanding of Négritude, nor do we attempt at re-canonising Damas' work, as Négritude is itself at odds with canonisation. Instead, we focus on the mediality of the film to illuminate its relation to the poetry. Although "Limbé" is Damas' only poem using the figure of the dolls as a pervasive metaphor, we will also analyse a selection of Damas' other poems in relation to museification.

In the first part of the essay, Gyssels recovers dimensions of Damas' suppressed history and artistic vision. Gyssels begins by scrutinizing the poet's biography in relation to his "black dolls" and the way the issue of stolen heritage re-emerges throughout his oeuvre (*Pigments & Black Label*). Then, she arrives at a focus on the figure of Damas and his marginality. The metaphor of the "black dolls" finally appears in the second contribution as a reflection on, rather than an analysis of, De Groof's film. *Rendez-les-moi* hopes to open up unique perspectives on the oeuvre of Damas. This critical piece and artist statement facilitates a reconsideration of Damas' other works.

## 1. The Damas of *Give Me Back My Black Dolls*

### 1. "The Africa they ransacked, the Africa they robbed me of"

De Groof's film offers an intriguing perspective on "Limbé" by considering the black dolls as objects stolen from museums. The Musée de l'Homme, in Damas' mind, becomes a kind of "mausoleum" of the dead and the diseased. Having studied in Paris with Marcel Mauss and Paul Rivet, Damas left the institution because he felt uncomfortable with the fact that European ethnographers—and, more precisely, French ethnographers—stole entire collections of art and tribal masks. The incorporation of these artefacts into the museum space voided them of their ritual function and highlighted African "darkness" in metropolitan museums. Those public places exhibit Western supremacy and hunger for wealth more than genuine scientific curiosity, an observation that lurks in Damas' poems. The work of Paul Morand, the controversial interwar writer and traveller who has his protagonist visiting the Tervuren Museum in the short story "Syracuse ou l'homme-panthère" (from *Magie noire*, 1927), evokes Damas:

*These African beliefs that make of the ritual cloths of the deceased so many extensions of the living person awoke in the heart of the citizen from Syracuse; all the diviners, the necromants who had slipped on these accursed, cast-off garments, all the souls that had been trapped in these calabashes, all the lifeless locks of hair that had been slipped into magic pouses came back to live, signalled their presence. "Flee," they said; "leave the land that you inhabit; it is fertile only in appearance, but ruin is upon it. Its progress is nothing but prestige; it has made of you a vampire. Return to the land where the trees and the stones speak in the name of the Spirit."* (Morand 1992: 566, qtd in Ezra 143)

In "The Dogon as lieu de memoire" (2012), Statchan explains how Marcel De Griaule's Djibouti expedition irritated Michel Leiris, one of Damas' friends and fellow ethnographers; we must understand Damas' metaphor of the black doll in this context.

French authorities seized Damas' first and most subversive collection, the polemical *Pigments* (1937), for its outright anti-fascist and anti-colonial discourse. In one of his most famous poems, "Ils sont venus ce soir" ("They came that night," 2), Damas portrays the colonial invasion of the European colonizer as a moment that forever stops the drumbeat of the many African worshippers and dancers. The arrival of white barbarians destroyed the African ritual gatherings of dances, songs, and drums:

They came that night when the  
tom  
tom  
rolled from  
rhythm  
to  
rhythm  
the frenzy

of eyes  
the frenzy of hands  
the frenzy  
of statues' feet  
SINCE  
how many of ME ME ME  
have died  
since they came that night when the  
tom  
tom  
rolled from  
rhythm  
to  
rhythm  
the frenzy

("They Came that Night")

However, by complimenting Damas on the African beat, Léopold Senghor, one of the initiators of Négritude, glossed over the actual event portrayed in "They came that night / Ils sont venus ce soir." The poem shows men (white or black) slaughtering and ransacking and discusses genocidal violence and how the poet is incapable of actually counting the relentless accumulation of colonialism's victims. Damas hints at the long-

lasting aftershocks of colonial rule, the collision between two cultures in which the oppressed turn to "statues" (i.e. inanimate dolls), to ashes, deprived of now-museified tribal masks and weapons.

