12-1-1993

When the pen becomes a sword: Race and class consciousness in the literature of the West Indian writers Jacques Roumain, Etienne Lero, Gilbert Gratian

Carla Denise Williams
Clark Atlanta University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.auctr.edu/dissertations

Part of the French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in ETD Collection for AUC Robert W. Woodruff Library by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center. For more information, please contact cwiseman@auctr.edu.
WHEN THE PEN BECOMES A SWORD: RACE AND CLASS
CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE LITERATURE OF THE WEST INDIAN WRITERS
JACQUES ROUMAIN, ETIENNE LERO, GILBERT GRATIANT

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY IN
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY
CARLA DENISE WILLIAMS

DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

ATLANTA, GEORGIA
DECEMBER 1993
ABSTRACT

FRENCH

WILLIAMS, CARLA DENISE        B.A., HARVARD UNIVERSITY, 1986

When the Pen Becomes a Sword: Race and Class Consciousness in the Literature of the West Indian Writers Jacques Roumain, Étienne Léro, Gilbert Gratiant

Adviser: Dr. Paul M. Brown

Thesis dated July, 1993

This thesis considers the influence of three West Indian writers who contributed to the development of Negritude as a literary, social and political phenomenon. The author shows that the racial awareness central to the Negritude movement was strongly affected by the experiences in Haiti and Martinique in particular.

The thesis is comprised of three chapters and a conclusion. The first examines the awakening of racial consciousness in Paris in the 1930s and '40s, placing those developments in literary and historical perspective. This chapter also serves as an introduction to the milieu of West Indian and black American writers who were aggressively active in deriving a literary response to racial oppression.

The second and third chapters analyze the roles of individual writers. The second chapter probes the writings of Jacques Roumain. He made an impression with his Marxist analysis of the Haitian situation, pushed for an "indigenous" Haitian literature, and developed the peasant novel. By using
excerpts from essays, poems, and his novel, *Gouverneurs de la Rosée*, the writer details the influence of this Haitian author on Negritude writers.

The third chapter considers two lesser-studied writers, the Martinicans Étienne Léro and Gilbert Gratiant. Gratiant embraced the mixed cultural heritage of Martinique, while Léro fought for an African outlook in initiating *Légitime Défense*, and through other contributions. An exploration of a small sampling of their work will help to clarify the context of color and caste in Martinique.

The conclusion summarizes the authors' social critique of French civilization and shows that the experiences of the West Indian authors discussed in the thesis influenced the principal leaders of Negritude—Léopold Sédar Senghor, Léon Damas and Aimé Césaire—and that this can be seen in the conceptions the Negritude movement embraced.
(c) 1993

Carla Denise Williams

All Rights Reserved
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

I. INTRODUCTION: THE EMERGENCE OF NEGRITUDE............1

II. JACQUES ROUMAIN AND "L'AME HAITIENNE"..............19

III. ETIENNE LERO AND GILBERT GRATIANT:
     SHADES OF DIFFERENCE..............................39

IV. CONCLUSION...........................................65

BIBLIOGRAPHY............................................73
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE EMERGENCE OF NEGRITUDE

Negritude existed as a cultural phenomenon in Paris during the 1930s and '40s when black writers of French expression began to speak in a new voice. The reasons for this development can be best understood by examining the social and political milieux of these writers' formative years. A comparative study of the Negritude writers and authors of the Harlem Renaissance will reveal the roots of race consciousness. This racial awareness determined a direction for these movements—the beginning of a patchwork ideology where black authors sought to win a new level of respect for their art and their people.

This study will show that the West Indians, because of particular social and political experiences in their homelands, expressed in their writings an attitude different from francophone Africans or black Americans. The West Indians from French colonies injected a sense of blacks as an oppressed people, with a definitively black soul. This conception, that each black person, in spite of different conditions, shared the same spirit, was infused into the works of writers from the Caribbean.
For a group of young writers of both French and African ancestry, the Negritude phenomenon developed as a result of acute alienation from Western society. The product of French colonialism, they were among the best students in the francophone world. French by their language, with Gallic features that could have allowed them to be mistaken for Frenchmen, these young scholars from the Caribbean had not as yet looked to Africa as their ancestral homeland. Privileged mulattoes in the French Antilles, they neither identified nor sympathized with their dark-skinned brethren. One exception was a darker-skinned student, Etienne Léro, who would play a crucial role in breaking down the barriers of color and geography that separated them. Their Parisian experience offered an intellectual crucible, a stimulating environment where the intellectual elite of the francophone world mingled, sometimes overlooking social taboos. But they were socially isolated from the rest of French society—their brown skins serving as an eternal stigma. In spite of their education in the Western world, they were still considered intellectual inferiors, colonial subjects.

In this milieu, the elite students, from comfortable families of elevated status, needed to reconsider their place in the world, not as French citizens, but as black people foremost.

Students from all over the empire, men of color as they liked to call themselves, drew together out of a shared sense of being set apart. This perception temporarily obscured the great
Their differences were reflected in several attempts at dealing with their reality. They examined their situation critically and sought to escape a sense of disquietude. Two journals particularly expressed those aspirations, *Légitime Défense* and *L'Etudiant Noir*.

In 1932, *Légitime Défense* presented an image of the oppressive conditions of black students in Paris. The principal founders included Etienne Léro, whose name is first of signatories to the "avertissement," and Martinicans of the privileged mulatto caste, who were ostracized, rather than exalted, in France. In the first pages, they declared a manifesto of sorts. They sought to combat the "abominable system of coercion and restrictions, which destroys love and delimits dreams, generally known as Western civilization." Their new approach, however, included emerging Western ideologies: communism and surrealism, so the rejection of Western society was somewhat rhetorical. But their observations represented an idealist declaration against the racist conditions of capitalism and appealed particularly to dark-skinned West Indians, rather than bourgeois mulattoes.

---


2Lilyan Kesteloot, Ecrivains noirs de langue française: naissance d'une littérature (Bruxelles: Editions de l'Institut de sociologie de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1963), 25. Ellen Conroy Kennedy’s translation is used here.
of their parents' circles.

...nous estimons qu'ils [non-mulâtres] ont eu particulièrement à souffrir du capitalisme et qu'ils semblent offrir—en tant qu'ils ont une personnalité éthnique matériellement déterminée—un potentiel plus généralement élevé de révolte et de joie.³

It was an assertion that was more romantic than political, because they had not arrived at a solution, or even tried to do so. But the emotions were based on a desire for racial liberation, a wish to be seen as a person not predetermined by skin color. Ms. Kesteloot noted that these young collaborators—except for Etienne Léro—were upper-class mulattoes who actually benefited from a system based on color castes and exploitation of the masses of darker-skinned peoples.

. . .tous les jeunes collaborateurs de Légitime Défense étaient des mulâtres et tous appartenaient, 'à leur corps défendant', à cette bourgeoisie qu'ils critiquaient si âprement.⁴

There was but one copy of Légitime Défense, however, in the circle of West Indians, and among black African and American students in Paris, it made quite an impression, establishing a few new parameters. European models were questioned, a rejection of capitalist values began to flourish, and the writers tried to redefine an image of Africa, conceiving it in their language, including the idioms and creole expressions of the most downtrodden. In

³Kesteloot, 25.
⁴Ibid., 26.
the literature of West Indians using French, there had been a stifling tradition of imitation, rather than innovation, according to Légitime Défense. They found their predecessors to be so lacking in originality of form and content as to be merely aping their colonial masters. For these young poets, authentic art could only come through rigorous self-examination and a recognition of African origins.⁵

It is significant to note that the intellectuals behind Légitime Défense caused a reaction in their homelands, too, with scandalous responses and embarrassment from students' parents and their friends. In fact, for French-speaking West Indians, the response to them in Paris was nothing more than a reflection of their own roles at home, where mulattoes exercised the same racial rules against darker-skinned blacks, as the French did against the mulattoes. But the mulatto was limited to downward social mobility; dark-skinned islanders who acquired land or moderate wealth could match their status. A handful of mulattoes would achieve parity with the French masters. The mulattoes' contradiction is captured well in a 19th century Haitian aphorism: "Every rich black is a mulatto; every poor mulatto is black." Color determined social caste, and a black person was usually at the bottom socially.⁶

⁵Ibid., 31.

The issue was discussed in the 18th century, when the middle-caste role of mulattoes became prominent in debates in the National Assembly over the colonial question. In 1789, the issue especially turned on San Domingo (later Haiti), where mulattoes were nearly as numerous as whites. The French colonialists had cultivated a layer of mulattoes to act as a buffer against black agricultural laborers. Yves Benot noted the contradiction of withholding full citizenship for Haitians of mixed ancestry, some of whom competed with whites as plantation owners and landlords. In their contradictory status, mulattoes blocked with slave owners to ensure their superior status over blacks and were viewed as a buttress against potential black insurrection. Yet they envied the liberties of their white rivals and lobbied the Assembly for admission as deputies. Benot remarked:

Les mulâtres sont donc, tour à tour, les meilleurs défenseurs du système contre une révolte que tout le monde redoute, et l'avant-garde de ce mouvement de libération.  

In this historical context, the isolation of the Martinican students around Légitime Défense reflected the pressure of seeking acceptance from their white peers. In being rejected, they chose the side of liberation. Their response

---

7 Yves Benot, "La Question Coloniale en 1789," Dix-Huitième Siècle 20 (1988): 188. My translation: The mulattoes are therefore, in turn, the best defenders of the system, against a revolt that everyone dreads, and the vanguard of the liberation movement.
was to accept themselves as black people, like their darker-skinned countrymen, and to fight for a new conception of their race.

One should not overlook the importance of other reviews that began to play an influential role. Some of them had preceded Légitime Défense, appearing in English-speaking countries. Events affecting black writers in the United States, such as the Harlem Renaissance and "Back to Africa" movements, as well as the U.S. occupation of Haiti, helped to crystallize a global racial awareness among black writers of French expression. La Revue du Monde Noir debuted around 1932 and discussed uplifting black people dispersed around the globe and a re-evaluation of Africa. There were only six issues of La Revue, but as a bilingual publication, it formed a bridge between francophone writers and black Americans of the Harlem Renaissance.

