‘In a Queer Time and Place’: Queerolization in *Giovanni’s Room* and *Black-Label*

Kathleen Gyssels [*]
Antwerp University

Abstract:

James Baldwin and Léon Damas have never been compared in terms of their representation of exile and uprootedness in the capital of France. More than the geographical and material distance from their respective native countries, which in fact they have left with a certain disgust, there is the constant discomfort of engaging with the Other (the same sex individual or the other ethnic different sex partner). Both writers have therefore been pioneers in the description of a double impasse and a double line to cross: as black subjects in a white dominated world, and as men who felt also attracted to same sex-partners. While Damas was not (at least not outing his gayness as Baldwin has done) queer, he adresses in *Black-Label* (1956) many of the same anxieties as those in *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) and they are related to performing black masculinity in a white dominant heterosexual racist society (Gyssels 2010).

Keywords: gender bias, racial and sexual ambiguity, queer, racism, colonialism, creolisation, black diaspora, négritude poetry, African American post-Restauration novel, French Guiana (Guyane) and Antilles

[*] Prof.Dr., kathleen.gyssels@uantwerpen.be

Kuir Bir Zamanda ve Mekanda: *Giovanni'nin Odası* nda ve *Kara Etiket'* te Kuirleşme

Kathleen Gyssels *
Antwerp University

Özet:

Baldwin ve Léon Damas'ın eserleri, Fransa'nın başkentinden sürgün ve yerinden edilmenin temsili bakımından daha önce hiç karşılaştırılmadı. Aslında keskin bir tiksintiyle terkettikleri şahsi anatavatanlarının coğrafi ve cismani uzaklığından ziyade, onlarda Öteki (hemcins birey veya öteki etnik farklı seks partneri) ile ilgilenmenin sürekli rahatsızlığı bulunmaktadır. İki yazar da beyaz egemenliği altındaki siyahi özneler olarak ve aynı cinse ilgi duyan erkekler olarak, iki çıkmazın ve kesişen iki çizginin anlamlandırılmasında öncülük etmişlerdir: Damas kuir olmamasına rağmen (en azından Baldwin kadar geyliğini dışa vurmamasına rağmen) o *Kara Etiket*'te *Giovanni'nin Odası*'ndaki çoğu kaygıya gönderme yapmıştır ve bu kaygılar, siyahi erilliğin beyaz egemen heteroseksüel ırkçı toplumdaki rolüne ilişkin olmuştır

Anahtar Kelimeler: cinsiyet önyargısı, ırkçı ve cinsel anlaşmazlık, kuir, ırkçılık, kolonileşme, melezleşme, siyah diaspora, siyahi şiir, Siyahilerde fakirlik, Afrikan Amerikan Post-Restorasyon dönemi romanı, Fransız Guyanası ve Antiller.

* Prof.Dr., kathleen.gyssels@uantwerpen.be

> The cowardice of this time and place – this era – is nowhere more clearly revealed than in the perpetual attempt to make the public and social disaster the result, or the issue of a single demented creature, or perhaps, half a dozen such creatures, who have, quite incomprehensibly, gone of their rockers and must be murdered and locked up. (James Baldwin quoted in Halberstam, 2005, p. 45)

> [The sailor] seemed – somehow – younger than I had ever been, and blonder and more beautiful, and he wore his masculinity as unequivocally as he wore his skin. He made me think of home – perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition. (Baldwin, 1977, p. 70)

Queerolizing Europe

This article revisits Léon-G. Damas' collection of poetry *Black-Label*, published more than half a century ago, in 1956, the year the first Congress of Black Writers took place (in his absence) in the Sorbonne. In that exact same year, the African American author James Baldwin published his second book, *Giovanni's Room*, an "all-white novel" in which he came out of the closet: through his protagonist, the homosexual black male was confessing his "double otherness", transgressing racial, linguistic, nationalist and gender-related boundaries. In her seminal work *In a Queer Time and Place*, Judith Halberstam defines "queer subjects" as those who "live (deliberately, accidentally, or of necessity) during the hours when others sleep and in the spaces (physical, metaphysical, and economic) that others have abandoned" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 10). This description matches both *Black-Label*, in which the poet repeatedly wanders through the streets of Paris at night and feels lonely, uprooted, and suffocated, and Baldwin's narrator David in *Giovanni's Room*. Both protagonists are liminal characters who feel diminished, oppressed, and compressed by the verticality of the city's towers. Their feeling of displacement is triggered

by their mutual awareness of being "in between". In Léon Damas' case, a constant duality weighs on him, felt from his childhood on to his adulthood, due to his education and "assimilation". The institutions have imprinted on his mind a "double consciousness" (W. E. B. DuBois, [1903] 1994), which also has repercussions on the performance of gender as yet another obstacle in addition to color prejudice in a society dominated by white men. Damas alludes to this as a "double impasse" and prays for forgiveness in an ironic passage faking devotion: "and why should we bear a grudge to THOSE one of whom I am / and God be blessed / GOD BE BLESSED / It's enough for me / to have two feet" (*Black-Label* 1956[1] , p. 79). While claiming "normality" (two feet), he assumes on the other hand to be "other", "different", and therefore a "sinner" in the eyes of the white, heteorosexual dominant wo/man.