This opening poem also hints at the racialized élite, the *évolués* betraying their own "race," enslaving their own "blood" ("Et Caetera" and "S O S" echo this lament). Not explicitly naming the culprits, Damas denounces both the French invader (the White perpetrator) and the Africans who sold their own brothers and sisters into slavery, complicit in their *razzias*; this vilification is most explicit in an inflammatory litany in the first movement of *Black-Label*. Additionally, he uses the *passé composé* tense to push the reader to reconsider a singular event (a specific evening of brutal colonial invasion as a sexually suggestive European "penetration,") as the inception of what became a history of brutal conquests and violent incursions by white colonizers that continues into the present.

In "Et Caetera," Damas indirectly condemns the enrolment of racialized troops, specifically Senegalese soldiers, in the French army. Thousands of soldiers for the French war machine came from Saint-Louis du Sénégal, the colonial capital on the Western coast of Sénégal. Embracing the loyalty France expected from its colonies was indeed one of the attitudes characteristic of the first generation of black and other racialized leaders in the interwar and immediate independences. Damas condemns the endless tribute paid by Africa's sons and daughters as an image of a gigantic machine making more soldiers for France's war. He blames the French occupier in Senegal for having "ransacked" the black continent and its populations. The innumerable sacrificed soldiers (from the Caribbean, America, and Africa) haunt Damas: they become his "spectral ghosts"<sup>1</sup> who follow him everywhere on his sails and crossings, as his ancestors did during the Middle Passage. His poem, "The Wind," describes another sleepless night as he crosses the Black Atlantic, hearing a polyphonic choir of ghosts. (Damas, *Pigments* 17) Out of the darkness, in spite of the silence, the poet captures messages from the elements and the unseen, the haunting silence of the many unheard voices echoes in his ears. The poem "Buried treasures" already demonstrates the poet's conviction that not only

human but also non-human loss is buried on the bottom of the ocean. The silenced voices in this poem impress themselves on the world under the cover of night, causing an extreme tension on the part of the enclosed, entrapped, and enlisted subjects. The ethnographer will have the same uncanny experience, in reference to what Freud calls "Unheimlich," when she or he strolls through the many museums of Paris, London, or Brussels. In "if tomorrow the ghosts," Damas writes, "I'm haunted by their memory" (*Black-Label*, M II). Ghosts are everywhere.

## 2. [K]Not's and Lines

The third cofounder of the literary-political movement *Négritude*, Léon-Gontran Damas embodies the Caribbean concept of creolization. His name aptly expresses this creolized heritage. Exploring the significations of his last name, Damas, inherited by some French "bagnard," the militant author intertwines the noun *damas*, which refers to an iron to forge weapons, with the image of sea knots and textile knots ("*damassé, fibre*"). Among all these polysemic uses, Damas favours indeed one specifically haunting image. Keith Walker articulates the symbolism of Damas' name and its use in his poetry in *Countermodernism* (1999):

*The slipknot is also a recurring image in the writing of the Césaire-Damas generation. Like the lifelines metaphor, the slipknot has much to do with the sea and survival. It is polyvalent in its signifying power and multilayered in its richness and aptness to the history and experience of New World Blacks, evoking a string of verbal associations that plot the legacy of the Middle Passage, colonial domination, plantation experience and post-colonialism: capture, bound hands, nautical voyage, bondage, suicide, lynching, strangulation, triangulation, struggle, tics, knots prestidigitation, escape, freedom and survival. (14)*

The noun "damas" by extension also refers to a "cord," a "line," which resonates with sinister images often *recycled* by the poet: indeed, Damas repeatedly inserts the intrusion of a hanging Negro, lynched at dawn for "having wanted to

cross the line.” This fictional double of himself shows the poet entangled in all kinds of existential knots. In Amerindian cultures, the knot often serves to measure time, as in the Aztec and Mayan calendars. The knot comes close to the other famous “metaphor” for mixed cultures in the New World, the “branchement” (see Amselle 2001) and Glissant’s “rhizome,” which Amselle (1990) criticizes for risking a slide into a new “essentialism.” Considering these diverse connotations, the cord with its potential to form a knot, may thus serve as metaphor that chronicles and summarizes the effects of colonization. Damas has always defined himself as “fils de trois fleuves” (“son of three rivers”), thereby objecting too strong polarities between Africa (the Niger) and Europe (the Seine). Thus, as part of his personal familial heritage, Damas has the blood of three rivers running through his veins: African blood, blood of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, and European blood.