This cultural linkage stressed the fact that French-speaking Africans and West Indians did not exist in a vacuum. In fact, ideologies similar to Negritude could be found in the United States 10 years earlier. During the 1920s, W.E.B DuBois founded the Pan-African Congress and earlier, in his Souls of Black Folk announced in 1903 that "the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line." Marcus Garvey, a black nationalist who was a native of Jamaica, had founded his "Back to Africa" movement in an organization known as the Universal Negro Improvement Association. In what was called the "New Negro" movement,
black authors in Harlem reasserted their African origins. A group that formed in 1919 around Cyril Briggs, a West Indian from the island of Nevis, called itself "The African Blood Brotherhood for Liberation and Redemption." In The Crusader, a magazine he founded a year earlier, Briggs stressed "a renaissance of Negro power and culture throughout the world." The Brotherhood founders were principally West Indians, and like the group of Léro, they saw politics as an interest equal in merit to cultural concerns; communism became their demand. They were inspired by the Russian Revolution of 1917, especially the call of Lenin's Bolsheviks for self-determination of colonial peoples and oppressed nationalities. Soviet leaders pushed the American Communist Party to recognize issues of concern to black people and black American visitors, such as the poet Claude McKay, were welcomed to Comintern conferences as reporters on the conditions of black Americans. These political and cultural groups gave Harlem its renaissance. A special issue of Survey Graphic in 1925 announced the New Negro and attributed the recent events to a racial awakening:

Harlem is neither slum, ghetto, resort or colony, though it is in part all of them. It is—or promises at least to be—a race capital. Europe seething in a dozen centers with emergent nationalities, Palestine full of a reascent

---

8Mark Naison, Communists in Harlem During the Depression (New York: Grove Press, Inc.), 5.


10Naison, 11.
Judaism—these are no more alive with the spirit of a racial awakening than Harlem; culturally and spiritually it focuses a people.\textsuperscript{11}

At the center of this racial awakening, as described by Alain Locke, was a demand for independence and for a new respect and self-esteem. Authors such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay and Countee Cullen were well known in the literary circles of Paris and there was a fertile collaboration between authors—due in part to the itinerant labors of writers such as McKay, Hughes, and Jacques Roumain. A Martinican, Paulette Nardal, a founder of \textit{La Revue}, kept a literary salon in Paris where black writers from around the world were regular guests. In Paris, the throwing off of intellectual fetters meant grasping toward surrealism and an increasing commitment to Marxist ideals. With the rise of fascist regimes in Spain, Germany and Italy, leading up to World War II, black students turned toward socialism and the nationalism inspired by Gandhi. The parallel development partly pointed to an emulation of the sympathy for the Soviet road that several black American poets, such as Hughes and McKay, had shown. It also reflected support for Haitian communists Jacques Roumain and Jean-François Brierre, who were imprisoned for anti-government agitation.\textsuperscript{12}

More than a hundred years earlier, Haitians certainly

\textsuperscript{11}Alain Locke, "Harlem Mecca of the New Negro," \textit{Survey Graphic} (March 1925), Introduction.

\textsuperscript{12}Kesteloot, 56.
inspired black Americans as well. The war of independence that the Haitians won in 1804 came to be regarded as a glistening beacon by black people then still enchained on plantations throughout the American South. The U.S. occupation of Haiti in 1916, which lasted until 1934, drew an intense reaction from the likes of Roumain and Brierre. During that period, British and American authors became more favored than French models and black American literary pioneers gained a hearing. 13 Eventually, Haitian intellectuals would turn toward their African roots and away from what G.R. Coulthard described as a "cultural Francophilia." Roumain's generation foreshadowed the intense rejection of certain French literary strictures that Negritude would initially embrace.

A black American student in Paris during the Negritude movement, Mercer Cook, later noted in the 1960s the common elements between black people in the New World and the Africans and West Indians:

The African and the American black writers are similar in their attempts to define and to give content to a special term, Negritude or African Personality for the African, African soul for the American. Despite the recognized differences between these terms, each represents a negative reaction against the dominations of white 'civilization' and a positive action toward identity. 14


It is not surprising that black West Indians served as a human bridge between writers of Harlem and Paris. The role of West Indians was determined by their conditions as immigrants. Because of their particular social experience, the question of racial identity was often at the center of West Indian consciousness. An intersection of the color line with a caste line in the colonies inspired a rebellious attitude toward a social order rooted in capitalism and racism.

Particularly among those in French colonies—Haiti, Martinique, Guadeloupe and Guiana—the pressure on black intellectuals to assimilate the cultural and political ideologies of white colonial rulers led to an anticolonial and anticapitalist analysis based on racial solidarity. Common conditions inspired similar responses among English-speaking West Indians. In Harlem, for example, W.A. Domingo, a childhood friend of Garvey in Jamaica and a socialist of the African Blood Brotherhood, remarked in Survey Graphic how the different perceptions of "color" had determined a distinct understanding among West Indians in the context of American society.

Forming a racial majority in their own countries and not being accustomed to discrimination expressly felt as racial, they rebel against the 'color line' as they find it in America. For while color and caste lines tend to converge in the islands, it is nevertheless true that because of the ratio of population, historical background and traditions of rebellions before and since their emancipation, West Indians of color do not have their activities, social, occupational or otherwise, determined by their race.15

Domingo summarizes a West Indian's viewpoint of race and caste in his argument. The point to note is that Domingo accentuates the notion of caste as more essential than that of race. It is worth emphasizing because, it was noted before that the group around Légitime Défense, the precursors of Negritude, was content as privileged scholarship students, until racial oppression began to reflect their own status at home. Their reaction to the "color line" was not unlike that of West Indian poets in Harlem.

Alain Locke, an exemplar of the New Negro movement, described the milieu of Harlem as the reason for a new consciousness. Migrations of blacks from the South and the presence of West Indians were the factors he marked as significant. The renaissance of Harlem was attributed to ongoing urban turmoil. But Harlem was not alone. The same sort of milieu developed in Paris, as shown in Ms. Nardal's analysis, "Awakening of Race Consciousness," in La Revue du Monde Noir (No. 6). "The sense of uprootedness," she wrote, "was the point of departure for their evolution." This development was well noted by psychologist Franz Fanon, in the 1950s work, Black Skin, White Masks. The catalyst for West Indian consciousness, he wrote, is the journey from their homelands to Europe:

Little by little, one can observe in the young Antillean the formation and crystallization of an attitude and a way of thinking and seeing that are essentially white. . . Because the Antillean does not think of himself as a black man; he thinks of himself as an Antillean. The Negro lives in Africa. Subjectively, intellectually, the Antillean conducts himself like a white man. But he is a Negro.17

The willingness of the French to amalgamate all black people facilitated the discovery of race as a common ground. The distinct conditions of Africans and West Indians became subordinate to the principle of race; or perhaps more truthfully, the "color line" became internalized. They were obligated to see themselves through the eyes of the French. And as a reaction to the negative viewpoint they found there, an effort was made to recreate themselves in a positive light.

The new voice of Légitime Défense not only found an echo in Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire and Léon Damas—the trio that often is credited with initiating the Negritude movement—but eventually began to pronounce a more positive message. No doubt the three had contact with Etienne Léro’s group. A Martinican like the others, Aimé Césaire was one of their countrymen and a leader of Martinican students. Léon Damas was an admirer of Léro who had attended secondary school in Martinique.18 Three years after Légitime Défense was issued, in 1935, a group under

18Kesteloot, 25.
the direction of Senghor, Césaire and Damas published

*L'Étudiant Noir*, a cultural journal. The journal's

contributors drew from a different group of writers than

that of *Légitime Défense*, and included the poet Gilbert

Gratiant, Birago Diop, Aristide Maugée and Léonard Sainville

among others.

A Martinican student, Gratiant discussed the dilemma

of racial identity in *L'Étudiant Noir*. For Martinicans,

the difficulty was that, except for a small minority,

everyone is of mixed race. From a cultural point of view,

they are both French and African. To rectify such a

"dilemma" it was necessary for them to reject their mixed

origins and impulses toward assimilation. However, Gratiant

reconciled himself to France, as indicated in the poem,

*Crédo des sang-mêlé*, also known as "Je veux chanter la

France." He took pride in both his African and French

heritage, arguing for a cultural synthesis of both the

African and European strains and developing a literature

written in creole. But the solution for many others became

Negritude, an implicit rejection of things French.

Aimé Césaire used the term first, in his surrealist

work, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*:

Ma négritude n'est pas une pierre, sa surdité
ruée contre la clameur du jour
ma négritude n'est pas une taie d'eau morte sur
l'œil mort de la terre
ma négritude n'est ni une tour ni une

\(^{19}\)Vaillant, 50.
This epic poem, published in 1937, was a new cry for its generation, inventing a conception definitively black. But the idea evolved in the eyes of each poet. The difference was that the rubric was formulated in the negative. In a sense, he tried to contradict established, exotic conceptions of black people. The key became the act of being able to define for oneself the characteristics that can be attributed to black people.

The same continuous search can be found in the important work of McKay, a Jamaican and distinguished author of Harlem who traveled to Europe, the West Indies and also participated in the African Blood Brotherhood. In Banjo, Ray, an itinerant worker, tries to find a set of values that he can see as fundamentally black. He finds them among Africans:

The Africans gave him a positive feeling of wholesome contact with racial roots. They made him feel that he was not merely an unfortunate accident of birth, but that he belonged to a race weighed, tested, and poised in the universal scheme. . .