I analyze both works of fiction to make a twofold argument: first, Damas has remained in the shadow of the other cofounders of *négritude*, especially in the year 2006, when Léopold Sédar Senghor was celebrated through a series of conferences and publications. Similarly, the canonization of Aimé Césaire has taken mythical proportions as soon as he died in 2008. Yet, Senghor did not tackle Anne McClintock's "triangle" of "race, sex, class", as she has shown in her seminal essay *Imperial Leather, Race, Class and Gender in a Colonial Contest* (1995). Moreover, that very same Senghor has called Damas an easy poet (Senghor, 1948, p. 5 and Senghor, 1979), a judgment that has subsequently been picked up by Edouard Glissant (who barely deals with Damas' poetry, while he remains the second French-Caribbean cofounder of the *négritude*-movement) as well as by the *créolistes* (Gyssels, 2014a, n.p.). In contrast to the opinions of his fellow writers, I believe that his poetry resists easy interpretation and that there are many silences and gaps that ask for interpretation: those "slippages" or "knots" concern several taboos, such as interracial sex and homoerotic desire (Reid-Pharr, 1996, pp. 372-394).

Ahead of his time, Damas believed in a Creole Europe in which different sexualities and performances of Black male/femalehood could be envisioned. It had to be a "Queer Europe" as well, a democratic and

multicultural world in which various "differences" would be accepted by the Republic of France. Its slogan "Liberty, equality, fraternity" nevertheless did not translate into reality in the late seventies of the 20th century, so at least Damas did not see it come into fruition. Damas not only understood créole/ Créole as the result of physical *métissage*, but also of a *third space*[2] in the gender-politic and the attitudes towards male and female. French Caribbeans, or any individuals coming from the colonies for that matter, experienced a strange "intrusion" upon their arrival in France, which transfigured both their mental and physical state. Living in a kind of "interstice", those individuals could not easily connect with the Other, both in terms of ethnicity or gender. The black or colored man had a hard time capturing the attention of the white female (*Pigment*'s second poem, "Captation", brilliantly illustrates this), and the small supply of women of color automatically drove men to develop strong bonds of male friendship which were not entirely devoid of homosexual desire (see the Harlem Renaissance poets, Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, two of Damas's "Idols"). The loosening of gender roles, however, was a utopian belief, "a Dream Deferrd" (to speak with Hughes), though it was shared precisely by those *métis* like the African American Baldwin and the Afro-Guyanese "son of three rivers"[3] Damas (Damas, 1956; "sang-mêlé des TROIS FLEUVES", declaring that he is of mixed-blood, tagged in caps in "Si depuis peu" (*Névralgies* 1972, p. 122). Both authors considered Europe a better place to defend (and in the case of Baldwin, to affirm) these "differences" and to have their *queerness*, in combination with their *creoleness*, both sharing a mixed origin which, to a certain degree, is undecipherable (Gyssels, 2007a; Gyssels, 2008 and 2010) accepted. In this article, I want to take a closer look at two forerunners in the large immigration wave to France in the nineteen fifties, when a small number of individuals of color settled in the "city of light", France's capital. In spite of France's strong reputation in terms of hospitality and freedom, of being a non-segregated society, those expats perceived their difference, and hence their invisibility in Europe's capitals, not only in terms of skin color but also in terms of the performance of their sexual identity. Given the racist undertones of their

adoptive countries[4] and the open discrimination, black males developed what was considered a different pattern of masculine behavior. Eventually it turned out to "deviate" from the overall white (and bourgeois) dominant society, in which gender roles were still firmly encoded and profoundly rooted in the collective mind.

The following analysis will focus on the relation between (controlled, even compressed ("désirs comprimés")) sexuality and migration in the autofictions of Léon Damas and James Baldwin, two exiled blacks in Paris, two nomadic subjects (Braidotti, 1994) who struggle with the double, even triple consciousness of being in the margins. They wrote their respective "confessionals" about Paris' and their solitude, their isolation and their resistance to the marginalisation in parallel ways. Specifically, their attempts to be "accepted" and understood in their mixed feelings about black masculinity echo each other. Both argue that to be fully creolized implies accepting and assuming one's gender and sexuality.

Complexion in *Black-Label*: The Slippage of "Creole"

Connections between gender and race in *négritude*-poetry have received little scholarly attention (except for Heidi Kalikoff, who re-examines Césaire's *Cahier* in that respect (Kalikoff, 2009)). In his third collection, *Black-Label*, the French-Guyanese poet Damas uses "Creole" in various ways. The shifts in signification already show a willingness to imbue the word with more than just its general meaning of "individual from European descent born in the West Indies" or "originating from the Caribbean, born in the French Antilles" (Gyssels, 2007a, pp. 131-135). Damas uses "creole" in its first signification ("mon enfance créole") or to speak in his mother tongue, the Creole of French Guyana ("prier en créole"). It is quite surprising that Damas' most famous poem "Hoquet" illustrates what childhood for a child of mixed "race" means. Yet while one could expect the word "Creole" to crop up in this context, it is censurized by the authoritative mother who forbids the child to speak it:

Did I or did I not tell you that you must speak French
the French of France
the French of the French
the French French
Disaster
tell me about the disaster
tell me about it
(…)
No sir
you must learn that we do not allow in our home
neither ban
nor jo
nor gui
nor tar
the *mulattos* do not do that
leave **it** to the *negres* (Lillehei, 2011, n.p. bold added)

The pronoun "it" ("ça") at the end of the poem concludes that both talking and behaving "Creole" (without making explicit what this means) are blocked out, erased. In *Névralgies* (1966), the last collection of poems he would publish during his life, he has included this stanza:

And God may preserve us
From any libidinous temptation
Even *Creole* ("Foi de marron", Damas, 1972, p. 101; italics mine)[5]

Reminiscing on his years in his native Guyana, Damas repeatedly uses the word "disaster" in his most famous poem "Hoquet", a title referring to oppressed language, to the suffocation of the voice, or the obstruction of the larynx due to the severe restrictions dictated by a matrifocal substitute mother (Burton, 1990, pp. 14-27). His "Creole infancy" or colonial education is suffocating because he learns all about color prejudice and the prohibition against flirting or fantasizing about interracial love.

As the subsequent passage from *Black-Label* shows, Damas already hints at the association between speaking/praying in Creole and

being very submissive to the authorities who rule the country and the church. The word "Creole" occurs at the very end of the first Movement, in the following context:

> PAST CENTURIES SAW
> and centuries to come will see
> with each Dusk
> on the haunted cotton tree
> initiated blackbirds
> that come to pray
> without gloves or mitaines
> pray on their knees
> pray with a rhythm
> pray in creole
>
> *PIÈ PIÈ PIÈ*
> *priè Bondjé*
> *mon fi*
> *priè Bondjé*
> *Angou ka bouyi*
> *Angou ké bouyi* (Damas, 1956, p. 32; italics in original)

Quite rapidly, the poet switches to ambivalent meanings in order to express his mixed feelings about what it means to be black and male, in other words, to connote black masculinity as a highly problematic terrain, a "marasm" or "mangrove". More precisely, the poet aims at relationships which are cursed because of pigmentation (being colored) which gradually also refers to a repressed masculinity. "Creole" points to the need and willingness to love and to be loved beyond color differences and beyond rigid boundaries of male/female, and consequently to the heartbroken individual whose relationships are repeatedly forbidden or interrupted because of "color prejudice":

Beware of that kind of love that does not dare to say to itself

I'm love, end of question.
And because I am love, end of question, the
Doubt is there, and the pain without remedy

It seems that Love has been impossible
In the Islands of Creole lights and shadows
Where one always says "SI" instead of "YES"
(…)
Where one says often *t'chup*

Never Love reminds herself
In these Islands of Creole lights and shadows (Damas, 1956, p. 42)

In the above passage, in the middle of Movement II, "Creole" again loses its literal, linguistic meaning ("prier en créole" and answering "si" instead of the normative standard French "yes" for every question that requires a positive answer) as well as its reference to geographic origin and location ("aux Iles de lumière et d'ombre créoles"). Instead, it shifts to a psychological sense in which the real affirmation of one's feelings is either repressed ("Never Love reminds herself") or betrayed.

"Creole" suggests a heightened awareness of the incapacity to obtain this freedom in a context of exile, diaspora and segregation, albeit legally prohibited as in the French Republic. In Baldwin's words, in the quote above, it is all about the capacity and freedom to wear his masculinity as unequivocally and freely as the color of his skin.

As an individual of color born in the Caribbean, Damas "transvests" Creoleness not only as a borrowed "cultural identity" through the politics of assimilation imposed by the French mother country, but also as a controlled, comprised passion. His motif all over the third Movement of *Black-Label*, namely "Désirs comprimés d'un bel enfant de choeur", underscores the ways in which the colonial society back home (Cayenne) as well as in the "mère-patrie" (Paris) make

childhood a traumatizing apprenticeship of many forbidden "sins" and many dreadful tasks. The French-Guyanese intellectuals feel the oppression of the color prejudice imposed by both whites (Creoles) and the *élite de couleur* all their life. Colonial mimicry (a term Bhabha actually borrowed from Frantz Fanon's "mimétisme" or "lactification") estranges the Self not only in reformatting the mind, but also in whitening the body, as it were. *Creoleness* happened to be associated with unbridled and dangerous love, which would stand in the way of a full acceptance by the French and a successful integration in the French society. Hence this warning in the third Movement, where "Creole" gains a sexual connotation:

> you told me about yourself
> about your convalescence marked by doubts and anxiety
> of your senses closed to the reality
> of your infirmity to enjoy
> enjoy with intensity
> of all those tiny little things which make up
> a soul *euphemistically Creole* (Damas, 1956, italics mine)