Damas – the city dweller and bohemian, the jazz lover and anthropologist, the censured poet and “député dépité” (deceived politician)<sup>2</sup>—was ahead of his time, moving beyond the antagonisms of Négritude. Not only did he claim African heritage alongside Amerindian and European (Gyssels 2009), but he also moved away from strong binaries regarding class and gender. Importantly, he struggled to move beyond masculinity as a cultural construction opposed to femininity (cf. *infra*). Regarding his own mixed identity, the poet acknowledged the important yet invisible figure of the “red-skinned Galibi,”<sup>3</sup> “la Tigresse des Hauts Plateaux,” living on the borders of the Orénoque-river in the Amazonian forest. In *Black-Label* (1956: 63), Damas poem “Roucouyennes” (BL 21) reclaims the “bone flute” (“flûte en tibia” BL 31) as both fetish and ritual instrument. Elsewhere in *Black-Label*, tribal music is evoked through the rhythms played on a “flûte de bambou” (“bamboo flute” BL 45). In these poems it seems as though the lyrical voice is trying to remember a female ancestor on the Amerindian side, “une Galibi matinée de sang Congo.” This emphasis on the Amerindian population already shows Damas working between the Lines, in what Homi K. Bhabha calls the “third zone” (Bhabha 1993), between the interstices of disciplines and among varying cultural heritage(s).

Fighting alienation and racism, the Guyanese Damas would take issue with some of the most divisive issues to come out of the next generations

from the French Caribbean. First of all the “antillanité”-movement by Glissant, as well as the second “créolité”-movement founded by Confiant and Chamoiseau in the footsteps of Martinican Aimé Césaire face the material as well as cultural dependence from the colonial Metropolis. Senghor, Césaire, Glissant all claim to write in hermetic style. When Senghor states in the “Introduction” to *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache* that “Damas’ poetry is not sophisticated” (PUF, 1948: 5), he indirectly reinforces scholarly neglect of Damas’ poetry and prose. Senghor’s comment is indicative of the somewhat turbulent partnership among the founders of Négritude. Although marginalized within his own movement, Damas’ writing has been taken up by some later critics (see Kesteloot 1963), and authors from the African Diaspora, including Glissant who in his *Discours antillais* (1981, tr. Caribbean Discourse) places Damas alongside Haitian Jacques Roumain from the *Indigénist*-movement, and Cuban Nicolas Guillén (Glissant 1989: 154). Yet other reasons have to be taken into account for the waning of Damas’ canonical stature and the obfuscation of his militant work. On the margins of the French-Caribbean canon, omitted from manifestos by Glissant and Chamoiseau, Damas deserves to be reread as his work also approaches a transgression of the lines between living and dead, object and subject, male and female, homo- and heterosexual. Also, contrary to more accessible poetry, his poetry has from its inception appealed strongly to visual arts. His second collection, aptly entitled *Graffiti* (1952) already testifies to the writings on the wall, so-to-speak, of marginalized cultures and the long-lasting pictures engraved on the minds of subaltern subjects. An early voice to publicly address issues of the colonization and oppression, Damas’ interwar period work proves a fertile ground for reframing Black poetry from the (post-)Négritude period. The following experimental short film, along with its director’s artistic statement, highlight these elements in Damas’ poetry, in particular in “Limbé.”



Fig. 1. Still from *Rendez-les-moi* (*Give me back my black dolls*), 2013.