Students in Paris read his book voraciously. Césaire

---

20Aimé Césaire, Cahier d’un retour au pays natal (Paris: Présence Africaine), 1956, 47. Translation: "My negritude is not a rock, its deafness hurled against the clamour of the day/My negritude is not a speck of water lifeless on the dead eye of the earth/ My negritude is neither a tower nor a cathedral. . ."

and Senghor could cite passages of it by heart.\textsuperscript{22}

Similarly, the main work of René Maran, \textit{Batouala}, which received the Prix Goncourt in 1920, had as a new orientation an ethnological study of the conditions of black Africans. For Senghor, an analysis of the works of Maran served as a beginning for an examination of his own African identity.

All of these West Indian voices, far from their own homelands, but resonating situations there, introduced a viewpoint in literature based on an assertion of a black aesthetic. They described these traits in their poetry, their novels and theater. In some cases, the viewpoint was opposed to Western values. Other cases showed the history of blacks experiencing oppression, slavery and colonialism. But principally, these writers tried to show the condition of blacks as the most degraded of workers everywhere. René Dépestre, who joined the Communist Party that Roumain founded in Haiti, unified these images of black working people in "You Recognize Them."

\begin{quote}
In all the places of the world / you recognize them / by the milk that flows from their laughter / You recognize them / by their broken heart / by their unrested muscles / You recognize them / by their loose limbs / by their hard metallic fists / by the nightingales nesting in their throats / In all the places of the world / Negroes of sad season.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{22}Vaillant, 101.

His poem shows a universal image of a face, black and saddened. But the act of recognition gives an identity to people who otherwise might seem faceless. Also, there is an implication of shared labors, and perhaps, anger, in the image of a "metallic fist," a shared sweetness in laughter and the solace of songs from "nightingales." The effort of unifying blacks of the world is echoed in the works of other black poets from the region, such as Guy Tirolier and Paul Niger of Guadelope. A vision of one universal outlook of blacks reflects an acceptance of the amalgamation imposed by the French. In some cases, they elaborated stereotypical notions of blacks as musical, laughing, sexy dancers smiling through suffering. Some writers attempted to turn those presumptions upside down, showing all blacks as sharing a common history of oppression but distinct as individuals.

Brierre, the Haitian poet, wrote of Harlem in sympathy to black Americans. These lines in "Here I Am Again, Harlem," dedicated to those lynched in Georgia, victims of fascist whites, reflect a sense of solidarity with the sufferings of other blacks:

Black brother, here I am again, neither less poor than you / Nor less sad or greater. I am among the crowd.

When you bleed, Harlem, my handkerchief is tinged with purple. When you suffer, your lament is prolonged in my song / With the same fervor in the same evening, / Black brother, we two dreamed the same dream.24

Brierre presents the sufferings of blacks as a sadness of a worldly people. He identifies himself as part of a crowd of blacks united in shared pain. It is as though a "black brother" in Harlem would feel the same pain inflicted on a black man in Haiti and awake each morning from the same dream, or nightmare. This pan-Africanist linkage characterizes many other poems of the Negritude movement. Nevertheless, principal to the outlook is an absence of self-blame or pity.

One can see that West Indians contributed the essential clarity to the understanding of the common oppression of blacks. Their work represents a positive response of black intellectuals to their alienation in Paris and Harlem. It can be argued that black American literature contained the roots of Negritude, of which West Indians were a central component. Similarly, the West Indians using French showed early currents of Negritude tendencies. An examination of the work of poet and ethnologist Jacques Roumain in the next chapter highlights the significant literary developments in Haiti that influenced young scholars in Paris. As the first independent black nation in the West, Haiti provided fertile ground for a search for a distinct identity, reaching beyond French cultural norms.
CHAPTER II

JACQUES ROUMAIN AND "L'AME HAITIENNE"

The life of Jacques Roumain, which ended prematurely in his thirty-seventh year, inspired many of the currents of thought that were embraced under the rubric of "Negritude." As a youth returning from studies in Europe, and seeing the devastation wrought by the United States occupation of Haiti, Roumain took a militant nationalist outlook and became a youth activist against the occupation and for Haitian independence. At the same time, he and others pushed the concept of an indigenous Haitian art form rooted in peasant culture, founding La Revue Indigène in 1927. He would later develop an analysis of the lives of the peasantry from a Marxist viewpoint, starting the Communist Party of Haiti in 1934. His perspective centered on the "wretched of the earth," who were suffering under the yoke of capitalism and imperialism.

Roumain evolved through some of the more tumultuous social upheavals of the 20th century—World War I and the U.S. occupation of Haiti, the rise of fascism in Spain, then in Germany—and his writings and activities reflect his times. As a precursor to Césaire, Damas and Senghor's
emergence in the literary circles of Paris in the 1930s, Roumain was both a contemporary and a mentor. His impact was most striking among West Indians around Légitime Défense. In Roumain, the young Martinican scholars in Paris saw an intellectual and a political activist who struggled to reshape the notions of what Haiti and Haitians represented.

An examination of Roumain's literary and political contributions reveal noteworthy tendencies: 1) a disgust and contempt for the parasitic elite of Haitian society enchained by its own class and cultural biases; 2) A solidarity with those who were economically exploited by the class of elites and their imperialist allies in France: the peasantry; 3) An agitation for a reordering of society along socialist lines, widening the consciousness of the Haitian intellectual to embrace other oppressed peoples; 4) A de-mystification of black folk traditions in Haiti and elsewhere. His examination of black folk life, which placed an emphasis on the role of black peasants and workers, found an echo in what would later be characterized as "Negritude," not only in Paris, but in Africa and the West.

Roumain is best examined in the context of an effort toward redefining black life, the "indigenous" thrust in Negritude. A search for definition of themselves—not as Frenchmen, nor as Africans nor as subjects of the Americans, but as self-determining Haitians—characterized a generation

---

1Kesteloot, 57.
of literati that Roumain epitomized. Moreover, there is a corresponding significance between his assertion that Haitian art and literature must reflect the condition of the masses, and his political analysis of Haitian reality. The melding of both in his writings are clearly realized in his posthumous novella, Gouverneurs de la Rosée. In his work, he asserts the power of the Haitian masses to alter their society for the better. Roumain mingles the creole dialect of the lesser educated with the descriptive narrative of an anthropologist who has carefully catalogued the social relations of Haitian village life. It is there that he finds what he considers the true poetry of his countrymen.

While cursorily reflecting on his poetry and political literature, this chapter will study carefully the images reflected in the principal characters of Gouverneurs de la Rosée. because the novel represented a realization of many of the themes that can be found in previous works. Manuel, the protagonist, is a hero seeking the liberation of his people from the tyranny of hunger and desperation brought on by drought and famine. Roumain’s poetry, especially "Guinée," "Nouveau sermon nègre" and "Sales nègres," when linked with Manuel’s persona, reflects an image of revolution and freedom. The concept of a hero who will liberate the masses from the drudgery of labor is a constant in his writing.

Roumain's assertion of the need for an indigenous Haitian literature largely reflected a rejection of the predominating tendency of his day to duplicate French cultural styles. He criticized the use of local landscapes as insincere, seeing that approach as a mimicking of prevailing French styles. A member of the Haitian elite, a mulatto whose grandfather had served as Haiti's president, Roumain was educated in Port-au-Prince through grade school before studying in Europe, as was expected of his social class. His rejection of French literary dominance was largely a turning away from his own milieu and from the values with which he had been inculcated. A similar development would later take place among Martinicans contributing to Légitime Défense. Partly this tendency derived from the pressures of events. He saw his country taken over with the abstention, and in some cases, complicity of the mulatto elite. Meanwhile, black peasant oppositionist armies led by Charlemagne Peralte waged a sporadic caco guerrilla war from 1918 until their leader's execution in 1920. The juxtaposition of the cowardice of the mulatto caste with the courageous stand of black peasants could not help but to have influenced Roumain's perception of his own role in Haitian society as he returned home from


4A creole expression signifying peasant revolutionaries.
Roumain was 20 when he came home in 1927 to find the American military occupation that began in 1915 still in full command of Haitian life. His observations shaped a nationalist outlook and an opposition to American imperialism that put him in the forefront of the youthful resistance movement in Haiti. The presence of the Americans reinforced a disgust with the chronic unrest and political corruption that dominated Haitian political independence leading up to the occupation. The Americans applied Jim Crow laws and reinstituted the corvée, which stipulated that peasants must do six days of voluntary labor for the state, conditions that for many Haitians were reminiscent of the days of slavery, when their ancestors were exploited by French colonizers and their mulatto overseers.

The U.S. administrators made no attempt to discern the complexity of social and racial questions in Haiti. Rather, the administrators consciously appointed white Southerners to duties where contact with Haitians was necessary, giving a basis to charges that overt racism was the order of the day. Much of the difficult relations between Haitians and Americans went unchallenged by Haitian

---


6Ibid., 49.
militants, with the exception of the 1918 peasant uprising of Péralte and largely journalistic efforts on the part of the elite.\textsuperscript{7}

In his "Nouveau sermon nègre," Roumain reflected on the common oppressive conditions of black people under the boot of white American oppressors. A similar sentiment was noted earlier in the work of J.F. Brierre, a compatriot and close friend of Roumain. The mere phrase "nouveau nègre" speaks to the parallel New Negro movement in Harlem that Brierre addressed in "Me Revoici, Harlem": "Quand tu saignes, Harlem, s'empourpre mon mouchoir. / Quand tu souffres, ta plainte en mon chant se prolonge."\textsuperscript{8} The idea that the same suffering is felt across oceans is also evident in Roumain's "Sermon."

The poem is a harsh condemnation of Christianity, an anti-clericalist theme that Roumain revisits frequently. \textit{Gouverneurs de la Rosée} treats voodoo, or peasant religious beliefs similarly, as will be shown later in this analysis. Taken together, the work in "Sermon" and \textit{Gouverneurs} shows how Roumain believed voodoo to be a set of faiths just as valid as Catholicism and he often criticized both. The language draws specifically on Biblical expressions.