In this particularly elliptic sequence of *Black-Label* in which the poet deliberately leaves gaps (Sommer, 1994, pp. 528-542 and 1999) that give the reader a feeling of "incompetence", the term "Creole" appears one last time. Significantly, it does so in the very last Movement of *Black-Label*. This time, in a fake prayer, the poet laments the loss of a loved one, a triangle of women (or men?) in the moonlight. As if to exorcize his bad luck in love, as if to transcend the state of "Limbé" (the Baudelairian "spleen" as well as the Caribbean "limbo"), the poet plays/performs the typical "coup de dés", both in an intertextual hint to Stéphane Mallarmé (*Un coup de dés*) and to the popular Afro-Caribbean game of playing domino: not only is this a typically male, even macho game[6], playing dominoes also often happens in a kind of male competition over women. Trying to overcome his own remorse and his own spitefulness, he prays now just for some tenderness and reciprocal love, unlimited and boundless love, as essential as the daily bread one eats to survive and to cure his "blues". Evocative of sickness and discomfort, he uses a prayer

to simulate the permission to obtain the kind of rare love, of forbidden affection without restrictions. As a matter of fact, he attracts bad luck this time and refuses to surrender to some superstitious ritual to play "pile ou face" (heads or tails) to find out if the Other loves him truly:

> I ask God (...) that he might give each of us
> so little of the daily bread
> *of love en pile in the Creole way*,
> never heads or tail
> always heads or tale
> and heads or tale
> and heads or tail and heads or tail and heads or tail
>
> *repiquée la mazurka*[7] (Damas, 1956, p. 81)

Trying to leave a world behind that overflows with energy and joy only in appearance (the mazurka dance, a vivid performance reminiscent of Plantation folklore), Damas shares the unseen stitches ("repiqué") felt by the dancers.

Music and, more precisely, the blues genre are equally important in James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues" (Albert, 1984, pp. 178-185). But it is his second novel that runs parallel to *Black-Label* in terms of creolizing a white, heterosexual, arrogant Paris that sees itself as "Nombril du Monde" (the navel of the world) (Damas, 1956, p. 53): the protagonist, David, is not "Creole" in terms of origins, since he is a white American spending some years in Paris where he has an affair with Giovanni, an Italian who will be jailed for murdering his white "souteneur". As I have shown elsewhere (Gyssels, 2010), both in *Black-Label* and *Giovanni's Room*, Creolization implies the double transgression of racial and gender borders. For both authors, the location of this attempt at transgression is Europe, far away from the narrow-minded and severe racial prejudices of their respective environments, Cayenne and Harlem. Both authors react against the damage caused by the interiorization of black male patterns of behavior, the black man being torn between two opposite role models when it comes to performing

black maleness. Richard Wright, a close friend of both authors, had indeed portrayed the dual scheme. Between the so-called violent black man, Bigger Thomas (in Wright's *Native Son*) and the subaltern, sexless Uncle Tom, there seemed to be less space to aspire to less masculine behavior, a more feminine way of engaging in sexual and intimate relationships. These two models have been firmly imprinted in the minds of black and white readers alike, and both Baldwin and Damas flew to France in the hope of escaping this mentality and the constraints of a particular family structure, determined by centuries of slavery in the Caribbean. The "matrifocal" family, in which black mothers who face the absent father are both mothering and fathering, has been the environment for Baldwin, Damas, and so many other black male writers from the African diaspora.

Yet "overdetermined from outside", overcome by an "unusual clumsiness" (Fanon quoted in Judy, 1996, p. 78) "the lived sexual experience" of the Creole turns out to be bizarre, estranging to the point of "queerness". However delusive Paris turned out to be for the two uprooted black intellectuals, the fictional rendering of their sojourn in the French capital translate this yearning for a blurring of racial and gender boundaries, a constant longing to emancipate from the strict rules governing black masculinity, particularly in the host society where they came to liberate themselves from the burden of color and a stereotyped maleness they could not and would not live up to. This subtle and ambiguous in-between situation of Creoles (coming from the New World, of mixed "blood") and Queerness (explicitly so in Baldwin's case) could be designated by the word "queerolization", a corporeal scheme that problematizes both physical and sexual being in the everday experience of white Europe ("l'expérience vécue du Noir" passing over the sexual [adventures or affairs]). This is an aspect that has been glossed over in Damas' poetry and that translates, as I will demonstrate, into an acute awareness of otherness when it comes to being close and intimate with the double Other (the white woman). In Baldwin's case, his gayness unsettled fixed boundaries of languages, ethnicity, nationality and sexual preferences even more. So their respective identities were

perceived as bringing trouble or being troublesome in the eyes of the Other, the white man and woman in Europe. They discover quickly that, although France is not a segregated society, the lines between "ethnicities", "classes", and gender remain very tenuous up to the late sixties :

> Private property
> Guarded domain
> no trespassing
> Dogs and Niggers forbidden on the lawn (Damas, 1972 quoted in Snyder, 1976, pp. 31-43)

In the poem "Toujours tu viendras", Damas actually draws a line between the two stanzas of the poem, making visual that yearning and dreaming can cross all distances and that the possessed mind (by the lover, by fever, by exile) can overcome all kinds of margins and frontiers (*Névralgies* 1972, p. 127).