## II. *Rendez-les-moi*: “Give me back my black dolls” through moving pictures

The short experimental film *Rendez-les-moi* (*Give me back my black dolls*) was part of De Groof’s work in 2013 during an IFAA-residency at Nijmegen.<sup>4</sup> The film interprets Damas’ poem “Limbé” as an expression of longing for a suppressed African cultural heritage now predominantly found in museums. The film might be called a “visual poem,” using the technique of “caméra-stylo” or “camera pen” that Alexandre Astruc describes as a form through which an artist is able to express his thoughts, tearing loose from the image for the image of the immediate anecdote (Astruc 324-5). The camera in *Rendez-les-moi* renders a visual poem guided by a linguistic one, Léon-Gontran Damas’ “Limbé” as if Damas too is holding the pen. After the introductory exposition of a mask spinning as a Miles Davis’ record plays, camera movements work to imply the subjective viewpoint of an imaginary person standing in front of a showcase in an Africa-museum. In a voyeuristic spy-shot, the camera takes on the imagined perspective of a person. This person surreptitiously gazes at a single black doll displayed behind glass. In a subsequent shot, viewers see a series of African cultural artefacts. Just at that moment, the film’s audience hears the poet’s voice. The voice, reading Damas’ poem, infers that the subjective gaze of the camera is also the gaze of Damas, who recites:

Give me back my black dolls  
so they dispel  
the image of pale whores  
merchants of love who stroll back and forth  
on the boulevard of my ennui

Give me back my black dolls  
so they dispel  
the eternal image  
the hallucinatory image  
of stacked large-assed puppets  
whose miserable mercy  
the wind carries to the nose

(“Limbé”)

In this recital, Damas gives an imperative order, addressed to the museum, to “give him back his black dolls.” The film uses camera movements to translate an understanding of Damas’ shame and the taboo of the subject: the museum dominates and exploits “his black dolls.” Indeed, in the context of the poem, the artefacts function as “whores” in the public space of the museum: undressed from their ritual costumes and behind vitrines, they are dominated as historically and racially inferior. Exhibited as idols, they suggest an African cultural heritage at the disposal of colonial projects. Through their static presentation, they become negative symbols of Western historical progression. Implying a remote past, they reinforce the West’s image as developed and modern. Looted, traded, and domesticated, the dolls become the relics of Western colonialism. Referred to as a variation of a Western past existing in the present, these objects make Africa into Europe’s eternal museum. Ethnologized, the black dolls are “othered” as remote and museified, historicized as past. Put at both temporal and spatial distances, they are defined by a museum, which uses the “self as measure” and makes from Protagoras’ *Homo Mensura* doctrine: *Europa mensura*.

Categorized, the black dolls are constructed as primitive; assimilated, they are conceived of as barbarous and imagined as exotic. As V.Y. Mudimbe elucidates, African artefacts “seem to be remnants [...] of absolute beginnings” (64). Moreover:

[t]he ethnographic museum enterprise espoused a historical orientation, deepening the need for the memory of an archaic European civilization and, consequently, expounding reasons for decoding exotic and primitive objects as symbolic and contemporary signs of a Western antiquity. (61)

Ethnographic museums appropriated African artefacts in order to assimilate them in a play of otherness and sameness so that they speak to us as our contemporary history. Art museums assign these artefacts aesthetic qualities so that they speak as art. Négritude attributes them with an alterity that refuses to be reduced to a Western gaze. This view of art is distinct from the understanding formed by institutionalized Western Art History, in which art has its place outside daily life, a detachment reflected by the spatial distinction of the museum (see König 2007).

*L'art nègre*, by contrast, is not only fundamentally entangled with life, but its ultimate function is to manifest *l'âme noire*. In other words, Damas identifies with the artefacts he sees in the museum and sees the imprisonment of African cultural heritage as an act of alienation in which museums took part. He writes:

my courage recovered  
my audacity  
I become myself once again  
myself once more  
out of what I was Yesterday  
yesterday  
without complexity  
yesterday  
when the hour of uprooting came

Will they ever know this rancor in my heart  
Opened to the eye of my mistrust too late  
they stole the space that was mine<sup>5</sup>

("Limbé")

Uprooting the masks from their cultural context and "stealing the space that was mine" functioned within the logics of cultural colonisation and alienation: this theft was French policy everywhere in the French empire, from the *Afrique-Équatoriale française (AEF)* and *Afrique-Occidentale française (AOF)* and in the Caribbean especially. Colonialism required this politics of assimilation.