Nous ne leur pardonnerons pas, car ils savent ce qu'ils font / Ils ont lynché John qui organisait le syndicat / Ils l'ont chassé comme un loup bagard avec

\textsuperscript{7}Ibid., 53.

His words, "ils savent ce qu’ils font," give a terse twist to the words of Jesus Christ during his suffering on the cross. Roumain is taking an unforgiving view, essentially rejecting the Christian message of passivity, submission and faith that is implicit in the last words of Jesus: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." He uses a series of metaphors of a desecrated Christ exploited by oppressive thieves. He states that they, the whites and their preachers, have consciously organized the lynching of John, a labor organizer, and chased many others with dogs. The reference to dogs chasing someone through the woods immediately conjures images of slave catchers and lynch posses of the American South. The image of a laughing mob, impaling someone to a sycamore tree, alludes to lynch-mob terror endured by both Haitians and Americans. He determines that prayer is not the answer and continues with a call for an uprising:

Nous déployons nos rouges drapeaux / Tâchés du sang de nos justes / Sous ce signe nous marcherons / Sous ce signe nous marchons / Debout les damnés de la terre / Debout les forçats de la faim.

Roumain’s urging to take up "nos rouges drapeaux" is both an explicit reference to the red flag of working-class or communist movements and a call for blood, symbolized in the "red" that will flow in the winds. His next line continues

---

9Ibid., 120.
the theme, referring to "tâchés du sang." And he ends by strikingly reversing lines found in the "Internationale"\(^{10}\):
"Arise ye victims of starvation, Arise ye wretched of the earth." This type of poetry specifically called for action against the occupying army, and would push Haitian literature to a new realm.

Roumain's generation gave rise to an indigenous movement in literature, while orchestrating a student strike in 1929 that precipitated a general strike and the departure of the Americans in 1934.\(^{11}\) The younger generation of Haitian nationalists moved beyond more reserved forms of protest to a conception of violent confrontation with the Americans as the only way to drive them out. Roumain rejected passive resistance, seeking to develop a more rapid avenue for liberation.

In a series of articles in the newly established Haïti Journal, during the first half of 1930, Roumain polemicized against the nonviolent strategy of Mahatma Gandhi. In his eyes, Gandhi is a practical idealist, showing moral courage. However, he concludes that nonviolence and noncooperation in national liberation struggles will not work in the West:

Pour ma part, je crois que la Non-violence est irréalisable dans les pays de civilisation occidentale justement parce qu'elle non [sic] pourrait être basée sur le même terrain

\(^{10}\)Revolutionary song first sung in France in 1871 and since popular as a song of workers and communists.

His opposition to the idealism and moral suasion led Roumain to a militant style of poetry. As resistance and confrontation came to the fore, young writers championed a kind of verse that showcased rhetoric and indignation. His break with passivism and assertion of a militant Haitian nationalism occurred publicly and in the pages of La Revue Indigène, where his views appeared alongside those of standard-bearers of the older generation, such as George Sylvain. His obvious disillusionment with that generation would be an example to those who would refer to him in Légitime Défense and later, L'Etudiant Noir. Yet he largely was influenced in his early years by his older peers.

Beginning with a few pieces that examined the Haitian elite in an urban setting, among them, "La Proie et l’ombre" in 1930 and "Les Fantouches" in 1931, Roumain began to shift attention to the peasantry and celebrate folk life in an effort to define an indigenous Haitian literature. He particularly enjoyed crafting harsh caricatures of the bourgeois elite. J. Michael Dash notes this sketch from the "Préface à La vie d’un bureaucrate," a discussion of Roumain’s short story, printed in La Montagne Ensorcelée:

Mme Ballin -- 'who wraps her fat yellow like

\[12\] Fowler, 65. Taken from Haïti Journal, January 30, "Notes pour servir à un manuel de parfait arriviste."

[13Kesteloot, 271.]
spoilt butter, in mournful dress which enormous cameos do not manage to cheer up. Her head small, bony, monstrously out of proportion with her huge body.' 

The emphasis on Mme Ballin’s small head and enormous body creates a stark portrait of a mindless, greedy woman whose yellow skin is as appealing as rotting cream. He conveys in a short outline a class hatred for the mulatto elite and a perception that people such as Mme Ballin are grossly bloated in importance. Further, the portrayal implies that it is the most rich, the butter of society, that have grown stale. Notes Mr. Dash, "After 1928, the call for radical and profound changes in Haitian society would be widespread and with the birth of indigenism the break with the past would be complete." The "break" was actually more of a leap in racial consciousness inspired by shared immiseration under the Americans.

A mulatto elite accustomed to authority felt the sting of racism and the authoritarianism of the Americans, arousing a sense of racial solidarity and national pride. Indigenism went a step further, seeking to understand this sense of race consciousness by putting it in writing. Central to this effort was a move to redefine and reject the negative ideas associated with the word "nègre."

Roumain’s "Sale nègres" epitomizes this self-definition and hints at themes in Léon Damas’s "Solde." His

---

14 Dash, Literature and Ideology in Haiti, 134.
15 Ibid., 62.
poem repeats the word "nègres" as an epithet to be rejected, however, unlike "Solde," images and metaphor do not dominate. The principal method is a poem constructed as a sort of dialogue.

Eh bien voilà nous autres / les nègres. . . / nous n'acceptons plus / c'est simple / fini. . . . / nous n'acceptons plus / ça vous étonne de dire: oui missié. . . .

The poem has the quality of a dramatic speech of repudiation directed at the "missié," and a harsh sarcasm that implies a threat. The term "nègres" also is used more generally, possibly to encompass anyone who must answer to a master, urging whoever reads it to stop answering "oui" to the master. But the poem is not high on literary style or phrasing, opting instead for blunt, colloquial usage. This emergence of a simpler style of writing also suggests what will no longer be necessary—the poetic norms associated with French literature. Roumain, though not a surrealist, embraces the flow of unencumbered imagery the movement espoused. The phrase: "Nous n'acceptons plus," repeated in the excerpt, could be used for many of the standards that were employed. This act of determining what is and is not acceptable is key to the indigenous thrust for which Roumain fought.

Like other young writers of that period, Roumain was drawing on the example of Jean Price-Mars, a Haitian ethnologist and writer who gave voice to the idea of "l'âme

---

16 Ibid., 142.
nationale" in 1919, during the Occupation. "May it not be that we have something to offer to the world which is not something watered down or imitated?" he wrote in his Ainsi parla l'oncle of 1928.\textsuperscript{17} Price-Mars embraced an earlier effort by authors such as Hannibal Price and Antenor Firmin, who wrote between 1850 and 1900 of the need for Haiti to play a role in restoring the dignity of the descendants of Africans.\textsuperscript{18} Price-Mars's call for a uniquely Haitian art was absorbed by the youth of that period. His preface to Roumain's Montagne Ensorcelée in 1931 marked it as a literary event.\textsuperscript{19} In his introduction, Price-Mars called the work a "note émouvante de nouveauté," and an example of "une esthétique haïtienne."\textsuperscript{20} His denunciation of the elite for its inability to lead would find an echo in the idealistic rhetoric found in Roumain's poetry:

\begin{quote}
Et je rirai: / je rirai à blanches dents / et tout en riant; / je vous crieraî: /
Ha, lâches. ha, chiens. / Ha, hommes-aux-yeux-baissés, / Faut-il que la mort / hurle, / faut-il que le feu / brûle,
faute-il que la bouche / crache / pour qu'en foule vous accourriez?\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

The cowardice of the mulatto elite in the face of the


\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., 63.

\textsuperscript{19}Fowler, 126.

\textsuperscript{20}Dash, \textit{Literature and Ideology in Haiti}, 137.

\textsuperscript{21}Ibid., 69.
Occupation produces a raging condemnation, a burning need not to be seen as conforming to that class outlook. The image of the "hommes-aux-yeux-baissés" speaks harshly to the capitulations of which the elite was accused and likely guilty in the eyes of the younger generation. The question that pierces through his verse: What would it take for Haitians to become united? The "feu brûle," or "la bouche crache"? He is wondering whether "the cowards" will wait only until the fire of hatred is pressing them to the wall, or until they are spat upon, before they are gathered up in the anger of the crowd. It is an explicit denunciation of the elite's unwillingness to stand up as Haitians and not allow their backs to be broken by blows, and instead to raise their eyes to the challenge of leading the crowd, rather than being swept away by it. In decrying their cowardice, Roumain is asserting his own fearless confidence, symbolized in the striking "blanches dents" and the mocking "Ha" directed toward those who would not act in the face of brute oppression.

