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By

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**Reading Urban Environments: French Exiles in the Poetry of Charles Baudelaire  
and Ethnography of Léon-Gontran Damas**

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**Reading Urban Environments: French Exiles in the Poetry of Charles Baudelaire and  
Ethnography of Léon-Gontran Damas**

by

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**Report**

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## Abstract

### **Reading Urban Environments: French Exiles in the Poetry of Charles**

### **Baudelaire and Ethnography of Léon-Gontran Damas**

by

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This report examines how urban environments create a sense of exile for marginalized communities in the work of French poet Charles Baudelaire and the ethnography of French Guianese Creole writer Léon-Gontran Damas, *Retour de Guyane*. Through a comparative literary analysis informed by an environmental justice framework I examine how urban decay prompts the development of discourses on public health in nineteenth-century Paris and twentieth-century French Guiana. A main question I address is: How do representations of exile in French and Francophone literature indicate the process of nation-building? I foreground the discriminatory legacy of French colonialism in my analysis of *Retour de Guyane* to highlight how governmental neglect resulting in Guiana's infrastructural decay constitutes an act of environmental racism and social exclusion. By using French Guiana as a case point, I illustrate examples of deliberate environmental degradation of racialized communities today in the twenty-first century and describe how Charles Baudelaire and Léon-Gontran Damas transmit the value of environmental awareness for the sake of intergenerational well-being.

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## **Introduction: Defining Environment and Ethnography**

How do representations of exile in French and Francophone literature indicate the process of nation-building? What is the relationship between deliberate environmental degradation and social exclusion? These questions guide my literary analysis of Léon-Gontran Damas's ethnography and poems by Charles Baudelaire which thematize urban decay. While Baudelaire focuses on the plight of the urban poor in a redeveloped nineteenth-century Paris, Damas examines the deteriorating infrastructure of early twentieth-century French Guiana, a former penal colony. Through a framework of environmental justice, I examine how the development of new ideas regarding public health in continental France informed the pursuit for a decent standard of living in French Guiana. The prejudicial treatment of the urban poor and discrimination intrinsic to French colonialism indicate procedures of social exclusion resulting in a form of exile. I refer here to exile as a metaphor for exclusion from the concept of the French nation. From the poor of Paris to the inmates of the Guianese prison, together Baudelaire and Damas describe the degrading environments of people socially rejected from the nation and urge readers to broaden their empathy for marginalized communities.

To gain a transhistorical sense of how environmental degradation has been depicted in the French literary tradition I study Léon-Gontran Damas's *Retour de Guyane* in tandem with arrivals in science and literature, specifically the role of ethnography and growing concerns for public health. For example, French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-67) illustrates urban decay in mid-nineteenth-century Paris through poetry, as scientific discourse on environmental degradation in France is emerging. Pseudo-ethnographic forms of writing during the nineteenth-century in France would later inform twentieth-century Antillean ethnographic writing. A major point of interest for this study is that in both urban contexts, metropolitan France and colonial

French Guiana, land and space not only provide stages for human activity, but also actively impact human activity; the environment becomes an active presence.

For the purposes of this report, I use a broad definition of environment from scholars of ecocriticism. In the introduction to *Beyond Nature Writing*, Karla Armbruster and Kathleen Wallace describe how the development of ecocriticism as an academic discipline has led to the expansion of what constitutes an environment. Beyond “natural” landscapes, an environment refers to: “cultivated and built landscapes, the natural elements and aspects of those landscapes, the cultural interactions with those natural elements” (4). This passage succinctly explains how the notion of environment encompasses that which is constructed, for example infrastructure. Built environments are material, spatial, and cultural products of human labor, which carry implicit and explicit meanings for different social agents. Additionally, the quote reinforces how interaction with the environment results in the creation of meaning. By interacting with our environments we become enabled to distinguish between “natural” and socially constructed aspects of our surroundings.

One example of ecocritical work that engages with the practice of ethnography in the Antillean context is Christina Kullberg's *The Poetics of Ethnography in Martinican Narratives* (2013). Kullberg describes how poetics are used by Martinican ethnographers from early 20<sup>th</sup> century on to contemporary times to explore self-identity and the environment. While Kullberg acknowledges how ethnography has been detrimental to colonized communities of the African diaspora, her analysis examines how Martinican writers have adopted the practice as an empowering tool for social critique. Kullberg's study has informed my own path of research. I build off of Kullberg's ecocritical scholarship on Martinique by examining another Antillean context via a case study of Damas's ethnographic engagement with Guianese environments.



Due to the complex history of ethnography as an anthropological practice, which lies outside of the scope of this report, here I work with a definition that both acknowledges its etymological root and draws from current practitioners. The Oxford English Dictionary defines ethnography as: “The systematic study and description of peoples, societies, and cultures.” The term—rooted in Greek etymology: *ethnos* (people) and *graphy* (writing)—developed in eighteenth century scientific nomenclature. The Greek prefix *ethnos* is related to *ethos* (character), which lends the term connotative potential of capturing moral qualities. Although the term employs Greek semantics, as a relatively recent term, its origins are not Greek. Beyond the etymological baggage of term, ethnography has also been used to write about environment .

In the introduction of Steven Feld and Keith Basso's anthology *Senses of Place* ethnographic texts are identified as those that “describe and interpret some of the ways in which people encounter places, perceive them, and invest them with significance” (8). Feld and Basso emphasize the place and space of ethnographic events to examine how people engage with their environment. As the title of their anthology suggests they emphasize how ethnographers gain senses of place via “the relation of sensation to emplacement: the experiential and expressive ways places are known, imagined, yearned for, held, remembered, voiced, lived contested and struggled over; and the multiple ways places are metonymically and metaphorically tied to identities” (11). Beyond mere people-writing, ethnography is premised on our capacities to affect our environments and to be affected by them as the practice informs us about ourselves and how we to relate to places. This lens that ties sense and place to identity formation can also serve to gain a sense of how emplacement is tied to the project of nation-building. This report examines how ethnographic strategies are used by Baudelaire and Damas to call attention to harmful environments of urban modernity from Paris, France to Cayenne, French Guiana.

### **Academic Position: Embodied Knowledge and Racism**

I claim no expertise on ethnography. I am not an anthropologist and I have no ethnographic fieldwork on my résumé. Instead, I am a passionate comparatist from the vantage point of literary studies and African diaspora studies, two main fields in which I operate. A professor once asked me why I write about Negritude literature at all. The question reminded me of the obligation to account for oneself, to explain why I'm *here* and not *there*. This chore is particularly incumbent on perceived cultural outsiders operating from positions of privilege. Too palpable of a mistrust exists between non-Black scholars and Black communities for me, as a Chicano, to glide past the issue of why I'm interested in early Afro-Caribbean literature.

After my first visit to Rincón Zacaiste, a rural community on the outskirts of Tierra Blanca, Veracruz, I became aware of my paternal Afrodescendant relatives. Upon asking family elders questions regarding genealogy I encountered silenced family histories. Although no relatives would admit it explicitly, it became evident that the erasure was in part due to prejudicial attitudes regarding race and national identity. As a result, I am compelled to combat racist ideas within my family and also extend the anti-racist struggle among Latina/o communities that do not have Afro-descendent ancestors. This personal anti-racist struggle within my family ties into my intellectual labor. Researching Francophone Afro-Caribbean literature has proved generative in challenging my personal sense of identity politics while encouraging me to use my interstitial positionality and embodied knowledge to my advantage.