Consequently, the poet of the post-colony first and foremost tries to recover and recuperate the loss. The idea of a "restoration"—(*redevenu moi-même [...] de ce que [...] j'étais hier[...] quand est venue l'heure du déracinement*)—without hindering transformation into something "new" (*nouveau*) is typical to *Négritude*. Yet the work of many of its members have nevertheless at times been considered traditionalist. However, in a context of alienation, nostalgia on the part of the victim is never far-off, as demonstrated by the succession of words in the poem:

the custom, the days, the life  
the song, the rhythm, the effort  
the path, the water, the huts  
the smoke gray earth  
the wisdom, the words, the discussion  
the elders  
the cadence, the hands, the tempo, the  
hands  
the stampings of feet  
the ground

("Limbé")

The "colonized heritage" has been altered into "colonial heritage": the masks end up being decapitated from their costumes and their ritual meaning. Exhibited behind glass, they function within the knowledge/power structure of the modernistic *Weltanschauung* of the museum. The significance of museification is most drastically expressed in reference to Walter Benjamin's terminology from his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936): artefacts change from the modality of ritual-value to the modality of exposition-value in the context of reproducibility (248). Nevertheless, the decapitated masks are not dead. To paraphrase the canonical 1953 French film-essay on African art *Statues Also Die* by Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, and Ghislain Cloquet, the masks still maintain the power to enchant, which is why they feature in De Groof's film.





Fig. 2. Still from *Rendez-les-moi* (*Give me back my black dolls*), 2013, 3' depicting Pierrot Barra's installation artwork "Agwé."

*Rendez-les-moi* attempts to fulfil a transatlantic cinematic restitution of the black dolls by incorporating Pierrot Barra's installation artwork "Agwé." This contemporary piece by the Haitian artist Barra (1942-1999) has the form of a boat that carries dolls. On the boat, the film's viewers see *Iwa Agwe*, a voodoo sea-spirit, represented as captain of the ship *Imamou*, which brings the deceased back to their ancestral home of Africa. Barra's works were primarily intended to serve as "little altars" for the *initiés*, the members of the *hounfor* admiring and praying the *loas* or voodoo pantheon. Syncretising West-African animist and Spirit religions with Catholicism and freemasonry, voodoo was developed by slaves in Saint-Domingue and was a supportive factor behind the Haitian revolution (1804) that secured the world's first Black Republic.<sup>6</sup>

Give me the illusion I will no longer have to  
satisfy  
the sprawling need  
of mercies snoring  
beneath the world's unconscious disdain

("Limbé")



Fig. 3. Still from *Rendez-les-moi* (*Give me back my black dolls*), 2013, 3', depicting Gérard Quenum's black dolls, Courtesy of the Artist.

One of the dolls shown in the film turns a closed eye on the word *disdain*, accentuating its contempt. Damas, for his part, articulates the disdain that often accompanies mercy, as a sentiment projected by the colonizer onto the colonized. In "Limbé" he describes/illustrates the disdainful mercy expressed for the dolls by a seemingly compassionate museum visitor. Damas demands to give him *the illusion* that he could get rid of empty mercy and reanimate the dolls (and we acknowledge the fact that the dolls stand in as a metaphor for objectified women, who do not appear in the poem).

Give me back my black dolls  
so that I can play with them  
the naïve games of my instinct  
which has remained in the shadow of its laws  
(*"Limbé"*)

In the poem, the word *illusion* stresses the fatalist impossibility of what he asks: to get rid of a merciful and paralyzing attitude and to liberate his heritage from the museum in order to metamorphose it with new meaning—*his* meaning. The sad irony of Damas' work is that he cannot see past these dolls as objects: the chance of recuperation is tied to his own domination of them.

In the *visual* poem however, spoken words connect with the medium of moving images. De Groof takes up Damas' wish to get the illusion, as explained above, across two phases in the film. First, a series of vertical shots (tilts) in parallel montage connects iron objects used to chain slaves (shown with downward tilts) and the black dolls (shown with upward tilts).<sup>7</sup> Second, the illusion of liberation through cinema develops in the final sequence where a succession of shots depicts artefacts in movement. Vertical and circular movements as well as abstract shots, detach the objects from their display, attempting to break these object free from their place in the museum and its connection with colonial history.