Roumain's reflections on Haitian disunity flow directly from his own attempts to unite the oppressed through his writings and agitation. A founder of *La Revue Indigène*, Roumain tried to create an awareness of literary expression elsewhere that spoke to the conditions in Haiti. In the journal, writings from France or from Latin America and the Harlem Renaissance in the United States were translated and made available for discussion. Looking more
carefully into the conditions of the urban elite in his early writings, Roumain found a class trapped in its own prejudices. "This theme was naturally shared by other irreverent members of Roumain's generation," Dash writes, "who saw the traditional urban elite as a sterile class." 22 Similarly, the group around Etienne Léro and Légitime Défense began by carefully criticizing the social norms to which they had become accustomed, and blaming the elite for its impotence. Moving away from his own milieu, Roumain, like the Léro group, was inspired by Price-Mars and the example of René Maran in Paris. In La Montagne Ensorcelée he addressed the tragic conditions of rural life in Haiti. The work de-romanticized folk life and presented a careful portrayal of how superstition and ignorance can produce tragedy—elements he would later expound on in Gouverneurs de la Rosée. Seeing both the sterility of the elite and the paralysis of the peasantry, Roumain turned toward Marxism as a methodology for explaining what went wrong in Haiti and to find solutions to the problems of society, founding the Haitian Communist Party. In 1934, the year of the party's founding, Roumain published his "Analyse schématique," a Marxist analysis of class and color in Haiti that presented those questions in terms of economic exploitation. 23

In the poem "Guinée," Roumain continues to treat the

---


23Ibid., 7.
plight of the indigenous population of Haiti. The title refers to slaves' belief that the souls of the dead journey back to their ancestral home, known as Guinea in Haitian peasant creole.24 In conceiving the poem, Roumain was thus rooted in the idealized conception of an African homeland that sustained generations of slaves and former slaves. Also, in choosing the creole word, he bows to a peasant perspective rather than one associated with French or European society. The reliance on creole would gain preponderance among indigenous movement writers, who sought to convey the message of the peasantry in their natural tongue.25

The poem portrays not only the journey back to Africa, but death as the only route for achieving it. The portrait of Guinea is immersed in sounds of nature associated with an untamed land. The images used are those of a lasting peace. He refers to "the sounds of the wind in its long hair / of eternal night," and one hears the deadening calm of the evening. The "slow road to Guinea" will not end with a "bright welcome" but instead one is greeted "In the dark land of dark men: / Under a smoky sky pierced by the cry of birds / Around the eye of the river / the eyelashes of the tree open on decaying light." Here darkness is the image of peace, a darkness meant to reflect

24Dash, Literature and Ideology in Haiti, 106.
blackness. Brightness and light are, by contrast, to be associated with whiteness. And for Roumain, this light is in decay. But decay does not reach the land of Guinea, for in this, a place of quiet and rest, streams rattle like "beads of stone." The place of rest is also "hard ancestral stone." The hope of durability is implied. This land of Guinea is always to be there at the end of a long road, a point he illustrates by referring to the "fathers" who wait:

It's the slow road to Guinea / Where your fathers await you without impatience / On the road they talk / They wait

Reward is suggested on the road to Guinea because of the absence of impatience, the calmness of "talk." In some ways, it is a backward-looking perspective, which sees the possibility of redemption only in a journey back to Africa brought on by death.

Negritude writers took up the idea of self-redemption through a focusing on what they considered African, as opposed to French, values. The impulse toward conceiving a racial mystique could also be traced to the type of idealized conception of Africa embodied in folk beliefs addressed in poems such as "Guinée." The notion of a set of intrinsic African ways--such as the value of "talk" or palavers--necessarily drew from a mythical view of Africa, whose thousands of tribes, cultures and nations do not, of course, share an innate set of beliefs. Yet in rejecting French society, Negritude writers were groping toward a clear, nonstigmatized view of their ancestral homeland and sought
The concept of redemption is embodied by water and death in Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la Rosée*. Manuel, an itinerant farm worker returning home from 15 years in Cuba, finds his village destitute, suffering from drought and divided by a bitter family feud. While the rest of the village resorts to voodoo rituals and superstitious practices, with the hopes of bringing rain, Manuel alone recognizes that a new source for water must be found. He begins a quest, looking to the signs of nature for the road to a spring. However, the water is so far from the village that it can only be directed toward the crops if a *coubite* is organized, which requires uniting the villagers for a common goal. His new love, Annaise, spreads word of his water source, and working with him, helps to break down old animosities. The two family factions are united, but a jealous lover of Annaise kills Manuel. As he dies, he pleads with his mother, Délira, not to name the culprit, so that the feud will not endure. Manuel is dead, but Annaise carries his child, conceived at the water source: A renewal of the family and the village is accomplished all at once.

*Gouverneurs de la Rosée* reiterates many of the themes found in Roumain's other work. The focus on the peasant culture, rather than urban life, is particularly striking.

---

Manuel, however, is an outsider, who brings a perspective honed in strike battles in the cane fields of Cuba. He relates to the villagers, during rituals with the drinking of cane rum and the worship of voodoo gods, but he is looking beyond those solaces to the solidarity of the peasants, working to sustain their existence. His tendency to speak of a vision uniting the workers, like one strong fist, earns him the nickname "Captain."

Roumain's story uses French, rather than creole, to render the story comprehensible to the outside world. However, slight turns of phrase suggest the language is not indigenous to the people using it. When creole proverbs, songs or expressions are used, they are translated into French in footnotes.27 The writing expresses the realm of peasant life in a language that is accessible to the widest range of readers. Roumain's message: It is the peasantry that is the key to Haiti. As Manuel remarks to Laurelien: "What are we? Since that's your question, I'm going to answer you. We're this country, and it wouldn't be a thing without us, nothing at all." He answers Laurelien, who would dismiss his cohorts as nothing but "Barefooted Negroes, scorned and mistreated." Instead he tells Laurelien that the true problem is ignorance:

We don't know yet what a force we are, what a single force -- all the peasants, all the Negroes of plain and hill, all united. Some day, when we get wise to that, we'll rise up from one end of

the country to the other. Then we’ll call a General Assembly of the Masters of the Dew, a great big coumbite of farmers, and we’ll clear out poverty and plan a new life.28

What Roumain addresses is not simply the future of Manuel’s village, but that of Haiti as well. The vision of a "new life" hinges on the fighting of ignorance and uniting of peasants. The coumbite that saves Manuel’s family and will allow his child to arrive without fear of hunger, is a metaphor for Roumain’s view of what will lead to an end to poverty in Haiti. It is a perspective profoundly faithful to a belief that Haiti’s working masses are the heart of its salvation, an outlook that reflects an intersection of racial and class consciousness. When he writes that "We are this country," Roumain explicitly dismisses the role that other groups, such as the Haitian elite, can play. Nonetheless, his writing in French necessarily makes the novel a broadcast to the literate Haitian, since few in the peasantry can read or write. Therefore, Roumain is essentially appealing to the educated elite to turn toward the peasantry for its strength. This focus on the most oppressed, "bare-footed Negroes" as a force for social change, is a legacy that other writers would pursue, drawing on Roumain’s example.

Through nationalism, indigenism and Marxism, Roumain wrapped himself in the rich folk culture of Haiti. His focus on the peasantry inspired a genre known as Haitian peasant

novel. As a result of his broad world travels and experiences, partly a byproduct of repeated political exile, Roumain successfully expanded the view of Haitian society. He placed it in the context of developments outside of the island, relating Haitian conditions to world imperialism and colonialism. What Roumain introduced in heroic characters like Manuel was the Marxist belief that man, not God or fate, is master of his own destiny.29 While Negritude writers may not have embraced Roumain's Marxist political views, they most certainly turned away from socially compromising themes and they began to see the descendents of Africans as subjects worthy of their own literature.

29Dash, 147.
CHAPTER III

ETIENNE LÉRO AND GILBERT GRATIANT:
SHADES OF DIFFERENCE

When the founders of *Légitime Défense* referred to Jacques Roumain and Jean-François Brière as role models, they also explicitly repudiated other predecessors. One who was pointedly attacked, Gilbert Gratiant, formed a striking counterpoint to Etienne Léro, the de facto leader of the Antillean students around the periodical, and an influence on Léon Damas. Both Léro and Gratiant espoused a view of Negritude before their compatriot, Aimé Césaire, coined the term. What inspires a closer examination of their work is the fact that not only were they on opposite ends of the spectrum in their writings, but also in color, a strong social determinant in Martinican society.

The issue of whether their color influenced their writings can be debated, however, Gratiant’s defining work, *Credo des sang-mêlé* strongly argues for an assimilation of French culture for Martinicans. In contrast, Léro, speaking through the voice of the manifesto in *Légitime Défense*, calls for a rejection of Western civilization in general and all things French in particular. Their political outlooks
led both to an espousal of communism, as with Roumain and much later, Césaire. It is clear that their perspectives reverberated through the milieux in Paris.

The work of Gratiant and Léro were both included in Senghor's *La Nouvelle Poésie Nègre et Malgache*, something of a benchmark for the Negritude writers. Published in 1948, with a laudatory introduction from Jean-Paul Sartre, Senghor's anthology was said to have reflected a coming of age for the movement. In it, Senghor referred to Léro as the main founder of *Légitime Défense*, along with Jules Monnerot and René Ménil. Senghor noted that in writing a Marxist analysis of the island society, Léro affirmed that only surrealism could deliver Antilleans from taboos of literature and express their complete existence. He added that Léro's work was a long way from the publication *Lucioles*. That journal was founded in 1926, six years earlier than *Légitime Défense*, and Senghor gives it the place of predecessor to the New Negro-inspired efforts with which he was centrally involved. Senghor's mentioning of *Lucioles* is a sharp reference to the journal's founder, Gilbert Gratiant, who, with the Haitian Léon Laleau and

---

1Kesteloot, 7.

2Senghor, 49. "Il affirmait que seul le surréalisme pourrait le délivrer de ses tabous et l'exprimer dans son intégralité. Nous étions bien loin de *Lucioles*!"

3Summary of Gratiant's life, Vertical file, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.
others, sought to affirm the cultural originality of the Antilles, Senghor wrote. \textit{Lucioles}, he added, was still very timid in its efforts, not as yet in keeping with the New Negro school. The journal was certainly significant, given the commentary it merited from Senghor. His explicit juxtaposition of Léro and Gratiant inspires a comparison of their works and the role each played in the formative years of Negritude.

Léro lived only thirty years, not long enough to see his work published in Senghor's anthology. Yet for the shortness of his life, he is mentioned by Senghor and Damas in their observations as an important figure in their own development. Senghor says that his access to Léro's texts are due largely to Damas, but as a senior expatriate student of sorts, Senghor was also in close contact with the group around Léro, according to Kesteloot. Damas devoted three pages of an introduction to his anthology, \textit{Poètes d'expression française}, to Léro's words in addition to publishing several of his poems. His work was fairly

---

4 Martinican poets August Joyau and Octave Mannoni are named in the Moorland-Spingarn vertical file pertaining to Gratiant as key helpers in the founding of the short-lived journal, which was published only two years in Fort-de-France, Martinique. Damas, in \textit{Poètes d'expression française}, refers to the pair. However, Kesteloot refers to Laleau's role in her notes.