Growing up, my mom would often tell me the story of a conversation she had with a neighbor shortly after our family moved away from the urban area of South Central Los Angeles—in the wake of the 1992 Rodney King riots—sixty miles east in the San Bernardino county suburb of Chino Hills. Our neighbor who was pregnant with triplets miscarried one of her

three children. She suspected that the miscarriage was linked to the activities of the nearby facilities of the rocket and missile propulsion manufacturing company Aerojet General. She asked for my mom's help to participate in a collective action to investigate the company. Within a decade later an investigative reporter from the local journal *LA Weekly* published a story on how Aerojet had detonated mustard and tear gas weapons and exploded depleted uranium-tipped projectiles since the eighties a few blocks from the house I was raised in until I was ten, the house where my younger brother was born. Up until this day my mom—who remains uncertain why my brother was born with Aspergers syndrome, a disorder on the autism spectrum—wonders whether my neighbor was onto something.

We may never know if living near heavily contaminated land directly had physical long-term effects on our family. Yet in any case, my mom's testimony has raised my awareness of the psychological and physiological impact of living in an environment polluted with toxic waste. I carry this embodied knowledge into my research as I study how the deliberate environmental degradation of vulnerable racialized communities has preoccupied authors such as Baudelaire and Damas. My experience living in outcast neighborhoods motivates me to write about them. I aim for my study of environmental degradation in French language literatures to provide a translingual vantage point of environmental struggles to a primarily Anglophone readership. In light of contemporary struggles to improve environmental conditions across the world, and since all humans are stakeholders in these struggles, the comparison of France and French Guiana helps us understand how past calls for environmental justice have played out in order to inform future activism.

### **Environmental Decadence in Baudelaire's Paris**

The environment of Paris during the nineteenth-century underwent profound changes

raising the issue of overcrowding which was reflected in literature of the era. The population of Paris increased in size drastically as rural migrants arrived in search of work. It soon became clear that the city required large-scale construction to accommodate the growing demographics. A major concern that grew out of this situation was the unsanitary conditions affecting the health of urban workers. David S. Barnes provides a historical study of hygiene and institutionalized health practices in his book *The Great Stink of Paris and the Nineteenth-Century Struggle against Filth and Germs* (2006). Barnes notes that as early as 1822 some hygienists decried the dangerous arrangement of working-class bodies in Paris that were placed in extremely close quarters, increasing the possibility of health threats. The lack of sunlight in congested dwellings on narrow streets was seen as having an effect on workers' health similar to the wilting of plants (74). In efforts to address these issues during the 1850s the emperor Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte inaugurated a series of urban redevelopment projects.<sup>1</sup>

The reorganization of the transport and communication systems resulted in the formation of new space relations. Shortly after the declaration of empire by Louis-Napoleon, Baron Georges Eugène Haussmann, an elite public administrator, was appointed prefect of the Seine and was mandated to spearhead the redevelopment of Paris. Some projects led by Haussmann included the construction of the Paris Opéra and the central marketplace Les Halles,<sup>2</sup> public utilities, transportation facilities, and modernized sanitation. As a result of Haussmann's renovation of Paris many old neighborhoods had to be demolished, resulting in the displacement

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1 These infrastructural changes came shortly after Louis-Napoleon led a coup d'etat against the Legislative Assembly December 2, 1851 to establish a monarchy. In opposition to the coup resistance culminated in violent fighting which resulted in "several hundred protesters [being] killed and twenty-six thousand arrested, ten-thousand of whom were subsequently transported to Algeria" (Wright 140). Louis-Napoleon's tyranny has been seen as both benevolent and terrible by historians.

2 Parisian market where Léon-Gontran Damas would later work to support himself after his family ceased funding his education after his decision to study literature and ethnology instead of law (Miller 14).

of many impoverished communities.<sup>3</sup> Although problems of overcrowding, inadequate constructions for the poor, and a geographic outlay that reinforced social stratification were not phenomena particular to this historical era, these issues intensified during this time of redevelopment and gained renewed attention.

For the poet Charles Baudelaire overcrowding became a topic of interest as he developed a fascination with *flânerie*, a style of urban spectatorship in vogue during the era. In *Les Foules* (*Crowds*), the twelfth prose poem in Baudelaire's 1869 posthumous collection *Le Spleen de Paris*, the poet admires the intoxicating effect of Parisian crowds: “Celui-là qui épouse facilement la foule connaît des jouissances fiévreuses, dont seront éternellement privés l'égoïste, fermé comme un coffre, et le paresseux, interné comme un mollusque” (35).<sup>4</sup> Baudelaire's poetic narrator describes the feverish delights of crowds as accessible only to spectators who enter the multitude with a receptive disposition. Baudelaire's use of the term *fiévreuses* (feverish) merits attention since it refers both to a generic name for a group of diseases which involve an abnormally high body temperature, and it also carries the connotation of being in a state of nervous excitement. Due to the ambiguity of the term *fiévreuses* it is implied that crowds stimulate physiological sensations that could either take a toll on or improve one's well-being. The uncertainty implies a risk involved in the pursuit of such adrenaline. Unlike “the lazy,” closed-off people who confine themselves like “mollusks,” Baudelaire's fascination with crowds indicates a willingness and ability to connect with strangers. To an extent *Les Foules* revels in the decadence of the evolving cityscape but, at the same time, it also indicates the poet's empathic sensibility towards others. Baudelaire's attentive outlook on his milieu enables him to address the

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3 For a more detailed study of this process look to Anne-Louise Sharpiro's *Housing the Poor of Paris, 1850-1902*.

4 “He who easily espouses crowds knows the feverish delights, of which the selfish will be eternally deprived, locked up like a chest, and the lazy, confined like a mollusk” (Kaplan, 21).

troubles of the city's poor.

The theme of exile which also pervades Baudelaire's poetry is intimately tied to his personal life experiences. Baudelaire's father died when he was five, two years later his mother remarried a soldier. Baudelaire was resentful towards his new father figure and tensions between them only increased with time. While his mother and stepfather, who eventually gained the rank of General, provided opportunities to Baudelaire to become industrious and dutiful he rebelled. To the dismay of his guardians he pursued a literary career and explored “the cafés, the cabarets and houses of prostitution in the Quartier Latin” (Laver xvii). During this time he contracted syphilis. After his family learned of his condition they decided to send him on a voyage in efforts to restore his health.

On May 1841 Baudelaire departed from Gravelines on a boat bound for Calcutta. Due to a storm on route the vessel made an unexpected stop at the island of Mauritius. After three weeks, another unexpected stop was made in the Isle Bourbon and it was here, after nine months of travel, that Baudelaire “decides to endure his exile from Paris for no longer” (xix). Yet, upon his return to Paris he “found that his voyage had left him a curious nostalgia for blue skies, palm trees, the brightness of sunlit houses...most of all, for the brown bodies of the native girls he had seen at Mauritius and the Isle Bourbon” (xx). A genre of reverse exile took hold of the poet who longed, not for his urban cityscape, but for the faraway tropical island landscapes he romanticized and exoticized. He embodied the urge of desiring the unattainable.

