



**HAL**  
open science

## Introduction "The visits of Aimé Césaire and Léon-Gontran Damas in the Haitian press and French archives: Haiti and the racial issue – 1944-1964"

Dimitri Béchacq, Marianne Palisse

### ► To cite this version:

Dimitri Béchacq, Marianne Palisse. Introduction "The visits of Aimé Césaire and Léon-Gontran Damas in the Haitian press and French archives: Haiti and the racial issue – 1944-1964". 2024. hal-04682627

**HAL Id: hal-04682627**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04682627>**

Preprint submitted on 30 Aug 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

BÉCHACQ, Dimitri & PALISSE, Marianne, Introduction, 2024.

**Article under review by *African Diaspora journal*.**

“The visits of Aimé Césaire and Léon-Gontran Damas in the Haitian press and French archives : Haiti and the racial issue – 1944-1964.”

Haiti is a country whose very birth has been a structuring element in the debate around racial issues since 1804 (Daut 2015). In the colony of Saint-Domingue, the implementation of the ideals of the French Revolution by insurgent slaves and ‘free men of color’ (Larcher 2014, Dubois 2005), was both a political stance and the affirmation of a certain conception of humanity, one and indivisible. Conversely, proponents of racism and a hierarchy of human races, in which the ‘Black race’ is at the lowest rung, used Haiti to demonstrate what they claimed was the inability of Black people to govern a country (Zacair 2005). Sensationalist books such as those by Spencer Saint John's (1884) and H. Hesketh Pritchard's (1910) are well-known examples, among the abundant literature listed by Laënnec Hurbon (1988). Carlo Célius points out that the conditions of the country's independence:

made it possible and necessary to formulate an anthropological project that refuted many aspects of the discourse that justified the old order. [...] Hence, in an awakening Haitian thought, tireless discussions on the equality of the races, on the aptitude of the black race for ‘Civilization’, on the proof of this aptitude by the existence of Haiti (Célius 2005: 49).

From the 19th century onwards, intellectuals from all over the world paid particular attention to this country, endowed with a constitution guaranteeing rights and freedom to Black men and women, with Victor Schœlcher even describing it as a ‘racial democracy’ (Joseph 2017: 65). In the 19th century, moreover, Haiti welcomed several groups of Afro-American migrants (Souffrant 1974, Bourhis-Mariotti 2016 and 2019). More broadly, Haiti was also a land of immigration: many Europeans (Plummer 1988) as well as West Indians (Zacair 2009 and 2019) settled and invested in commerce. In the 20th century, visits by Black intellectuals from different continents multiplied. After the representatives of the Harlem Renaissance movement in the 1930s (Dash 1997, Ndiaye 2009, Roumain 2003, Tolliver 2019, Stovall 2003),

BÉCHACQ, Dimitri & PALISSE, Marianne, Introduction, 2024.

Article under review by *African Diaspora journal*.

“The visits of Aimé Césaire and Léon-Gontran Damas in the Haitian press and French archives : Haiti and the racial issue – 1944-1964.”

the writers of Negritude took an interest in Haiti. Two members of the Senghor, Césaire, Damas trio that posterity has remembered as having founded the movement, putting female contributions in the shade (Moïse 2021), came to stay in the country: Aimé Césaire from Martinique, from May to December 1944, and Léon-Gontran Damas from French Guiana, from December 1952 to January 1953, then from August to September 1964.

While the first independent Black republic in the Americas has raised numerous hopes beyond its borders (Bonacci et al. 2006), the racial issue is far from resolved or overcome, as the socio-racial hierarchies in force during the colonial era have persisted beyond independence. Although the Haitian social configuration is dominated by military power, wealth and land ownership, a form of polarization persists between a light-skinned oligarchy, known as the ‘mulatto’, of Latin and Western culture, urban and outward-looking, and a rural population, made up of former enslaved of African descent, socially marginalized and geographically isolated: the ‘peyi andeyo’, the country outside (Barthélemy 1991, Casimir 2000)<sup>i</sup>. While Haitian society is not solely hierarchical in terms of ‘race’ (Casimir 2009, Daut 2015, Étienne 2007), the fact remains that color prejudice is present in all social milieus, with complex games played around phenotypes:

Moreover, there is a strong correlation between color, class and culture in Haiti that impact significantly on the way people of different phenotypes are perceived. Reference to a light-skinned person as ‘mulatto’ in Haiti acknowledges phenotype but do not necessarily refer to social status. In Kreyòl, however, the term *milat* contains reference to class and not just color, as exemplified by the oft-cited Kreyòl quoted credited to nineteenth-century army leader Jean-Jacques Acau, ‘Neg rich se *milat*, *milat* pòv se neg’ (the rich Black is a *milat*, the poor *milat* is a Black). Considering the differences, *milat*,

though imperfect, is a more encompassing definition of someone who is both light-skinned and of a certain social class (Smith 2009 : 198, n. 6 ; voir également Giaferri-Dombre 2007, Joseph 2017).

This issue also polarizes the political field:

*Mulâtrisme*, at one pole, a version of the hegemonic ‘mulatto’ bourgeoisie, which asserts the superiority of the ‘mulatto’ and the ‘White’ over the ‘Black’, an implicit ideology that is elaborated on a private level, and more indirectly on a public level. Its political corollary is rooted in the class struggle of the 19th century, and condenses into the idea of power for the most capable, the most ‘enlightened’. *Noirisme*, at the other pole, is the explicit counter-ideological version of the ‘Black’ ruling classes and ‘Black’ fractions of the bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie, which posits the superiority of the ‘Black’ and his full legitimacy to govern, with the following political corollary: power to the greatest number (Labelle 1987: 138, see also Trouillot 1990).

The first visit, in 1944, was that of by Césaire, sent on a diplomatic and cultural mission to give courses in literature and lectures, and to take part in the International Congress of Philosophy. The other two were from Damas’s: in 1952, he was invited by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs to give lectures (Racine 1983: 39); in 1964, he was awarded a UNESCO fellowship with the support of the government of the Republic of Dahomey to work on ‘the survivals of African culture in the New World’ (Ibid.: 41) and to prepare an anthology of the Black poets of the Americas (Damas 1966).<sup>ii</sup> From 1944 to 1964, the theme of ‘race’ occupied a very special place, both in international news and on the Haitian political scene.

This period begins in 1944, the year in which Nazi Germany retreated from the war front, and ends in 1965, the year in which racial segregation ended in the USA with the Voting Rights Act. Between these two dates, the 1950s saw the Cold War and the height of the

BÉCHACQ, Dimitri & PALISSE, Marianne, Introduction, 2024.

**Article under review by *African Diaspora journal*.**

“The visits of Aimé Césaire and Léon-Gontran Damas in the Haitian press and French archives : Haiti and the racial issue – 1944-1964.”

decolonization movements, particularly in Africa. In Haiti, after decades of political domination by the ‘mulattos’, reinforced during the American Occupation of Haiti (1915-1934) and ending with the presidency of Élie Lescot (1941-1946), the *noiristes* conquered power with Dumarsais Estimé, president from 1946 to 1950. Estimé was deposed by a military triumvirate, the same one that made the transition after Lescot's fall, led by Paul Eugène Magloire, who then became president (1950-1957). ‘The Cold War and McCarthyism in the United States were conducive to the interests of Magloire, who in December 1950 had left-wing parties and their publications banned, while signing an anti-communist pact with the Dominican dictator Trujillo’ (Béchacq 2019: 138). François Duvalier, a ‘Black’ country doctor and fervent promoter of *noirisme*, took power in 1957, instrumentalizing racial issues to establish his dictatorship until his death in 1971 (Nicholls 1975, Smith 2009, Trouillot 1990, Voltaire 1988).

How then were the visits of Césaire and Damas commented on in the Haitian press? This article draws on a unique study of Haitian newspapers published during their visits and on various archival corpuses, including those of the Territorial Archives of Martinique and the French diplomatic archives. The significance of these sources lies in the fact that they offer several levels of reading: while the press is the expression of Haiti's literate classes, revealing the interplay of social distinction and a constrained relationship with the governments of the time, the archives provide access to Haitian political strategies and France's diplomatic interests in Haiti.

Moreover, to understand how the racial issue is articulated between international issues and local circumstances, these sources are particularly relevant as they show two levels of discourse: one, public and relayed by the press, celebrating the ‘Black race’ and ‘racial solidarity’, and the other, consisting of testimonies and reports in the archives, demonstrates how color prejudice and racism are expressed unfiltered behind the scenes of Haitian, but also

BÉCHACQ, Dimitri & PALISSE, Marianne, Introduction, 2024.