5 Senghor, 49. "C'est encore timide, ce n'est pas encore l'école du 'Nègre nouveau.'"

6 Ibid., 48.
limited, however, by his pursuit of a doctorate in philosophy, which he was completing at the time of his death. A small collection of his poetry and prose can be found in anthologies and periodicals of that period, principally in *La Revue du Monde Noir* and *Légitime Défense*, as well as in Senghor’s and Damas’s aforementioned anthologies. The essay "Misère d’une poésie" defined *Légitime Défense*’s explicit attack against what was considered mediocre efforts by an older generation of Antilleans. "Evelyn," a two-part short story serialized in *La Revue*, displays the surrealist impulse contributed to Negritude, and serves largely as a metaphor for an infatuation of black people for white society. The poems featured in Senghor’s and Damas’s anthologies give the sense of a strong talent just beginning to be forged.

Gratiant lived to see the independence movements sweeping French colonies and to contribute extensive collections of poetry into the 1960s. Yet his work was rarely celebrated in the same vein as other authors of the Negritude movement, although he is frequently cited in the negative. He is praised by French patriots, such as Auguste Viatte, for his willingness to embrace an outlook beyond racial conceptions.7 Some of his poetry, written purposefully in creole dialect, insists on a nationalist

---

7Kesteloot, 34.
outlook more in keeping with some of the offshoots of Negritude. But it also reflects Gratiant’s sincere wish to hold true to the métissage in Martinican culture, a melding of both African and French heritages.

His Credo des Sang-mêlé is a manifesto for this perspective. Suggestive of Langston Hughes’s famous "I, Too (Sing America)," it was subtitled "Je veux chanter La France." He also contributed to La Revue and was included in the anthologies of Senghor and Damas. Damas refers to him as a principal collaborator on L’Etudiant Noir. But that journal, like Lucioles, is not circulated widely in the United States, therefore, the efforts recorded in it cannot easily be analyzed. As Damas noted in "From René Maran to Negritude," a preface written for the textbook anthology Voix françaises du monde noir:

This is meant for all those who speak about this very 'Etudiant Noir' - without ever having seen it because it is almost impossible to find, and rightly so. But that's another story, more marvellous than sad, moreover.  

However, the assessments reflected in the words of Senghor and his own writing strongly suggest that Gratiant never rejected the example of France in the same terms as those around Légitime Défense. In fact, Damas cites Gratiant’s

---


9Ibid., 22. Warner notes that the translated preface was shortened in the anthology because of editorial constraints.
essay from Lucioles as a prelude to the poetry selected, where there is an explicit reference to his emulation of France:

Que voulons-nous? Recule un peu le couchant en attirant sur notre commencement de nuit les rayons les plus féconds qu'un soleil les avait laissés derrière lui, dans la vieille Europe. Ces rayons lointains du Paris des Lettres, nous les accueillerons en nos vallées d'Outre-Mer.

In essence, the light of literature emanated from Paris, and the wish of Gratiant and his peers was to trap some of that light, forming an intellectual oasis in Fort-de-France. He thinks of Old World Europe as an inspiration left behind that needs to be recaptured in a part of France on the other side of the ocean.

Both authors possessed a racial consciousness that led them to embrace a class analysis of life in the island of their birth. Gratiant, however, spent most of his life in France, despite an assertion of a Pan-franco literary movement in the Caribbean. Léro was educated through his youth in Martinique, journeying to France for advanced studies. Their differing perspectives may have reflected their upbringings and the social reality imposed by a color-caste system. Writes Kesteloot of Gratiant:

Il est certes parfaitement compréhensible que Gilbert Gratiant ne soit pas un partisan de la négritude et se réclame plutôt de la culture française: il a été presque entièrement éduqué en France et est d'ailleurs métis très clair.\(^\text{10}\)

By the same token, in writing of Léro, she makes a noted

\(^{10}\)Kesteloot, 35.
exception in her analysis of the Légitime Défense group. He alone of the group was not a privileged mulatto, nor was his personal development well documented.

Damas recalls him in this way: "Le nom d'Etienne Léro, Martiniquais de bonne souche, domine cette phase de la poésie indigène d'expression française." Damas credits him with the creation of Légitime Défense, and says that for Léro, a poem must be understood, tasted and felt. He quotes Léro's "Misère d'une poésie":

Ça entre ou ça n'entre pas, et c'est un ruban de dynamite qui finit plus ou moins tôt, plus ou moins tard, d'exploser à l'intérieur d'un individu. Donner le ruban sans la poudre, ce n’est pas du jeu.12

Damas's quote of Léro slightly alters the way Léro originally wrote of Gratiant: "M. Gratiant nous donne le ruban sans la poudre. Ce n’est pas du jeu." Perhaps Damas was sparing his friend Gratiant. Léro's accusation that Gratiant's poetry is somehow impotent flowed from his own view of a necessarily explosive poetry. He goes on to describe the work of Flavia-Léopold and Gratiant as


12Ibid., Introduction. Translation: It works or it doesn't, and it's a dynamite ribbon that finishes sooner or later by exploding inside a person. To give the ribbon without the powder, it's not fair.

13Etienne Léro, "Misère d'une poésie," Légitime Défense, Kraus Reprint, Nendeln, 1970, p. 12. All subsequent references to this essay will appear in the body of the text and will be set off by parentheses and include the author's name and a page number. Translation: "Mr. Gratiant gives us the ribbon without the powder. It's not fair."
representatives of an Antillean lyricism of a condemned class. He sharply blames these poets for allying themselves with the French bourgeoisie.

Despite this understanding of the role of the poet, Léro’s work hardly seems as powerful as a stick of dynamite when placed beside some of his peers of the day, notably those of Césaire. Senghor, in his introduction to his selection of Léro’s work, notes that despite this fact, "Je ne doute pas que, s’il eût vécu, il ne nous eût donné des oeuvres plus personnelles, plus nègres, du moins plus antillaises." The essay to which Damas refers certainly reflects a synthetic analysis of literary styles that preceded him, and is worth examining. "Misère d’une poésie" appeared in the only issue of Légitime Défense, as his second contribution. The first, "Civilisation" is worth a brief examination as well.

In "Misère," Léro notes the inexactness of the expression "une poésie antillaise." Explaining that most of the islands’ population can neither read nor write, he sees that the responsibility for a uniquely Antillean literature falls to the literate members of society, mainly the mulattoes. He links the mediocrity of Antillean poetry to the social order. He sees these intellectuals as ambassadors of a stifling system that nonetheless rejects them as well, because of their dark skin.

---

14Senghor, 49. Translation: "I don’t doubt that, if he had lived, he would have given us work more personal, more black, at least more Antillean."
Quelques membres d’une société mulâtre, intellectuellement et physiquement abâtardie, littérairement nourrie de décadence blanche se sont fait, auprès de la bourgeoisie française qui les utilise, les ambassadeurs d’une masse qu’ils étouffent et, de plus renient parce que trop foncée.15 (Léro, "Misère," 10)

The problem, as Léro describes it, is that the writers are afraid of being told by an indignant Frenchman that their work is obviously done by a black person, and they try as much as possible to write so that the French can read a book without knowing it is created by a black person. Thus the goal of writing becomes to deny one’s identity, so that: "Il se fait un point d’honneur qu’un blanc puisse lire tout son livre sans deviner sa pigmentation."16 (Léro, "Misère," 10)

Léro argues that the attempt to hide from racial identity is the main hindrance to creating a distinct Antillean poetry. The result of this cowardice, in Léro’s understanding, is a literature devoid of originality or sensual imagination. He says:

L’étranger chercherait vainement dans cette littérature un accent original ou profond, l’imagination sensuelle et colorée du noir, l’écho des haines et des

---

15Translation: A few members of mulatto society, intellectually and physically bastardized, literally nourished on the white decadence that made of themselves, in the fashion of the French bourgeoisie who uses them, the ambassadors of the masses they stifle and moreover who are rejected because they are too dark.

16Translation: "He [the mulatto author] makes it a point of honor that a white person can read his entire book without guessing his color."
aspirations d'un peuple opprimé.17 (Léro, "Misère," 10)

His idea that poetry should reflect the woes and triumphs of the oppressed black masses would become a part of the challenge woven through Negritude. He asserts that only when the black proletariat is able to break through the double yoke of a parasitic mulatto layer and a degenerate group of whites will a genuine Antillean poetry exist.

In this vein, Léro devotes nearly a full page of "Misère" to a pointed attack on Gratiant, with a few other poets included for good measure. He mentions Gratiant's "Poèmes en vers faux," criticizing them for several paragraphs:

Les vers de M. Gratiant ne traduisent ni les iniquités sociales de son pays, ni les passions de sa race, ni sa valeur propre de désordre et de rêve. Chacune de ses pièces nous paraît un intempérant commentaire autour d'un poème qui était à faire. On n'y traverse pas un éclair d'innocence, pas un instant de courage, pas une tentative vers l'expression passagère et détournée de la violence humaine, qu'est la poésie.18 (Léro, "Misère," 11)

Léro's critique of Gratiant reveals both what he considered to be the demands a poet is required to fulfill and correspondingly, what he found lacking in Gratiant. A poem

17Translation: A stranger will search in vain in this literature for an original or profound expression, a sensual imagination colored in black, an echo of the hatreds and aspirations of an oppressed people.

18Translation: The verses of Mr. Gratiant translate neither the social inequities of his country nor the passions of his race nor the proper value of disorder and of dreams. Each of his works appears to us an intemperant commentary rather than a poem that was to be made. One will not run across a speck of innocence nor an instant of courage nor an attempt at transitory expression and deterring of human violence that is poetry.
must reflect the social struggles of the society, the passions of people and the violence of human survival. At the same time, a poet must show courage in looking at the world, weigh the words chosen to describe it, and be willing to properly assess his people’s dreams. Léro saw none of this in Gréatiant, instead finding what he derisively referred to as "l’audacieuse neutralité de M. Gilbert Gréatiant." Poetry must not ascribe to a fence-sitting set of observations, but must take sides in the events of life, in Léro’s view. Interestingly, Gréatiant’s Poèmes en vers faux, published in 1930, are cited as some of the earliest of Martinican works to take pride in African heritage. Obviously, Léro found them inadequate expressions of racial pride.