Another prose poem from *Spleen de Paris* entitled *Les Yeux des Pauvres* (*The Eyes of the Poor*) captures the divide between the haves and have nots of Paris. It takes place at a brand-new café at the corner of a new boulevard. As a man and woman enjoy an evening as café patrons, a forty-year-old father and his two boys, each in tattered clothes and the youngest of which is too

weak to walk, are planted across the street. The poor family gazes at the brand new café:

Les yeux du père disaient: “Que c'est beau! Que c'est beau! On dirait que tout l'or du pauvre monde est venu se porter sur ces murs.”—Les yeux du petit garçon: “Que c'est beau . . . mais c'est une maison où peuvent seuls entrer les gens qui ne sont pas comme nous” . . . Non seulement j'étais attendri par cette famille d'yeux, mais je me sentais un peu honteux de nos verres et de nos carafes, plus grands que notre soif (84-85).<sup>5</sup>

The narrator reacts to the gaze of the poor family by being ashamed of his abundance as he has more than enough drink to quench his thirst, while the father and the boys can only watch with desire. As the accessibility of consumable nourishment is evidently unequal across class boundaries, rather than being proud of possessing abundance, the poem's narrator feels guilty for having access to a safe food and water supply. The poor youth demonstrates an understanding of the beautiful new space's exclusivity. Well aware that poor people are not meant to enter the café, the youth comprehends the nuances of social taboos which reinforce class divides in the new space relations of the redeveloped city. The poor father gazes in awe of the building's opulence, likening it to the brilliance of “all the poor world's gold” (85). Although Baudelaire does not reference the role of imperialism here, the father's remark evokes a revived desire for gold shared by nineteenth-century French colonists.<sup>6</sup> At the closing of *Les Yeux des Pauvres*, as the male bourgeois narrator looks into the eyes of his female companion for her response, anticipating her affirmation of sympathy, she looks at the poor with disgust and demands that he tell the waiter to make the family leave. Baudelaire demonstrates the extreme class prejudice that sought to police the newly developed urban space. The bourgeois woman affirms what the poor youth intuited: at new boulevards the poor are not welcomed.

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5 “The father's eyes were saying, 'How beautiful! How beautiful! All the poor world's gold seems to have fallen upon these walls . . . ’—The little boy's eyes, ‘How beautiful! How beautiful! But only people not like us can enter this house’ . . . Not only was I moved by that family of eyes, but I felt a little ashamed of our glasses and decanters, larger than our thirst” (Kaplan, 61).

6 Although gold had been extracted from French soil in meager quantities since the time of the Gauls, the mineral extraction industry intensified during the late nineteenth-century. The French confirmed the existence of gold deposits in Guiana in 1855 (Taubira-Delannon).

Prevailing pseudo-scientific ideas during the nineteenth-century linked physical and moral attributes and by extension led to the belief that people were products determined by their environment. To the dismay of marginalized communities such scientific attention often resulted in a typology based on environmental determinism—the notion that physical environment predisposes human social development towards particular trajectories. As Barnes explains, hygienists often held perceptions that considered residential configurations, moral well-being, and physical health to be interrelated. It was believed that “excessive crowding simply denied human bodies the minimal requirements for physical and moral survival” (75). By connecting physical traits and even physiognomy, a person’s facial features or general appearance, with a person's moral attributes, social elites typecasted the urban poor as morally inferior. It was only until later in the nineteenth-century after great bacteriological breakthroughs in etiology, the causation of disease, that scientific literature on public health investigated the empirical particulars of overcrowding.

Despite the semblance of glamor in the New Paris Baudelaire eulogized the loss of the Old Paris in his 1857 poem *Le Cygne (The Swan)* from *Tableaux Parisiens (Parisian Scenes)*. Set in the Place du Carrousel near the Louvre, early in the poem the author laments the changing city: “Comme je traversais le nouveau Carrousel. / Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville / Change plus vite, hélas! que le coeur d'un mortel).”<sup>7</sup> As the city changes faster than the poet's heart, Baudelaire's poetic voice is filled with nostalgia. The speed with which urban redevelopment is occurring seems inhuman. To illustrate his disdain for the new city, the main symbolic image of *Le Cygne* becomes the spectacle of an attempted escape by a petting-zoo's displaced swan:

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7 “As I walked across the new Carrousel. / — Old Paris is no more (the form of a city / Changes more quickly, alas! than the human heart)”



Un cygne qui s'était évadé de sa cage,  
 Et, de ses pieds palmés frottant le pavé sec,  
 Sur le sol raboteux traînait son blanc plumage.  
 Près d'un ruisseau sans eau la bête ouvrant le bec  
 Baignait nerveusement ses ailes dans la poudre,  
 Et disait, le coeur plein de son beau lac natal:  
 «Eau, quand donc pleuvras-tu? quand tonneras-tu, foudre?»  
 Je vois ce malheureux, mythe étrange et fatal.<sup>8</sup>

The swan is unable to find sustenance. It seeks water but is surrounded by dryness. It is clear the creature is out of place. The sense of displacement is active on several registers as Baudelaire's waterfowl experiences encagement and is transplanted to a parched urban space. Harsh imagery of webbed feet chaffing against dry pavement and feathers dragging on the ground demonstrate the painfulness of the situation. As the creature fails to find any water source, Baudelaire's narrator interprets its cry as signaling a desire to return to its native lake. The anthropomorphic gesture of interpreting the meaning of the swan's cry indicates the amount of empathy held by the narrator for the poor creature. The author imagines that the swan's cry is a call to the water, asking out loud when rainfall will happen, to quench the lingering thirst for nourishment. For Baudelaire the condition of the swan becomes a metaphor for living in exile. In the second part of the poem Baudelaire uses the swan as a segue to discuss the exiled condition of other persons. The animal becomes a polysemous symbol:

Je pense à la négresse, amaigrie et phtisique  
 Piétinant dans la boue, et cherchant, l'oeil hagard,  
 Les cocotiers absents de la superbe Afrique  
 Derrière la muraille immense du brouillard;...  
 Je pense aux matelots oubliés dans une île,  
 Aux captifs, aux vaincus! . . . à bien d'autres encor!<sup>9</sup>

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8 "I saw a swan that had escaped from his cage, / That stroked the dry pavement with his webbed feet / And dragged his white plumage over the uneven ground. / Beside a dry gutter the bird opened his beak, / Restlessly bathed his wings in the dust / And cried, homesick for his fair native lake :/ "Rain, when will you fall? Thunder, when will you roll?" / I see that hapless bird, that strange and fatal myth."

9 "I think of the negress, wasted and consumptive, / Trudging through muddy streets, seeking with a fixed gaze / The absent coco-palms of splendid Africa / Behind the immense wall of mist . . . / Thus in the dim forest to which my soul withdraws, / An ancient memory sounds loud the hunting horn! / I think of the sailors forgotten on some isle, / — Of the captives, of the vanquished! . . . of many others too!"

From a negresse (Negro woman), to sailors on deserted islands, captives and the vanquished alike, the animal's condition is shown to be similar to that of marginalized humans. The image of the negresse seeking coconut trees, which Baudelaire associates with a superb Africa, in the urban landscape mimics the swan's hopeless search for water. With the brief biographical details of Baudelaire's African island tour in mind, the imagery of palm trees and the negresse may tell us more about his own desires than it does about those of negresses in Paris. The wall of mist that the negresse encounters clouds her vision serving as a climatic impediment to reinforce the disorientation that accompanies exile. Imagery of sailors on forgotten islands evokes the well-known exile of Robinson Crusoe, the fictional English sailor who wound up castaway on a Caribbean island for over two decades in Daniel Defoe's popular 1719 novel. The final line of the poem, which references captives and the vanquished, alludes to incarceration. Although the prison is not explicitly referenced by Baudelaire, the mentioning of captives and the vanquished among the ranks of castaways and Africans removed far from their ancestral homelands indicates a gesture towards describing places of detention, such as the swan's cage, as locations of exile.