The Fact of Blackness (Fanon) or the Male Body In/Difference

Giovanni's Room brilliantly illustrates what Fanon meant when he was talking about "The Lived Experience of the Black Man" (Chapter 3 from Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967)), in which also sexual aspects of the exiled condition are described, especially coming from an African American homosexual. Echoing Fanon's "Regarde, maman, un Nègre" ("Look! A Negro!"), David is confronted with several occasions where people stare at him, where Parisians (male and female) pass him by on the sidewalks and gape with instantaneous contempt, envy and even desire. David talks about the look in the eyes of a sailor he once met:

> There was a sailor, dressed all in white, coming across the boulevard, walking with that funny roll sailors have and with that aura, hopeful and hard, of having to make a great deal happen in a hurry. (…) [W]e came abreast and, as though he had seen some all-revealing panic in my eyes, he

> gave me the look contemptuously lewd and knowing; just such a look as he might have given, (…) to the well-dressed nymphomaniac or trollop who was trying to make him believe she was a lady. (…) I was certain that there would erupt into speech, out of all that light and beauty, some brutal variation of Look, baby. I know you. I felt my face flame, I felt my heart harden and shake (…). (Baldwin, 1977, p. 70)

The "Look, baby, I know you" sounds like a variation on Fanon's "Look, a Negro". Both writers recount in detail their efforts to become fully integrated in the French society, to be accepted by the French people, to dress, speak and behave as French citizens. Nevertheless, the Creole individual feels ridiculous and silently hides his shame and his pain. The city of lights displaces and destabilizes foreigners of a darker complexion and with sexual needs that do not fit the dichotomist male/female structure. David interweaves a lot of sociological remarks about French society, which appears to him as quite a stereotyped network of bourgeois and nuclear families. Both writers reveal an uncomfortable feeling regarding the family and founding a "normal" family. France turns out to be a false El Dorado or a "Dream Deferred", to use Langston Hughes' words once again. Baldwin's narrator is upset by people's awkward reactions during his nightly escapes. They make David feel uncertain, anxious, and *queer*, especially when Giovanni takes him to nightbars kept by female bartenders:

> Behind the counter sat one of those absolutely inimitable and indomitable ladies, produced only in the city of Paris, but produced there in great numbers (…). All over Paris they sit behind their counters like a mother bird in a nest and brood over the cash-registers as though it were an egg. (…) [T]hough some are white haired and others not, some fat, some thin, some grandmothers and some but lately virgins, they all have exactly the same, shrewd, vacant, all-registering eye (…). (Baldwin, 1956, pp. 73-74)

These upsetting nightly dwellings strangely echo Damas' wanderings in *Black-Label*, in which the speaker similarly tries to forget his displacement and dislocation, but gets even more uprooted as he discovers that wherever he turns, he remains an outsider. This symbolically comes to David's mind whenever Giovanni calls him an American, which he continues to resent, aware that he is different from all the other Americans he sees around him, the crowds of tourists which appear to him as a same-color and sexless "unit":

> At home, I could have distinguished patterns, habits, accents of speech (…). At home, I could have seen the clothes they were wearing, but here I only saw bags, cameras, belts and hats, all, clearly, from the same department store. At home, I would have had some sense of the individual womanhood of the woman I faced: here the most ferociously accomplished seemed to be involved in some ice cold or sun-dried travesty of sex, and even grandmothers seemed to have had no traffic with the flesh. And what distinguished the men was that they seemed incapable of age; they smelled of soap, which seemed indeed to be their preservative against the dangers and exigencies of any more intimate odor; the boy he had been shone somehow, unsoiled, untouched, unchanged through the eyes of the man of sixty (…). I was seeing (…) but a part of the truth and perhaps not even the most important part; beneath these faces, these clothes these accents, rudenesses, was power and sorrow, both unadmitted, unrealized, the power of inventors, the sorrow of the disconnected. (Baldwin, 1977, p. 68)

However big their efforts, both protagonists are wandering through a city rapidly associated with unbelonging, and therefore despair or even death. The impossibility of having stable and enduring relationships dawns on them. High buildings become symbols of dangerous, phallus-like instruments of domination and (s)exploitation: further on in the novel, sex-work is condemned all the more as people of color seem to be

obliged to prostitute themselves in order to survive. Creolization, then, is often synonymous with "chosification" in the white (wo)men's eyes and implies a progressive "process" of emasculation. In *Another Country*, the towers of the cathedral in Chartres also have the most disturbing and deranging effect on the protagonist, which only confirms its importance in Baldwin's work (Baldwin, 1984, p. 217). This verticality is opposed to the horizontal "river" crossing the Republic's capital, which is also linked to suicide and crime. In Baldwin's novel, "la Seine" is the mythical river Styx:[8]

> Look, said Giovanni, as we crossed the river. This old whore, Paris, as she turns in bed, is very moving.
>
> I looked out, beyond this heavy profile, which was grey — from fatigue and from the light of the sky above us. The river was swollen and yellow. Nothing moved on the river. (Baldwin, 1956, p. 66)

For Damas, the Seine is the graveyard of newborn babies who are thrown away, probably because of their mixed origins:

> Watch watch
> Caught from the Seine
> At the very moment of the Seine[9]
> The gentile and beautiful
> The newborn
> Child born out of sin (Damas, 1956, p. 49)

The child born out of prohibited relations between black and white sojourns in a "limbo" state and is "evacuated" through the city's mighty river: the poet translates his disgust of their "civilization", a nice word that he will break into pieces:

> I feel ridiculous
> among them accomplice
> among them pimp
> among them cut-throat
> hands frightfully red

with the blood of their ci-vi-li-za-tion (Lillehei[10], 2010, n.p.)