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### III. Concluding Thoughts

By reading "Limbé" and other poems by Damas, we have tried to shed light on a particular metaphor used by the poet to denounce the process of dehumanization as defined in Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950). The image of the black doll might also refer to the many artistic objects stolen by French ethnographers and explorers, visitors and art collectors, in the colonies. Moreover, the metaphoric black doll crosses different lines the poet wanted to abolish: between ages, sexes, races, and classes. The reading of this poem illustrates how much Damas' poetry can be amplified through close reading and artistic practice. De Groof's film presents an audio-visual interpretation of Damas' work. It may serve as an example of the ways in which Caribbean literature can inspire contemporary film art as a recuperative and reconciliatory strategy. Resulting films then offer new interpretations and thus encourage re-reading of Caribbean writers such as Damas.

## Notes

1. A strong theme recurrently reappearing in Harlem Renaissance poetry. See Gyssels Kathleen, "Damas et McKay : les démons blancs", *Riveneuve Continents* (automne-hiver 2008-2009), Hors-Série, Harlem Heritage: 219-227. Gyssels, Kathleen, "Correspondances et consonances: Bois-d'Ebène et Black-Label", in *Révolte, subversion et développement chez Jacques Roumain*, Acacia, Michel, ed., Port-au-Prince, Editions de l'Université d'Etat d'Haïti, 2009 : 231-244.

2. Trained as ethnographer and a pupil of Marcel Mauss and Paul Rivet, Léon-Gontran Damas moves beyond a third Line, the enduring *différend* around the issue of independence of the French Antilles and French Guiana. A strong opponent to the vote of "départementalisation" launched by Césaire in 1946, Damas would forever remain the rebel, the "maroon" who does not fit in the triangle of the more Francophile first Black member of the Académie française (Senghor) and life-long mayor of Fort-de-France, Césaire. In his accessible poetry, as well as in *Retour de Guyane* (1938), his subversive portrayal of his mother country in his censored travel report on the results of French infiltration in French Guyana, Damas protested fiercely against the *départementalisation* supported by Aimé Césaire and fellow Cayenese intellectuals such as Gaston Monnerville and Félix Eboué. Rejecting the status of "département d'outre-mer" for his own country and the neighbouring French islands, Damas was convinced this status between autonomy and dependence would enhance a neo-colonial regime holding the populations in a dreadful *double bind*. In line with Frantz Fanon, Damas believed that as citizens of France, they would always remain outlaws because of their origin and skin colour. Finally, his withdrawal from politics and his distancing from the Négritude movement contributed to his isolation.

3. The "Galibi" are one of the many Amerindian tribes living in French Guiana.

4. ifaa-platform.org

<https://vimeo.com/70741130> (password: bergendal)

<https://vimeo.com/70731876> (password: bergendal)

5. "Stole" is not strong enough a translation for "cambrioler." In *The Négritude Poets, An Anthology of Translations from the French* (1989 [1975]), Conroy-Kennedy, the verb "cambrioler" gives the stringent equivalent "ransacking" (Conroy-Kennedy 1989: 39-61). For Kesteloot, the first essayist to illustrate the entire movement (Kesteloot 1963), the first poems by Damas indeed had a particularly insolent and incisive character. Again the verb has not the stringent corporeal meaning of "fouiller" (nor of "cambrioler" it is: "cambrioler" being close to "chamber," the intimate space where atrocities are going on between white master and black slave). Lillehei weakens Damas' irritation by translating "stole" instead of "ransacked."

6. [octobergallery.co.uk/exhibitions/2007voy/index.shtml](http://octobergallery.co.uk/exhibitions/2007voy/index.shtml)

7. The dolls are made by Gérard Quenum, an artist from the Republic of Benin. Like the work of Barra, Quenum makes powerful use of discarded children's dolls and draws on voodoo traditions which have resonated across the Atlantic in varied guises ([octobergallery.co.uk/exhibitions/2007voy/index.shtml](http://octobergallery.co.uk/exhibitions/2007voy/index.shtml)).

## Image Notes.

Figure 1: Still from *Rendez-les moi (Give me back my black dolls)*, 2013, 3'

Figure 2: Still from *Rendez-les moi (Give me back my black dolls)*, 2013, 3' depicting Pierrot Barra's installation artwork "Agwé".

Figure 3: Still from *Rendez-les moi (Give me back my black dolls)*, 2013, 3', depicting Gérard Quenum's black dolls, Courtesy of the Artist.

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