The theme of exile in Baudelaire's poetry is intimately tied to the alienating decadence of the urban environment. He examines how beings living in the degrading environment cope with the difficulties presented with destitute conditions. As a result, the poet views the New Paris as a facade that evades underlying issues of poverty and marginalization, or as Ann-Louise Shapiro calls it “an illusion which belied the reality” (32). While the new buildings of Paris may seemingly be adorned with “tout l'or du pauvre monde”<sup>10</sup> such lavish infrastructure does little to alleviate the sense of exile for the city's poor. In fact, the blatant display of wealth in public space exacerbates the exclusionary attributes of the cityscape.

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10 “All the poor world's gold”

The *flâneur* style spectatorship that Baudelaire practiced to create his poetic work involved a proto-ethnographic approach. Indeed, *Tableaux Parisiens* and *Spleen de Paris* are ethnographic texts in that they explore “the experiential and expressive ways places are known, imagined, yearned for, held, remembered, *voiced*, lived contested and struggled over” (Feld and Basso 11). While it bears mentioning that Baudelaire wrote during a time when many authors sought to bridge the gap between science and literature,<sup>11</sup> since Baudelaire wrote before the birth of anthropological ethnography it would be anachronistic to equate his literary work to the work of a scientific discipline. However, Baudelaire's poetic analysis of the decadent Parisian environment and his representations of overcrowding (and its results: the toxic fever-inducing ambiance, the starved children) are published as discourses on the issue of public health in France become more scientifically rigorous and work towards improvements.

### **Biographical Sketch of Léon-Gontran Damas's College Years**

During the college years of Leon-Gontran Damas ethnography as a scientific methodology was in its nascent phase. The Institute of Ethnology in Paris was founded in 1925, and Damas enrolled in 1934. As a *mise en valeur* culture began to sweep the field of French anthropology, attributing value to African civilization to compensate for prior devaluation, pioneering ethnologists involved in the foundation of the Institute began actively recruiting African and Antillean students into the certificate program.<sup>12</sup> Efforts to diversify the Institute's student body gained traction as ethnographic research became part of a larger national goal developed in the post WWI era: “scientific knowledge, in the form of ethnography, served the

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11 A pair of notable novelists inspired by scientific methods include Honoré de Balzac and Emile Zola.

12 In an attempt to apply republican ideology to the colonies and fulfill a self-appointed social mission, the doctrine of *mise en valeur* (to attribute value), which was popularized during France's Third Republic in the 1920's, authorized social welfare, construction of economic infrastructures, population policies and political engineering. While France's goal was to create an international colonial family the process engendered contradictions between imperialism and republicanism (Aldrich 923-4).

basis of colonial administration through its demonstration of the knowledge required to serve 'societies to be administered'" (Miller 104). The recruitment of students native to colonized societies marked an effort to collect new colonial scholarship from native informants. In this context, becoming acclimated to the process of conducting fieldwork in the colonies, returning to the metropole and ultimately publishing studies was a rite of passage for becoming a colonial administrator. While Léon-Gontran Damas was drawn to ethnology, his politics were resistant to implicit expectations of him becoming a state functionary.

While completing his certificate program at The Institute of Ethnology, Damas was assigned by his advisors to research afroamerindian maroon communities in the Amazon rainforest, known as the *nègres bosh* (bush Negros), in his native Guiana. Damas's project was to be incorporated in a museum exposition on the theme of marronage, runaway slaves, entitled: "Africa in America" (Debaene 358). Since the assignment corresponded with Damas's research interests, he accepted the task and traveled to Guiana to produce an ethnographic study. He funded his research trip with a meager grant from the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadero, and by writing for a couple of journals during his stay. Shortly after arriving in the field to commence his ethnographic project Damas began to deviate from the original plan, partially due to the fact that the planned museum exhibition was abandoned. Yet aside from the circumstantial reasons, Damas also practiced his own agency by going against the normative "*mise en valeur*" ethnographic standard that was expected of him—objectively documenting the *nègres bosh*—and instead choosing to write about the urgent crisis regarding Guiana's incompetent colonial administration and its practice of infrastructural violence.

### **Scholarship on Damas and Negritude Ethnography**

Damas's turn to ethnography as a means to lend credibility to his critical viewpoints was

part of a larger trend in Negritude literature. In addition to expanding on the study of how Negritude writers use ethnography as a mode of social critique and self-expression by Kullberg (2013) mentioned earlier, here I draw on two more critical studies. First, *The French Imperial Nation-State* (2005) by Gary Wilder, which examines Damas's *Retour* through the framework of cultural nationalism. Wilder's analysis, as an anthropologist, is informed by political theory and takes interest Damas's critique of republican colonialism. Next, F. Bart Miller's *Rethinking Négritude Through Léon-Gontran Damas* (2014) informs my work by bringing the question of genre to the fore, particularly how Damas interweaves ethnography and essay to compose anti-colonial critique. To expand on the work of my intellectual predecessors, my report links how the deliberate creation of hostile environments by authoritative powers induces a sense of exile for poets in different positionalities and temporalities across the French imperial nation-state, from Baudelaire to Damas.

For Damas to produce *Retour*, an anti-colonial ethnography countering the dominant *mise en valeur* outlook of his academic discipline, marked a rebellious act of self-representation. The Negritude writer challenged colonial scholarship, and its exoticized typologies, by making a political intervention which he deemed more urgent than the documentation of the *nègres bosh*. The drive for ethnologists to document native communities in the early twentieth-century was tied to the prevailing idea that indigenous peoples and their lifeways were on the brink of extinction. As the European settler colonialist land-grab in the Americas devastated numerous indigenous communities, subsequent displacement and genocide gave many settlers during the later nineteenth and early twentieth-century the impression that autochthonous communities would eventually disappear. The impetus to preserve “vanishing cultures,” part and parcel of the *mise en valeur* doctrine, resulted in the practice of salvage ethnography. Current studies are

coming to the conclusion that those who prescribed to the “extinction narrative” couldn't have been more wrong (Hochman 2014). In many cases, survivance has prevailed in the communities that were perceived by anthropologists to be on the brink of extinction as indigenous communities have used media to their advantage by documenting cultural practices on their own terms.<sup>13</sup> Borrowing the term from Ojibwe scholar Gerald Vizenor for this Guianese context, Native survivance is “an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion . . . the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent” (1). Unlike mere survival, survivance entails an active and sustained storytelling tradition. As a member of a marginalized community of mixed indigenous and *arrivant* peoples<sup>14</sup> Léon-Gontran Damas uses the preservationist methodology of ethnography in a counter-discursive manner in the name of survivance.