Echoing the first poem analyzed here, "Contre notre amour", *Black-Label* once again insists on Creolization as race-mixing, which the majority of the French population therefore perceives as sinful and blamable, as morally despicable. Creolization and thus *métissage* as the result of love between people of different color seem to traumatize Damas. However, both protagonists' efforts at integration remain in vain. The closeness and intimacy in *Black-Label* and *Giovanni's Room* show that in the underground subculture of Paris, there unquestionably were "contacts" with the Other. In Baldwin's "all-white novel", the affair between the Italian beauty Giovanni and the American David is upsetting for the latter, who fights against his giant, ghostly monster, Goliath: the queerness and homosexuality that he has repressed for years. His lover Giovanni blames David for terminating their affair out of cowardice and weakness. He reproaches him for his inability to "give himself totally", a rebuke which echoes Damas' warning quoted above:

> You will never give it to anybody, you will never let anybody *touch* it – man *or* woman. You want to be *clean*. (…) [Y]ou do not want to ***stink***, not even for five minutes (…). (Baldwin, 1956, pp. 206-207; italics in original, bold added)

Again, the violating type of love that both artists seem to instil through their characters is linked to impurity, to insanity, even to physical and mental reactions that push the Other further and further away. Overcome by loss and loneliness, the poet and the American exile seek refuge in their maiden's rooms during the day and come out at night, when they find soulmates and friends equally "queer". *Giovanni's Room* includes several night scenes during which the lonely strangers escape to find some solace from the daily humiliations and despise. However unpleasant the reactions by white people, for whom blackness/*négritude* has become associated with bad manners, lack of hygiene, and perspiration[11], both poet and author continue to struggle for a change in race/gender relations.[12] A conversation with Jacques, another gay man who questions David's love affair with Giovanni, is particularly revealing:

> (…) [I]f you think of them as dirty, then they *will* be dirty (…).
>
> You will end up trapped in your own dirty body, forever and forever and forever – like me. (Baldwin, 1956, pp. 83-84)

Baldwin's narrator, the white American David or the author's fictional double, experiences his forbidden love for Giovanni. Later, Giovanni's murder in self-defence against sexual harassment is seen as scandalous, a love that shakes the very foundations of the French republic:

> It was a terrific scandal, if you were in Paris at the time you certainly heard of it, and saw the picture printed in all the newspapers, of Giovanni, just after he was captured. (…)
>
> Such a scandal always threatens, before its reverberations cease, to rock the very foundations of the state. (Baldwin, 1956, pp. 218-219)

The idea of scandal addressed in both texts concerns this *queerolization*, the intimacy between individuals of different color, or even of the same sex. The condemnation of that kind of relationship is bound to have traumatized the two authors. They were under the threat of being considered decadent as "Creoles" and ambiguous in terms of gender. In "Limbé", Damas deals with a sexual encounter between a black man and a white woman (Damas, 1972, pp. 43-45). In spite of the many comments upon this famous poem, the theme of "forbidden sexuality with the Other" (the white woman in Paris) has been glossed over. However, the poet talks about prostitutes as "Marchands d'amour", a masculine epithet for a female profession, and about the feeling of total disgust and loss by the supposedly Creole man. To summarize, this contact with pale-faced women ("blèmes", which he uses often: "dépit blème") leads to another "disaster". Sex with the Other completely diminishes, even infantilizes the adult black man. Reclaiming his toys, his "Rose of Cayenne", the poet gives rise to the extreme distance between the sexes, the cultures (the European decadence in which women have to sell their bodies) and ethnicities. Cross-racial encounters of this kind seem to reinforce the confusion

between typically male and female gender-related issues and performances. A destabilized masculinity pervades "Limbé", one of Damas' better-known poems, which too many critics simply reduce to a nostalgic cry for his native Guyana. However, "Limbé" also expresses a third-sex code in the manner of his admired Jamaican friend, Claude McKay, to whom Damas has dedicated *Pigments*. McKay dreamt of a space in private and public spheres where black men could perform a feminine-identified masculinity as expressed in "Limbé". The Creoleness of the Guyanese poet always stands in the way of interracial alliances which were considered queer at the time. The Paris of the fifties is a world of overt racism, miscegenation, and an aversion to "creolization" as a process of overthrowing boundaries of skin color and of changing fixed identities (including gender norms).