In counterposition to the work of Gréatiant and Flavia-Léopold, Léro proposes as models Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, whom he describes as two black revolutionary poets who have brought us, marinated in red alcohol, the African love of life, African joy of love and the African dream of death. (Léro, "Misère," 12) In his view, these authors reflect a turn toward Africa that the Antilleans must make. Dreams and death, life and love, must be shown in an African light. He also refers to young Haitian poets as inspi—

19 Vertical file, Moreland-Spingarn Research Center.

20 Translation: "Les deux poètes noirs révolutionnaires, nous ont apporté, marinés dans l'alcool rouge, l'amour africain de la vie, la joie africaine de l'amour, le rêve africain de la mort."
rational. While there is no mention of a particular poet, Kesteloot infers that he is speaking of communist Haitian poets Jacques Roumain and J. F. Brierre.\(^2\)

In the foreword, there are references as well to the role of the Communist Party and an endorsement of several authors and artists of the surrealist movement, including André Breton, Salvador Dali, René Crevel and Paul Eluard. So in denouncing the works of Gratiant and others, Léro had in mind a particular alternative, a view of what the words "art" and "civilization" should mean.

The short essay "Civilisation" espouses a view that is even more explicit than his essay "Misère." A polemic against the persecution of the Scottsboro boys in Alabama, the essay indicts the French press and the black press in the United States. At the same time, it declares that the French Communist Party newspaper, "L'Humanité," is the exception to the significant silence surrounding the case of eight young black males accused of raping two white women with whom they unknowingly shared a train car. He says that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People has proved incapable of defending the youths and touts the Red Aid ("Secours Rouge International") for coming to their defense. He writes that only the working class, up to that point, has cried out its indignation in meetings, and urges black people everywhere to take up the cry and save their brothers from the electric chair. The essay

\(^{21}\text{Kesteloot, 57.}\)
concludes with the pointed rhetorical question: "Quand donc les noirs d'Amérique comprendront-ils de façon efficace que la seule évasion possible de l'enfer américain est pour eux dans le communisme?" The question is reminiscent of the one posed in Roumain's defiant poetry: "Faut-il que la bouche crache pour qu'en foule vous accourriez?" The call to rise to action is implicit.

Thus communism is the answer that will save blacks from the hell of American civilization, to which Léro refers at the beginning of the essay as the most evolved of all the countries pretending to be civilized. (Léro, "Civilisation," p. 9 "le plus évolué de tous les pays prétendus civilisés...") The striking point of the essay is that it is included in a journal ostensibly devoted to examining literature of the Antilles. However, it is essentially a call to defend the Scottsboro boys and a ringing endorsement of the work of the Communist Party and its defense group in that cause célèbre. In the foreword, the authors explain that they see the Communist Party playing the decisive role against the capitalist, Christian and bourgeois world. The group wrote that if the Communist Party were to be defeated, it would mean a definitive end for them as well. Communism is championed as the last hope against a racist world. Also, it

---

22Etienne Léro, "Civilisation," Légitime Défense, Kraus Reprint, Nendeln, 1970. p. 9. Translation: "When, then, will black Americans understand effectively that the only escape from the American hell for them is communism?"

23Dash, 69.
is linked strongly to the efforts of surrealists who saw the need for a revolution and the liberation of man. In large part, therefore, the Léro grouping was emulating the rebels within French intellectual society. They particularly addressed the class battle between black workers and their colonial oppressors, as well as the adjuncts to the white rulers, the mulattoes. The Légitime Défense group was influenced by the anticapitalist and antiracist actions of the Communist Party, and sought to apply those examples to the circumstances of the islands.

Little explanation in Légitime Défense follows the explicit endorsement of French surrealism and of communism. However, there is no shortage of reasons why these movements might have appealed to Léro and those around him. The surrealist school protested much of bourgeois art and society in the post World War I period. Its prescription was a literary revolution that sought to free writers from what were seen as stifling bonds of style, and in using an automatic writing method, to return to the imaginative freedom of a child or a primitive. For those whose people were frequently devalued because of underdeveloped economies and social organization, the return to the primitive dovetailed nicely with a turn toward African societies. Léro argued that surrealism had best integrated the conception of a functional poetry.24 (Léro, "Misère," 12) Poetry was to

---

24 Translation: "C'est l'honneur et la force du surréalisme d'avoir intégré toujours plus à fond la fonction poésie, d'avoir mis à poil la poésie."
be wielded as a tool against evident injustices. Among young poets who saw their craft as a "functional" weapon against an abominable social order, surrealism held appeal. It is noteworthy that for intellectuals ostensibly rejecting Western society, they were largely following the same course as their white peers. André Breton recalls the group as a parallel movement to his own. 25 And many of the prominent surrealists spent a brief time in the Communist Party of France, guided there by an opposition to what was considered a decadent bourgeois order and out of sympathy for those suffering under the French colonial yoke.

One of the tenets of the written surrealist works was a stream-of-consciousness rendering of the imagination. Léro's "Evelyn" reflects this style of production. It is written as though he were sending the prose as a love letter from André to Evelyn. The story recounts the development of a relationship, first in the imagination of the author, who sees her in a class at the Sorbonne, then as that relationship changes and the two become friends. But the love of André is unrequited, and in the end, Evelyn returns to the mountain village of her native Romania.

The story appeared in La Revue du Monde Noir and initially would seem out of place in a journal devoted to an examination of the role of blacks in diaspora. However, if one places the author in the voice of "André" and the story is viewed as a metaphor, it becomes a powerful indictment of

25 Kesteloot, 44.
the love of the blond, green-eyed woman. This interpretation is based on the tone and style of the story as well as the self-examination that André undergoes. Placed in the context of Léro’s other essays, certain passages suggest the story was meant as a stinging rebuke of the idealized love for the white Evelyn.

After describing how he had loved Evelyn before they had even met, André’s letter remarks:

Comme je vous aimais de ce que vous m’ignoriez absolument, de ce que je n’existais aucunement pour vous! Je vous avais, je vous voyais, vous étiez ma chose. Je ne pouvais rien vous demander de plus, puisque vous n’aviez jamais donné quoique ce soit, puisque tout ce dont je me délectais en vous et par vous venait de moi, je ne pouvais pas trouver que vous m’accordiez de vous peu de chose, puisque vous ne m’aviez jamais rien accordé du tout.26

That passage could easily reflect the author’s perceived alienation from French society, a sense of invisibility amid a culture and mode of life that he had come to appreciate. At the same time, there’s a discomfort at not finding that appreciation acknowledged; nothing is given in return for the affection stored up. And finally, the author notes that this was all centered on his own estimation, not from any

26Etienne Léro, "Evelyn," La Revue du Monde Noir 2 (1931-32): 36. All subsequent references to the work will appear in the body of the text and will be set off by parentheses and include the author’s name and a page number. Translation: "How I used to love you, because you ignored me entirely, because I did not even exist for you! I saw you, I made you my own, you were all mine. I could not ask any more of you since you had never given me anything, since all that I enjoyed in you and through you, originated in me. I could not complain that you had given but a little of yourself, for you had never given anything at all."
action on the part of Evelyn, or perhaps by way of allusion, French society.

The letter continues, describing the absence of envy or jealousy, because the love was simply imagined and based on an image of perfection conjured in André’s mind. The text rambles in a stream of remembrances, speaking of moments in classes and the clothing Evelyn would wear and her behavior in class. André speaks to the fantasy of being part of a novel Evelyn is reading and the wish that the fiction could somehow blend with reality. Yet even so, he is reticent to reveal his feelings to her: "J’avais peur de l’inconnu que représentaient de nouvelles relations entre nous. En sortirait-il du 'faste’ ou du 'néfaste’?"27 (Léro, "Evelyn," 39) This fear of unhappiness or of a happiness that falls short of expectations paralyzes the character, André. At the same time:

Et pourtant, je souhaitais ardemment vous connaître. ... Je désirais passionnément vous parler, pouvoir me trouver seul avec vous, et non plus perdu dans cette foule.28 (Léro, "Evelyn," 39-40)

He hopes to speak with her, to be alone in her company and step out of the shadows.

In the second part of "Evelyn" the desire to be seen

27 Translation: "I was afraid of the unknown which new contacts would call up between us. Would joy or woe come out of it?"

28 Translation: "And yet, I earnestly wished to know you. That will astonish you, but it is true. I was all reticence, intemperate enthusiasm, and suddenly, helpless immobility. I longed to talk to you, to be alone with you, and no longer swallowed up in the crowd."
as an individual, and not a part of the crowd, leads André eventually to Evelyn, simply in the kind act of retrieving her dropped pen. The act parallels the author’s own wish to distinguish himself, not simply as one of "the blacks" in French society, but as a unique man. The act of picking up a pen becomes his bridge to being seen as an individual in Evelyn’s eyes. So, too, is Léro redefining himself in the eyes of French society in the simple act of picking up a pen and communicating.