In the *French Imperial Nation State* Gary Wilder addresses the question of how racialized subjects/peoples, such as Antillean creoles, were regarded by colonial rationality as “minor members of the French nation” (5). While this marginal subjecthood within the French nation resulted in unequal treatment, the position also highlighted self-undermining attributes of the nation since it simultaneously provided opportunities for political critique. As public policy attempted to include black subjects in the French nation, colonized communities remained conscious of the contempt with which the imperial nation-state regarded them. Although Wilder's book is concerned with a broad regional scope spanning from West Africa to the Antilles, part of his chapter “Cultural Nationalism” pays attention to French Guiana via Damas's *Retour*. Wilder studies how Negritude writers such as Damas seized on the possibility to address dissent of the

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13 For one example see the co-authored publication of Felix Tiouka (Kali'na), an Amerindian leader in French Guiana (*Na'na Kali'na* 2000).

14 Although Arrivants is a flexible enough term to apply to several communities, here I reference Edward Brathwait's conception of Arrivants—African peoples exiled in the Americas.

paternalistic nation-state, which sought to placate colonized communities, towards both metropolitan public opinion and administrative authorities.

In *Rethinking Négritude Through Léon-Gontran Damas* (2014), F. Bart Miller examines Damas's generic combination of the ethnographic report and anti-colonial essay in *Retour* to create a subversive literary production:

Combining ethnography with essayism, Damas affects the second stage of his ongoing critique of colonialism in his *œuvre* through his encounter with Guyane . . . By employing a colonial ethnographic framework, *Retour* subverts the administration in Guyane; it undermines the racist bases of the discipline by using experiential fieldwork against its intended purpose (114).

In accordance with Kullberg, yet referring to Damas's specific Guianese context, Miller also highlights the subversive capacity of ethnography. Miller explains how Damas produces social critique to defend colonized communities while using a methodology historically used to their detriment. The type of fieldwork documented in *Retour* constitutes a polemical challenge to dominant social structures. The genre of essayism used by Damas assures that “the personality and the reflection of the author” (Miller 106) are clearly evident in this text about his birthplace which holds a personal resonance. At the level of form, the passionate text employs a hybrid genre: “ethnography with essayism.” At the level of content, the text aims towards the administration in French Guiana as the main target of critique.

Efforts were made to stifle the dissemination of *Retour de Guyane* since authorities considered the ideas in the text dangerous. At the governmental level, punitive measures of censorship were carried out to curtail the impact of Damas's work. Guianese authorities purchased and burned more than 65% of the copies of *Retour de Guyane* shortly after its publication (Miller 105). It was also banned in the French colonies. Such a repressive gesture obviously limited the potential readership the text would have reached otherwise, yet as Gary

Wilder has noted *Retour* constituted “an intervention into contemporary debates on the future form of colonial politics” (218). Wilder's emphasis on the future iterations of colonial politics Damas's work activates raises the question of how Damas's work was received during the time he wrote. As Miller notes: “the reception of Damas's work is documented as either outright governmental censure . . . fragmented criticism or overwhelmingly positive reception,” he goes on to hypothesize that due to the fact that “Damas's works were initially considered indecent or censurable criticism of his œuvre has been detained” (45-6). While the relevance of Damas's ideas from the colonies to the metropole in the early twentieth-century remains unclear, it merits consideration that despite the censure of his work Damas continued to publish and establish himself as a writer.

### **Reading Built Environments in Damas's *Retour de Guyane***

*Retour de Guyane* is an ensemble of ethnographic essays which critique the settler colonialist ventures of the French Empire and call for the uplift of French Guiana. The critical text assumes a radical posturing that is seasoned with sarcastic tension in its call for action. Since Damas's writing caters to readers both in Guiana and in the metropole, he oftentimes seems to be advocating from a reformist position, especially in the earlier chapters where he makes suggestions on how administration may improve public policy. Yet, subtle irony underlies Damas's writing as he suggests that if one is to colonize, to at least do it right. He challenges French settler colonists by leaving them with two options regarding the question of Guiana: “l'aménager ou l'évacuer” (27). This option of either “cleaning up or evacuating” is offered, with Damas advocating for the latter, as a result of the ill intentions surrounding the reasons that incentivized French settlement in Guiana in the first place which have led to environmental degradation.



From the outset Léon-Gontran Damas's *Retour de Guyane* foregrounds the history of French Guiana by referencing early colonial ventures fueled by the myth of El Dorado. With reference to this myth, the richness of Guiana's land is thematized throughout the text as Damas alludes to the several abundant mineral resources available for exploitation and the hyperfertility of the soil. Damas is not against mineral extraction in and of itself in French Guiana. As he explains towards the end of the text: “Il faudrait organiser une exploitation rationnelle des gisements aurifères de la Guyane . . . cette exploitation, convenablement dirigée, entraînerait par son existence même l'exploitation d'à peu près toute la vie industrielle et commerciale du pays” (151).<sup>15</sup> Here Damas urges for a more rational approach to extracting gold that is not purely exploitative and is considerate of mineral finitude. This concern is aware of how industrial relations premised mainly on an extractive approach eventually result in the predatory desire to conquer. Beyond interest in searching for the mythical riches of El Dorado, extractive practices expose settler attitudes of entitlement to land. In her book *Creole Indigeneity: Between Myth and Nation in the Caribbean*, Shona N Jackson writes about the retellings, reinventions and reimagining of the El Dorado myth. According to Jackson the myth of treasure is displaced from the mythical city of El Dorado to land itself since it is what is truly precious (115). Jackson's claim is a view that Damas is in accordance with in his text as he repeatedly reminds the reader of the importance of the land—a base aspect of the environment. An impactful instance of such environmental valorization is evident when Damas mentions the grand error committed by reputed French abolitionist Victor Schœlcher, which was to “émanciper les esclaves sans émanciper la terre” (152).<sup>16</sup> The Negritude writer's critique of Schœlcher indicates an underlying

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15 “We must organize a rational exploitation of gold-bearing deposits in Guiana . . . such exploitation, well directed, may bring about by virtue of its existence the cultivation of close to all of the commercial and industrial life of the country” (my trans. 151).

16 “Freeing the slaves without freeing the land” (my translation).

post-abolition enslavement of the land. As Wilder argues with regard to this quote: “political rights without radical social transformation is a recipe for continued colonial dependence” (229). Instead of exploiting the resource of Black labor in plantation style economies, the mining economy exploits the mineral resources of the land, consequently keeping intact the socioeconomic problems of colonial Guiana. By foregrounding the colonial fantasy of El Dorado, Damas’s analysis focuses on many other aspects of negligence that are consequences of a purely exploitative impulse that shows little to no concern about the creation of harmful environmental conditions.

To better understand why the French colonial administration did not allot an adequate amount of resources to French Guiana, Damas also foregrounds Guiana's foundation as a penal colony (*bagne*). French Guiana was originally a settlement used to exile prisoners in a remote location far from France. Undesirables such as dispossessed commoners, felons, indentured servants, religious radicals, pirates and African slaves were likely some of those sent here to become forced laborers.<sup>17</sup> According to Damas, Guiana's prison administration has historically been incompetent. In efforts to save money and resources French authorities never bothered to create the infrastructure needed to accommodate incarcerated bodies: “Trois cent condamnés constituaient le premier convoi. Rien ne fut fait, au préalable, pour recevoir la cargaison. Aucun camp ne fut installé” (48).<sup>18</sup> Shortly after the prisoners were located in a region near the capital city of Cayenne, near Montjoly, the population panicked. After authorities isolated the inmates further away from the capital and near Kourou and the Oyapock river there continued to be

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17 This list of social outcasts who: “posed a powerful threat to the building of state, empire, and capitalism” is from *The Many Headed Hydra* (2000). While Linebaugh and Rediker focus on English colonial expansion, the types of outcasts they include in this list are highly likely to be the types of “deracinated and degenerate French people” (Wilder 219) the *bagne* was designed to imprison.