Both Damas' alter ego in *Black-Label* and David, Baldwin's similarly fictional double, wander by night in a city that is not at all comforting. Paris is even compared to a prostitute. The "dark nature" comes to the surface again, and David never gets rid of this queerness:

> The city, Paris, which I loved so much, was absolutely silent. There seemed to be almost no one on the streets (…). I could almost hear the collective, shivering sigh – were lovers and ruins, sleeping, embracing, coupling, drinking, staring out at the descending night. Behind the walls of the houses I passed, the French nation was clearing away the dishes, putting little Jean Pierre and Marie to bed, scowling over the eternal problems of the sou [*sic*], the shop, the church the *unsteady State*. (Baldwin, 1956, pp. 206-207)

The word "scandal"**,** common to both texts, points to the impossible and shocking ideal of Creolization brought to the French capital by these immigrants of dark(er) complexion.

In words that echo Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, Damas evokes the feeling of being reduced to a poor thing when his desire is mocked by Ketty. The poet seems to be torn between Ketty and Sicy-la-Chabine. The first seduces him in his "chambre de bonne", the room where the female servants used to sleep, but then refuses to have sex with him:

And my ugly desire
A poor poor dead thing (…)
NEVER EVER WITH YOU (Damas, 1956, p. 46)[13]

The rejection by the blonde is the SCANDAL[14] in his own life; the word referring to untranslatable and forbidden interracial relationships. *Giovanni's Room* equally scandalized Richard Wright and many other African American readers and critics alike. The fear of Creolization in the Parisian circles and the night life of these two lonely dwellers are described through intimate narratives which offer a sound picture of how these post-colonial subjects discovered France's capital. For David, it is his homosexual affair with Giovanni that will definitely cause his depression and feelings of guilt when his lover commits a crime.

Trans-Caribbean and Trans-Gender

While both Baldwin and Damas had a soul which was "euphemistically Creole", fifty years later, African Americans, Africans and Caribbeans are no longer a manifest and visible minority in the streets of Paris. Members of the second and third generations of immigrants regard Paris as their "native city" and protest loudly against what they perceive as racial prejudice and rampant discrimination by the authorities. Fifty years after the foundation of *Présence Africaine*, fifty years after the first Congress of Black Artists was launched at the Sorbonne, the African Damas imbued "Creole" with a new meaning, crossing the last line. Struggling against the prejudices against his "race", he also fought lines of another nature. Baldwin, for his part, delivered with his autobiographic circumfession, an "outing novel". Both *Black-Label* and *Giovanni's Room* are symbolically set in an attic: poor lodgings and depressive housing were the curse for many uprooted single men originating from the colonies (West Indies, Africaà. Léon Damas and James Baldwin ruminated in their attics on what it means to be "colored black" and enclosed in a "male" or masculinist "jacket": they call for a revision of "Creole" as the utopian wish for blurring the boundaries between opposites such as gender, class, and color. The fact

that Minister of Justice Christiane Taubira quoted *Black-Label* and "Grand comme un besoin de changer d'air" (Damas, 1972, p. 87) in her defense of gay marriage proves that she "filled the gaps" in Damas' elliptic poetry. She understood like nobody else how much this close friend of Langston Hughes and Claude McKay (but also launched by André Gide) was ahead of his time and transgressed all the lines that separate individuals, be they distinct in terms of "class", "race", or "gender", both in his own society and in the Caribbean archipelago as a whole, notorious for its general denial of homosexuality, as well as the stigmatization in the "mère-patrie" (Mariott, 2006, pp. 161-169). To conclude with one last "stanza" that Damas kept on rewriting from *Névalgies* (Damas, 1972, pp. 108-109) to the recently published *Mine de riens*[15]:

> Against our love
> Which dreamed of living in a free space
> Which dreamed of living its own life
> Of living a live
> Which would be
> Neither shameful
> Nor leprous
> Nor faked
> nor portioned
> nor haunted (Damas, 1956, p. 106)

Gopal Dagnogo is a painter. He nourishes his work from combinations, readings, and the diversity that he encounters during his travels between Africa, Europe, and Asia. In the "Seeds and Guides" collection, he has illustrated the title on Sitting Bull, Miriam Makeba, Alexandra David-Néel, as well as that on Léon-Gontran Damas.

This illustration is from: a book entitled, L. G. Damas, the Jazzy Poet by:

Nimrod An excellent connoisseur of negritude poets, it is both as a novelist and a poet that Nimrod tells us about the enchanted life of Léon-Gontran Damas. Nimrod publishes with Actes Sud and Obsidiane.

[1] A translation of Black-Label, blocked from editing by the ayant droit Marcel Bibas exists thanks tot he collaborative project with Femi Ojo-Ade, Christine Pagnoulle, and myself. I quote from our unofficial translation. Gyssels, Kathleen, Christine Pagnoulle. «The Négraille's Testament : Translating *Black-Label*», in *Intimate Enemies. Translation in Francophone Contexts.* Kathryn Batchelor and Claire Bisdorff, eds. Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2013, pp. 124-140.

[2] Whereas Homi K. Bhabha hardly addresses the third space in sexualized or gendered terms, McClintock and Halberstam interrogate the fatal attraction between individuals from the same sex but from different ethnicities in a context of colonization. In *Imperial Leather*, male homosexuality proves to be an important, yet taboo terrain in each of the European empires. (McClintock, 1995)

[2] Hereby Damas claims his Amerindian roots (Gyssels, 2009).