Article under review by *African Diaspora journal*.

“The visits of Aimé Césaire and Léon-Gontran Damas in the Haitian press and French archives : Haiti and the racial issue – 1944-1964.”

French, power. Indeed, these archives and the press coverage of the two intellectuals of Negritude reveal the tensions and ambiguities that run through Haitian discourse on the subject.

The ideas put forward by the Negritude movement (Leiris 1955, Giraud 1994, Depestre 1989) regarding the value of ‘Negroes’ cultures<sup>iii</sup>, resonate with specifically Haitian debates on the legacy of the Indigenist movement and *noirisme* (Buteau 1993, Gaillard 1993, Largey 2006, Smith 2009). The former was dominated, according to its leader Jean Price-Mars, by ‘the importance of associating the greatest number of people with the national culture’ by studying the customs and culture of the ‘humble’ (Price-Mars 1959: 98), including vodou, which provoked fierce polemics and a certain unease among the elite (Tippenhauer 2008). As for *noiristes* intellectuals, because of their valorization of the ‘Black popular masses’ through a racial essentialism inspired by the theories of Arthur de Gobineau and Alfred Rosenberg, theorists of Nazi racism (Hoffmann 1990: 194), they instrumentalized, especially during the Duvalier regime, this reference to Africa shared with Negritude. While the mobilization of the notion of ‘race’ thus remains omnipresent throughout the period studied, it is posed according to different issues and contexts.

Firstly, we will see that Césaire and Damas benefited from the special welcome given by Haitian intellectuals to their ‘illustrious congeners’, that is, in the vocabulary of the time, to famous Black individuals from all over the world. Next, we will try to understand how these visits revealed the socio-racial configurations of the time. These configuration reflect both the global context mentioned above, and local political issues. Thus, we will analyze the reception of Aimé Césaire in 1944, when he visited Haiti under the presidency of Élie Lescot (1941-1946), at a time when the man who would become known as ‘Haiti's last mulatto president’ was tightening his grip on the press and political power. His visit took place as World War II was drawing to a close with the defeat of Nazism, and at a time when Marxism was widespread

BÉCHACQ, Dimitri & PALISSE, Marianne, Introduction, 2024.

Article under review by *African Diaspora journal*.

“The visits of Aimé Césaire and Léon-Gontran Damas in the Haitian press and French archives : Haiti and the racial issue – 1944-1964.”

among young intellectuals. Finally, we will study the evolution of the debate during the two periods covered by the Damas’s visits. These visits occurred in a context where the struggle for Black American Civil Rights and the process of decolonization once again mobilized racial issues. At a local level, while the first visit, in 1952-53, was marked in Haiti by power struggles between *noiristes* and ‘mulattos’, the second, in 1964, took place in the midst of the violence of the Duvalier regime, which put Damas in a delicate position.

---

<sup>i</sup> At the time of the outbreak of the ‘North Plain slave insurrection’ in 1791, an estimated 50% of the enslaved population had been born in Africa (Dubois 2005).

<sup>ii</sup> *Le Nouvelliste*, n° 26127, 17-18 August 1964, p. 1; Malu, ‘Étapes d’une visite culturelle’, *Le Nouvelliste* n° 26135, 29-30 August 1964, p. 3.

<sup>iii</sup> In the French language, historically, the term ‘Negro’ has a pejorative connotation when a non-racialized person refers to a person with a dark phenotype. On the other hand, in the 1920s-1930s in France, the use of the word ‘Negro’ as a mode of identification and grouping was debated among people from the French colonies. Thus, ‘around 1927, the *Committee for the Defence of the Interests of the Negro Race* was symptomatically renamed *Committee for the Defence of the Interests of the Black Race*: the word ‘Negro’ embarrassed these men, who were militating precisely so that they would no longer be ‘Negroes’ but ‘Black Frenchmen’ [...]. But in 1927, the word ‘Negro’ became the torch of revolutionaries’ (Dewitte 1985: 224-225). It is precisely in this then subversive perspective of turning stigma on its head by valorising Afro-descent cultural facts that Aimé Césaire, in *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, uses the term ‘Negro’.