18 “Three hundred condemned people constituted the first convoy. Nothing was made to receive them. No camps were installed” (my trans. 48)

issues concerning the desirable standards of hygiene for the condemned. Damas describes the result of the neglect: “l'imprévoyance y fait des morts dont le nombre est terrifiant” (49).<sup>19</sup> Aside from the sheer number of deaths, the death of prisoners was also terrifying because of the fact that non-inmates were often subjected to equally dangerous living conditions. This malpractice points to the worthlessness of life attributed to those who were criminalized by the state and, by extension, other “minor members of the French nation” (Wilder 5). One of Damas's main arguments is that the punitive measures taken on the inmates spilled out beyond the confines of the prison and became exemplary of the administration's general disposition towards the colony's broader non-inmate population. Through various forms of governmental neglect Guiana, according to Damas, became the “cul-de-monde” (25).<sup>20</sup>

Outrage pervades Damas's ethnography as he details the substandard living conditions that the French colonists created in French Guiana, from the Northern commune of Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni to Cayenne. Instead of writing about the conditions in the Amazon rainforest, as he had originally traveled to Guiana to do, Damas focuses most of his attention in *Retour de Guyane* on the urban port cities. Here Damas evaluates the dilapidated infrastructure, which he claims is aesthetically unappealing and ill-suited for the local climate. In the chapter on Cayenne he calls attention to the following:

Il est certain que ses constructions dénotent une absence totale de style. Bâties toutes sur un modèle uniforme, qui ne répond ni aux exigences du climat, ni au décor naturel, elles sont généralement trop basses. Faites en bois, elles auraient pu, à l'exemple de ce qui fait en Floride, à Surinam, être coquettes . . . Il n'en est rien. Le souci d'esthétique semble n'avoir jamais effleuré la plupart des constructeurs. On aura simplement bati des habitations. (66)<sup>21</sup>

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19 “There the lack of foresight resulted in a terrible number of deaths” (my trans. 49)

20 “The world's shithole” (my trans 25)

21 “The constructions certainly denote a total absence of style. All built in a uniform model that does not consider the demands of the climate, nor of the natural scenery, they are generally too low. Were they to be made out of wood they could, as is the case in Florida and Suriname, be pretty . . . They are not at all. It seems as though the constructors never worried about the aesthetic. They simply built houses.” (my trans. 66)

Here Damas lamentingly describes the bland uniformity of Cayenne's buildings. To further illustrate the ugly condition of Cayenne, he resorts to comparisons with Florida and Suriname (the Dutch colony neighboring French Guiana to the North-West), which he claims at least have aesthetically appealing architecture. This comparative gesture is something Damas does on multiple occasions throughout his text so as to assure his readers that French Guiana has it worse than any other colonial situation. Failing to take into consideration the climate during the construction of buildings results in infrastructural deterioration. And to add insult to injury, for the infrastructure that the city of Cayenne is equipped with there is a blatant lack of maintenance and upkeep (Damas 66). Damas interprets his dilapidated surroundings as evidence of an offense towards the Guianese. As Damas puts it himself: “Le délabrement des façades soulève quelquefois l’indignation” (66).<sup>22</sup> Although Damas does not use the term, what he points to is infrastructural racism—the display of discriminatory attitudes towards a racialized population via the installation of infrastructure that is doomed to fail in serving the community for whom it is installed. Damas’s ethnographic style is attuned to such manifestations of racism in his environment as he references the make-up of cities, institutions, and infrastructure as sources for his analysis in *Retour de Guyane*.

Another institution which receives Damas's critical scrutiny is the Leprosy Asylum of l'Acarouany. In a penal colony where France's undesirables are concentrated, the leprosy asylum is the location for the colony's most undesirable. Both the lack of infrastructural quality and medical resources supports Damas's argument of how lack “soulève quelquefois l’indignation” (66). Damas describes the asylum as having “bâtiments exécrables” with access to “un médecin

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22 “The dilapidation of buildings sometimes underlines the indignation” (my trans. 66)

qui ne vient plus qu'une fois par mois pour ne rester qu'une journée à peine" (115).<sup>23</sup> The irony of a medical facility with an absence of medical professionals raises the question of the purpose for which Asylum is really intended. Damas describes the patients as having no hopes of being cured from their illnesses: "Indépendamment de leur manque de confort, de leur manque total d'hygiène et de propreté, de la noirceur des murs qui n'ont jamais été repeints, de l'ossature même des constructions tombant de vétusté complète, elles sont aussi la proie des intempéries" (116).<sup>24</sup> In addition to poor hygiene standards the buildings were so dilapidated that they exposed patients to bad weather conditions. With more and more evidence pointing to how ill-equipped the facility is for helping patients get well, and how well-equipped it is to deteriorate their wellness, Damas dubs the asylum the "antichambre du tombeau."<sup>25</sup> Indeed the affirmation is made clear: "on va à l'Acarouany pour y être éliminé, sinon guéri, mais assurément pas pour être nourri" (116).<sup>26</sup> In this supposed health care facility there is no nourishment. Instead of caring for the ill, the facility produces the conditions to expedite their elimination. This blatant disregard for the most vulnerable of human life disgusts Damas and leads him to consider how to survive such hostile conditions.

As previous studies on *Retour* have shown, Damas uses the rhetoric of hygiene to describe colonial Guiana as infectious. Damas's usage of hygienic discourse in the context of colonial French Guiana raises questions of how to survive such contamination. As mentioned earlier, with reference to the work of David Barnes, such a hygiene-centered lexicon is made possible due to a series of discursive developments in public health in France during the

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23 "detestable buildings . . . with one doctor that only goes once a month to only stay for barely a day" (my trans. 115)

24 "Independently from the lack of comfort, the total lack of hygiene and cleanliness, the darkness of the walls which have never been repainted, the skeletons of the falling constructions due to complete dilapidation, they are also prey to bad weather."

25 "the antechamber to the grave"

26 "One goes to l'Acarouany to be eliminated there, if not to recover, but definitely not to be nourished"

nineteenth-century. According to the virus narrative Damas views colonialism as the germ that inaugurates an epidemic of racism in the French Antilles. *Retour*, then becomes a meditation on how to move away from contamination and how to purify. Guillermo Antonio Rivera's 2006 PhD dissertation "Colonialism, Imprisonment, and Contamination in French Guyana" is the first study to read the hygienic discourse of *Retour* as a metaphor for colonization, the infection that plagues French Guiana. Rivera problematizes such a rhetorical move by calling attention to the consequences of valorizing purity: "infection as a metaphor works like a double edge-sword for Damas, because he is implying that there is a possible state of (pre-colonial) purity and that there are desirable hygienic measures to avoid colonial infection" (Rivera 69). Rivera interprets the disgust of colonial infection in Damas's hygienic discourse as an allusion to notions of precolonial purity and public health reforms to act as an antibiotic to the virus of colonialism. A way in which Rivera reaches his conclusion is by focusing on passages such as "la Métropole ne se sera souvenu d'elle et ne l'aura sortie des cartons des Ministères que pour l'infecter" (Damas 32),<sup>27</sup> which emphasize France's victimization of Guiana. While Rivera's dissertation is a valuable resource for understanding the historical context of the *bagne* of French Guyana he overemphasizes victimization and, as a result, pays scant attention to Damas's instances of survival such as the following passage:

Considéré de point de vue de la salubrité . . . les maladies, épidémiques y sont rares. Les fièvres pestilentiennes, la petite vérole, la rougeole, si familières aux régions intertropicales, lui sont totalement inconnues. Même la fièvre jaune, qui y fut apportée par un bâtiment des États-Unis, alors que l'esclavage battait son plein, a disparu définitivement depuis. Les exemples de longévité humaine n'y sont pas rares. (28)<sup>28</sup>

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27 The Metropole will not remember [Guiana] and will not uplift it from the Ministries except for infecting it." (my trans. 38)

28 "Considered from the point of view of healthiness . . . illnesses, epidemics are rare [in Guiana]. The pestilent fevers, syphilis, measles, familiar to inter-tropical regions, are totally unknown there. Even yellow fever, which was brought there by a US building, while slavery reached its high point, disappeared afterwards definitively. Examples of human longevity are not rare there." (my trans. 28)

While there is an undercurrent of detrimental hygienic discourse in *Retour* there is also a counter discourse of longevity. In this passage Damas depicts imperial power as infectious when he accuses a US building for bringing yellow fever to Guiana, where epidemics that are familiar to other tropical regions are rare. By identifying the US as infectious Damas challenges prevailing notions of US superiority. Although the US arrived to contaminate Guiana the disease was overcome. This accusation of imperial contaminants fits well with Rivera's thesis, yet in spite of the colonial infection Damas illustrates survivance. Although Damas uses negation to affirm human longevity in French Guyana: “les exemples de longévité humaine n'y sont pas rares” (28), he assures readers that survival is the rule in Guiana and not the exception.

The increased valorization of sanitation and raised hygiene standards had its own double edged attributes as it could be instrumentalized by imperial powers to more effectively harm the environment in the name of global capitalism. For a prime example we may turn to how the isthmus of Panama, which links the Northern and Southern American continents, was susceptible to the penetration of imperial powers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century resulting in the Panama Canal, an artificial waterway that connects the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. Although the canal was completed by the US in 1914, the project was initiated as early as 1888 by France. The mutual interest in developing the canal for the benefit of the international shipping industry was pursued in spite of consequential ecological disruption. Although the canal is in Central America, the major role of Antillean migrant labor during its construction cannot be undermined. It is estimated that 22,000 Martinicans and Guadeloupeans died from diseases and accidents during its development (Chazeau). As Damas suggests in his reference to the Panama Canal, after France's failure, US construction efforts prioritized the issue

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of sanitation:

Les Français ont voulu creuser le Canal de Panama. Ils ont échoué.  
Lamentablement. Les Américains ont commencé par le commencement: posant le problème, ils ont compris que c'était d'abord une entreprise sanitaire, que l'hygiéniste devait commencer avant l'ingénieur. Et le canal américain fut percé. (144)<sup>29</sup>

The United States was able to finish the project that France started by getting hygienists involved before calling in the engineers. Although Damas does not get into details, he implies that the US learned from the high mortality rates of the French attempt at building the canal and supposedly made efforts to increase safety measures. Explicitly inserting his subjective opinion, Damas describes the US finishing what France started as “lamentable.” Whether alluding to the loss of Antillean life or the detrimental environmental impact of the Panama Canal,<sup>30</sup> Damas lamenting the completion of the canal leaves us room to infer that he does not attribute much value to the expedited delivery times for cargo ships, the purpose for which the canal was built. Although the canal may not be viewed as equally exploitative as a mineral extraction operation, each industrial practice is premised on a settler colonial entitlement to land. While Panama is over 1,800 miles from French Guiana each region shares a history of imperial intervention resulting in the depletion of natural resources.

### **Assimilation into the French Nation**

The consumption of French Guiana's natural resources is only one aspect of colonialism; it is eventually coupled with efforts of assimilating colonized peoples into French culture, so as

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29 “The French wanted to dig the Panama Canal. They Failed. Lamentably. The Americans started from the beginning: posed with the problem, they understood that it was firstly a sanitary issue, the hygienist had to commence before the engineer. And the American canal was pierced.” (my trans. 144)

30 Studies have shown that the Gatún and Miraflores fresh water lakes in Panama have increased in their salt level due to the ocean waters of the canal. The introduction of salt waters into these lakes jeopardizes the optimal quality of water purification for the communities which sustain themselves on the lakes. Aside from increased salt levels, the ocean water brings invasive species from one ocean to another disturbing the Panamanian ecosystem (Vargas).



to deplete them of vital cultural resources. Damas strongly opposes assimilation on the grounds that it is detrimental to both the colonies and the metropole. A major argument put forward against assimilation into French society is that it goes against the self-expression of Afrodescendent peoples. He claims that because France's *mission civilisatrice* viewed assimilation as an act of reparation, an amelioration, Antillean and African colonized subjects of France could not assimilate into the nation since such complicity would confirm the existence of a deficiency (129). As Damas steps into the territory of describing Black culture in terms of an African essence he refers to Black Americans as examples of assimilation into the concept of nation while retaining African sensibilities.

Damas claims that the United States “a simplement fait coexister deux Amériques qui sont à la fois dans l'impossibilité de se souder ou de cohabiter dans des appartements voisins - mais séparés” (127).<sup>31</sup> The discriminatory space relations of Jim Crow segregation, which sanctioned the separation of Black people from the rest of society in the US, constituted a unique territorial attribute that was conducive to a model of assimilation that adhered to the notion of “equal but separate.” The doctrine of coexistence but not cohabitation, in Damas's opinion, gave Black Americans an ability to maintain a high degree of cultural integrity. Damas claims “le noir américain est américain, il n'en pas moins resté africain” (126).<sup>32</sup> To support the claim that Black people in the US have assimilated with more success Damas turns to an autoethnographic lens as he recounts a personal anecdote of meeting Langston Hughes in Paris who shared a poem with him, which Damas exclaims was “purely African” (127-8). This example serves to illustrate how a *noir américain* can produce lyric poetry, using “l'instrument rigide et précis de l'Anglais”

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<sup>31</sup> “has simply made two Americas coexist which are simultaneously impossible to mend and unable to cohabit in neighboring apartments – remaining separate” (my trans. 127)

<sup>32</sup> “The Black American is American, yet he remains African” (my trans. 126)

(128),<sup>33</sup> that possesses a palpable African aesthetic. Instead of critiquing the assimilation of Black Americans he admires their transcultural innovation.