[3] Hereby Damas claims his Amerindian roots (Gyssels, 2009).

[4] In this respect, one should notice that Baldwin spent considerable time in Istanbul as an expatriate, although his prolonged stays and eventual residency was in Paris. See Fortuny, 2010; Zaborowska, 2008.

[5] All translations are by Kathleen Gyssels and Christine Pagnoulle, with the help of Femi Ojo-Ade.

[6] See for instance Frank Martinus Arion, *Dubbelspel*, 1973 (new edition and English translation *Double Play*, London: Faber and Faber, 1989), in which four men play dominoes every Sunday at the home of one of them. The novel tells the story of one of these games, a game which is historic and very eventful for all of the men. (http://www.doubleplaythemovie.nl/popup.html)

[7] See for instance Frank Martinus Arion, *Dubbelspel*, 1973 (new edition and English translation *Double Play*, London: Faber and Faber, 1989), in which four men play dominoes every Sunday at the home of one of them. The novel tells the story of one of these games, a game which is historic and very eventful for all of the men. (http://www.doubleplaythemovie.nl/popup.html)

[8] David tries to forget Giovanni by making love to an American girl in Paris. After having slept with Sue, he wants to bring himself back to normal life: "I wanted to have babies". Yet then he quickly thinks about suicide by throwing himself in the river: "And this was perhaps the first time death occurred to me as a reality. I

thought of the people before me who had looked down at the river and gone to sleep beneath it. I wondered about them. I wondered how they had done it – it, the physical act." (Baldwin, 1956, p. 150) The river is said to be crying like a wounded beast in *Black-Label*: "(des) cris de bête blessée dont s'inquiétait la Seine bien malgré elle/malgré la mansarde/malgré la neige en plein dans la mansarde/ (…) malgré le téléphone arme blanche" (Damas, 1956, p. 44).

[9] Pronounced as "scène", Damas plays at the confusion between the words (Seine/scène), again hinting at the various "scandals" caused by the intrusion of "creole" or "queer" individuals into the white, generally bourgeois milieux of the city. Like Baldwin, he claims that those incidents and faits-divers (which he repeatedly parodies in his poems, see for instance *Mine de riens*, a posthumous collection which came out in 2012 under another title (*Dernière escale*, Paris: Le Regard du Texte, 2012, by Marcel Bibas and Sandrine Poujols). In "A la rubrique des chiens crevés", or "Sauvage-de-bon-sens"), these kinds of "social and public disorders" rock the very foundations of a country preoccupied with maintaining order and "purity", with controlling its unwanted intruders, and which institutionalizes marginalization based on color, religion, origin, even language and non-normative gender identities.

[10] I refer to the bilingual online version of an unpublished MA thesis by Alexandra Lillehei, submitted to Wesleyan College (April 2011): https://wesscholar.wesleyan.edu/etd_hon_theses/706/

[11] Bodily reactions are indicative of his uncomfortable situation and "malaise": "mains moites" ("sweaty hands") and "orteils qui exhalent la chaleur du morne" ("sweaty toes") are some of the symptoms that repeat themselves all over the poem. In both texts the irresolvable attraction to the other is jeopardized by strong stereotypes of colour, impurity, lack of bodily hygiene, to the point of stinking. In "De la profuse et diffuse odeur fauve" (*Mine de riens* / *Dernière escale*, posthumous collection, 2012, pp. 113-118), Damas points to the denigrating representation of Creoles and blacks alike as disgusting, repulsive because of their bodily odour. If the love the poet aspires to is impossible in his native land, his quest in Europe is even further jeopardized by strong restrictions and taboos.

[12] Previous affairs with friends from the same sex are suddenly remembered as the narrator, David, falls in love with Giovanni. It turns out that David accepted the latter's offer to sleep at his place because he has been sent out of his room.

David remembers how beautiful Joey's body was: "*brown*, (…) sweaty, the most beautiful creation I had ever seen till then." (Baldwin, 1956, p. 11) The homosexual affair is described as having opened a "cavern" in which the narrator has fallen: "A cavern opened in my mind, black, full of rumor, suggestion, of half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of dirty words. I could have cried, cried for shame and terror, cried for not understanding how this could have happened to me, how this could have happened *in* me." (Baldwin, 1956, pp. 12-13)

[13] It is after this deception that the poet evokes "la mazurka créole" (Baldwin, 1956, p. 49) together with other dances and rhythms to cure his sadness in the "Cabane Cubaine", a Parisian club famous for its Afro-Caribbean public and music, a gateway to queerolisation as the bar allowed both white and black audiences and non-heteronormative relations in the intimate atmosphere of the obscure dance club. See also Claude McKay's portrayal of Marseille and its nightclubs gathering African, Caribbean, and European single men often in search of tenderness and love.

[14] In English and in another font in the original Gallimard edition, 1956, p. 46.

[15] *Mine de riens*, posted by Damas' Martinican friend in Washington D.C., Christian Filostrat.

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