Damas attributes the failure of French assimilation to issues of territory and space relations. Whereas the Black American lives within the boundaries of the US the majority of Black subjects/peoples of the French nation-state are either on islands or in Africa, away from continental France (138). For Damas, the space relations that accompany the territorialization of imperial nation-states inform the quality of assimilation that can occur. Pertinent to this issue is the notion of departmentalization of Guiana, becoming an administrative division of France instead of a colony, which Damas strongly opposes. Three years before Damas published *Retour*—during the 1935 tercentennial festivals commemorating French colonization of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Guiana—marked a time where active discussion regarding the departmentalization of France des Antilles took place. While proponents of departmentalization touted the benefits of universal civilization Damas called the move a masquerade: “En définitive ceci n'est qu'une nouvelle démagogie à la Schœlcher: donner un titre sans se soucier du reste” (138).<sup>34</sup> Damas likens the move towards departmentalization to a fraudulent Schœlcher-style liberation: to free the slaves without freeing the land. Turning colonies such as Guiana into departments would only mark a switching of titles while forms of colonial power structures would remain in place. The lifeways of Afrodescendent Guianese peoples would continue being under assault as new subject/citizens would be obliged to assimilate into a Eurocentric French culture. The territorial dynamics of departmentalization generate spatial relationships of metropole and periphery which reinforce the notion of Antilleans as minor members of the

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<sup>33</sup> “The rigid and precise instrument of the English language” (my trans. 128)

<sup>34</sup> “Definitively it is nothing more than Schœlcher-style demagoguery: giving a title without worrying about the rest” (my trans. 138)

French nation-state. In his case against assimilative departmentalization Damas delineates decolonial politics in efforts to further the argument that Afrodescendent peoples should not have to abandon their ancestral heritage to gain citizenship into a European empire.

Although Damas contextualizes the Guianese Creole in relation to the African diaspora of the wider Antillean community he distinguishes the particular injustices of the Guianese case. While admitting that Guiana shares a common African heritage and attachment to shared traditions, something that differentiates Guiana is “le caractère tenace et insoluble de sa rancune: “le souvenir d'un tort, d'un affront reçu ne s'efface jamais de son esprit” (73).<sup>35</sup> Guiana may share cultural heritage with Martinique, Guadeloupe and other Caribbean places, but the specific injustices carried out on the Guianese people have inflicted wounds that have yet to heal. He goes on to tie the Guianese grievance with the particular precolonial cultural geography on the American continent that includes “d'Aztèques, de Caraïbes, d'Incas . . . [et] des Galibis” (74).<sup>36</sup> This gesture of acknowledging the native peoples in tandem with the Black *arrivant* communities runs consistently throughout Damas's work as he recognizes the importance of knowing the history of those who occupied the land before French settlement. One of Damas's critiques of colonial education is that: “Cette éducation ne comporte ni l'histoire, ni la géographie du Continent Américain ou vit l'individu qui la reçoit, ni l'organisation sociale, ni les origines premières nations qui habitèrent la région” (85).<sup>37</sup> Keeping in mind Damas's original mission of salvage ethnography, documenting the afroamerindian maroon *nègres bosh* community, I would argue that Damas was among the most conscientious Negritude writers with

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35 “The tenacious character and its insoluble grudge: the memory of a wrong-doing, an insult received which will never erase from its spirit.” (my trans. 73)

36 “The Aztecs, the Caribs, the Incas, and the Kalina people” (my trans. 74)

37 “That education does not include the history, nor the geography of the American continent where the individual who is receiving it lives, nor the social organization, nor the origins of the First Nations that inhabited the region”

regards to Amerindian communities. Damas's consciousness regarding the deficient cultural history curriculum echoes the sentiment of many other Negritude writers, also educators by profession, who denounced colonial education.

While the trip to Guiana highlights a major phase in Damas's educational preparation at The Institute of Ethnology, Damas's ethnographic essay style is also telling of his brief stint as a student of law. He dedicates several passages to the legislative injustices that French Guiana has faced.<sup>38</sup> One example being the exclusive ordinance of imperial decrees, issued by ancient royal authority, in Guiana during a time that such decrees were not implemented in any other French territory (Damas 43). This discriminatory practice was a judicial form of prejudice that further indicated the mistreatment of French Guiana's residents. In addition to the injustice inscribed in the code of law issued by the metropole, at local and national levels across overseas France, totalitarian rulers often stifled political dissent—a practice exemplified through the destruction and banning of *Retour de Guyane* by the Guianese authorities shortly after its publication.

### **Conclusion**

In the twenty-first century, there continues to be instances too numerous to mention of environmental degradation that puts profit over people. In 2014 city officials of Flint, Michigan, poisoned the municipal water of majority Black and low-income communities. In a move to save five million dollars Flint switched from Detroit's regional water system to the highly corrosive Flint River and failed to properly treat the river water (Guyette and Levy 2016). The dangerous amount of lead and carcinogenic byproducts of chlorine in the water caused some citizens to develop symptoms such as rashes, hair loss, muscle stiffness and soreness. In addition, children

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38 For more on legislative injustice in Guiana see Gary Wilder's chapter "Cultural Nationalism" in *The French Imperial Nation State* (2005).

with exposure to the powerful neurotoxin have become highly vulnerable to learning disabilities and behavior problems—increasing the likelihood of entering the school-to-prison pipeline.

In February 2015 authorities in French Guiana have resorted to using pesticides containing malathion to exterminate mosquitoes carrying the chikungunya virus. When the state administered deltamethrin, a “safe” neurotoxic insecticide, in Guiana years earlier to combat the dengue fever, certain mosquito species became immune to the chemical. With the deltamethrin-resistant mosquitoes spreading the chikungunya virus, the state switched to using the more potent neurotoxic pesticide, malathion, which is illegal in continental France and Europe.<sup>39</sup>

In 2015 Guiana the “*mouvement citoyen contre l'utilisation du Malathion*” was able to demand the state to stop using the Malathion. In Flint, after two years of community pressure, city officials are currently facing indictment in 2016. These twenty-first century instances on deliberate environmental degradation continue to carry the same ambivalent message towards the communities that they impact from their respective nation-state contexts: *while you poor people “belong” to the nation you will not receive access to the same standards for safe living afforded to people with more money.* The class bias possesses ethnic and racial disparities as non-white communities in Euro-American contexts are more likely to grow up in poverty resulting in a sense of exclusion from the concept of nation.

From redeveloped nineteenth-century Paris to the early twentieth-century penal colony of French Guiana urban infrastructure is constructed for the benefit of the nation and to the detriment of those deemed minor members of the nation. The urban poor, French Guianese creoles, and the inmates sent to Guiana all experienced a sense of exile. Whether it's exile from

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39 “Communique de Presse: du mouvement citoyen contre l'utilisation du Malathion en Guyane.” [www.guyaweb.com](http://www.guyaweb.com).

the newly developed boulevards, exile from legalistic standards in continental France, exile from continental France across the Atlantic to the *bagnes* of Guiana—physical and metaphorical forms of exile are active in the works of Charles Baudelaire and Léon Gontran Damas. From their respective positionalities Baudelaire and Damas demonstrate to readers the strained relationships marginalized communities have with their environments.

Although environmental racism is alive and well so are efforts towards survival. Valorization and caretaking of the land is not something embedded in our genetic memory. It is not a naturally inherent trait of humans. To take “relationships to the land” as a given, as Seneca scholar Mishuana Goeman reminds us, undermines the intellectual and critical work it takes to pass on such relationships for generations and generations (28). Whether it be the landscape as environment or built environments, our cultural interactions with our environments have the potential to become taught social behaviors transmitted through a continuation of stories. The poetry of Charles Baudelaire and the ethnography of Léon-Gontran Damas are two examples of knowledge-bearing Francophone writers transmitting the value of environmental awareness and care. Their environmental writings explicitly and implicitly favor investments in long-term intergenerational well-being. For centuries marginalized communities have faced impediments to achieving wellness. In spite of perpetual obstacles there are significant gains being made at local levels which inspire social movements across the globe. Damas's demand for environmental justice is instilled with a spirit of resistance that continues to inspire critical minds to this day.

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## VITA

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