The end of the first half of the story, which was serialized in La Revue, reflects this act of self-realization. André refers to the characters in a book that he is writing and how the complete absorption in the characters is a type of love that he similarly felt for his imagined Evelyn. He then reflects on the discovery of reading something he had written as an adolescent, and how looking at that in retrospect tells him how far he has matured as a writer and individual. He goes through the same process in examining the pages penned to Evelyn:

Ces pages sont écrites d’hier. C’est moi que j’y vois et ce n’est déjà plus moi. Je ne suis plus ce grand garçon déclamatoire et sensible—sincère pourtant—qui voulait tout avoir de la vie, ne rien perdre d’aucune émotion, d’aucune puissance. . . . C’est avec intérêt et sympathie que je considère ce frère plus jeune, qui n’était qu’un ‘devenir,’ qui ignorait tout de sa vocation, n’avait aucune notion de ses forces ni de ses limites. 29 (Léro, "Evelyn," 42)

---

29Translation: "These pages were written yesterday. It is I that I see there, and yet it is no longer me. I am no longer the big, high-flown sensitive youth, but nevertheless sincere, who wished to live life to the fullest, not to lose one iota
In other words, André is evolving in his writing to Evelyn, becoming clearer in his identity and work, as well as gaining a sense of his limitations. His main limitation was a lack of perspective that would let him step forward and show Evelyn his true self. And yet, as he examines what he has written, there is a recognition of personal growth, from "ce frère plus jeune" to someone far more self-aware. The rest of the story is something of an ode to the departed Evelyn, both of his dreams and of reality. Yet, in her departure, Evelyn allows André to maintain his ideal conception and polish the memories of their time together. He is able to distance himself from that false love of the imaginary Evelyn and to move on.

The story is exceptional in its cross-referencing to classical European culture: the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, references to the characters of Stendahl and Proust, and a final image of Evelyn in a "septembre verlainien." Also striking are the Parisian scenes that speak of their courtship in the Latin Quarter, Les Indépendents and Le Luxembourg. The combination of images creates a sensitive portrait of young lovers' tempestuous courtship as they explore Paris and each other. Clearly, there is a highly personal attachment to these scenes. Léro reflected on the impact of his own young discoveries in

of any emotion or enjoyment. It is with interested sympathy that I consider this younger brother who was only a thing in progress, who was ignorant of his calling, who had not the slightest idea of his possibilities or limitations."
Parisian society, and if one were to see Léro in the character of André, these experiences were both painful and exhilarating. The overwhelming emotion is that of coping with rejection. The focus on rejection is what hammers home the metaphorical nature of the work. The author strives to move past his own sense of isolation from French society in penning the character of André, who must do the same with Evelyn.

In contrast, little of this rejection gushes through the poetry of Gratiant. His treatment of French society is consciously seeking to affirm a French influence as a positive, if mixed, determinant in Antillean society. In a preface to Credo des sang-mêlé, Gratiant wrote in 1961 of the reasons for the poem, which was presented in 1948 with the subtitle "Je veux chanter la France," for the centennial of the abolition of slavery in the French Antilles.

Recognizing the changes that took place in the years since the poem was written, Gratiant's preface is part apology and part defiance. Apologetic, perhaps, for the inability of his observations to stand the test of time. Yet he recognizes that his poem made an impact in the recognition of the mixed heritage of Antilleans:

J'ajoute qu'il faut que ceci soit parfaitement entendu: ce que nous abhorrons, ce n'est pas le Français en soi, en tant que Français, lui est aussi notre ancêtre, notre cousin, notre guide, notre ami selon les heures et les événements, même s'il a été en d'autres heures et au cours d'autres événements le maître d'esclaves, levant le fouet, et l'exploiteur d'hommes prétendument libre. Mais celui que nous abhorrons, c'est le colonialiste grandeur nature et son complice le capitaliste s'ils ne se confondent en
He is not dismissing the oppression meted out to slaves, but recognizing that the relationship between slave and master was far more complex. Cousins and ancestors were also slaveholders. This complexity was woven by a system of colonial exploitation and capitalism, not something that is exclusive to the French. This is the system Gratiant opposes, rather than the culture of his exploiters.

That is a principal theme of his lengthy 1948 poem, similar in its effort to the surrealist catharsis of Aimé Césaire. However, unlike Césaire’s condemnatory tone and vigorous assertion of "négritude," Gratiant’s effort is to recapture the best of Europe for the Martinican. He stands against the colonizer, the political domination and the paternalist overseer, saying instead that that is a "fake" part of France. He is looking at the France of the 1789 Revolution, the one that promised "liberté, fraternité, égalité." He notes this specifically in his preface:

Trop de nos compatriotes crient: 'Vive la France!' pour qui la France est tout bonnement tel ou tel patron, telle puissance politique du moment, telle ou telle entreprise capitaliste à sauvegarder, telle ou telle politique de guerre coloniale, telle ou telle opération de dépersonnalisation culturelle. Contre

---

30 Gilbert Gratiant, Credo des sang-mêlé, preface (Paris: Editions Louis Soulanges, 1961), 10. All subsequent references to this work will appear in the body of the text and will be set off by parentheses and include the author’s name and a page number. This passage explains the hatred Gratiant feels toward colonialism and capitalism of which the French were a part. At the same time, he notes that these same French people were also cousins and friends, if not ancestors and lovers at different times, just as they were masters of slaves, cracking the whip.
Gratiant’s conception of a "fausse France," is founded in a faith in the better aspects of French society, particularly the contributions of the Enlightenment. His exaltation of "la présence française" in his Credo is put in the context of the diverse history of the island of Martinique. He recognizes that the heart of his island is the spirit of Africa: "Terre de l’antilope et du lion / Terre africaine / Tu es ma terre"—but he concludes in the same stanza: "Tu es ma terre, / Mais voici mon climat: / La présence française." 32

(Gratiant, Credo, 24) He is proud of this heritage, the mixture of the French village and the African village. For this acknowledgement of Africa, he was known as a foremost representative of Negritude among mulattoes of his caste. His affirmation of a multiplicity of inheritances is central to his work, and despite attacks on his depth of commitment to African culture, waged strongly by Etienne Léro, he defends his outlook: "Je conjugue, métis, / La fierté d’être homme de France / noble homme, jadis, serf et

---

31The passage refers to the blind admiration for French society espoused by some of Gratiant’s compatriots. Gratiant calls this worshipful view of France—a patron and colonial safeguard—a false one. He says that he has fought against a usurpatory France in Europe and in the Antilles.

32Translation: "Land of the antilope and of the lion / You are my land / You are my land / But this is my climate / The French presence."
That Gratiant's "homme de France" is both noble and servile is itself an assertion of the vast mix of origins that he recognizes in himself, and by extension, his countrymen. He is a far cry from the stereotypical "tragic mulatto" theme that was common to writers of his day. He is trying instead to take the best parts of both French and African cultures and to see them realized in an understanding of Martinican society.

A few other passages reinforce the idea that the mixture of blood from his ancestors has determined his existence. Midway through the 21-page poem, which traces the history of Gratiant's own contact with France and the interaction of the French and the Antilles, Gratiant salutes the France of revolutions, referring to the country as "O pays malaxeur des races":

Car si je suis là, homme brun, homme noir, / Au confluent de deux ou trois races, / C'est que le lucre m'a concu dans les siècles / L'aventure a baptisé ma lignée / Mais l'amour extravagant et public / Que tu ose au grand jour exposer / D'une race pour d'autres races / A sanctifié ma source et ma naissance. (Gratiant, Credo, 35)

---

33 Translation: "I conjugate as mulatto / Proud to be a man of France / A noble man of yore, a serf and corsaire as well."

34 Dash, 102. Noting the works of Claude McKay and Jacques Stephen Alexis, this image portrayed characters who were torn between "European rationalism and African sensuality," the author writes.

35 Gratiant acknowledges his color as a reflection of the mixture of two or three races and the product of love and adventure. He suggests that it would be daring to expose one race as being part of others, thus blessing his own birth and the source of it.
He recognizes that the lust for gold and adventure may have brought various lines of his ancestry together, through centuries of both conquest and love. And he asserts that his birth is a reflection of all of those admixtures, a product of what he calls in an earlier verse "ma France d'amour."

Whereas Léro rejects the France of the whites as a poor and bastardizing influence, Gratiant salutes France as the source of the complexity and richness of Martinique. Yet he also goes back to Africa, citing some of the same symbols and images that other Negritude poets use:

Grâce à toi France que je chante, / Qui créas telle et très complexe / La Martinique / Avec les fleurs, / Avec les pleurs de ton Histoire / Avec les ors / les sangs / les fiels de ton Histoire, / Créas la Martinique, / Comblé puisque je puis sans cesser d'être moi, / Me perdre en la voluptueuse monotonie rythmée / Des infinis tam-tams, / Descendre au fond des mystérieuses résonances / De l'Afrique, / sentir en pleine chair le haut service d'Esclavage (Gratiant, Credo, 24)³⁶

Martinique is the product of the blood and tears that formed plantation life, a life woven together from the threads of French and African history. The inseparability of the two is the essence of Gratiant's existence. When he writes "Grâce à toi," in speaking of France, he salutes the highs and lows of Martinican history, in which France has played, and continues to play, an undeniable role. And he argues that he

³⁶This passage is a salute to France for creating the complexity of culture and life that is Martinique, including its flowers and its tears, its gold and blood shed through history. He says that because he cannot stop being who he is, he is naturally lost in the rhythm of drums and the mysterious echoes of African culture, and he feels the experience of slavery in his flesh.
must look at both the bitterness of slavery and the rich rhythms of Africa that survived the experience, because he cannot stop being who he is.

That Gratiant retained such pride for France could be a result of his ability to live comfortably there, and to function in European society without the stigma of dark skin. Léro functioned within different social parameters. The writers' existences reflect the legacy of plantation life and the abiding social nuances associated with color in that setting. Perceptions of social standing cannot help but have influenced their writings. And while both were exceptionally well-educated and exposed to a range of privileges, one responded to the sting of French racism and hypocrisy more harshly. In the authors' observations, we see strikingly the dilemma of racial awareness that prodded young Antilleans. In her examination of plantation life in the novels of Joseph Zobel and Michele Lacrosil, Beverly Omerod points to the world that generated the social relations Léro and Gratiant reflect:

Until recent times, . . . the majority of black employees had no share in the profits and were systematically denied the chance of social advancement. Status, therefore, continued to be identified, for all practical purposes, with an individual's place in the colour spectrum, wealth and privilege continued to be associated with lightness of skin. 37

Even if neither Léro nor Gratiant wrote specifically of their status based on their color, it is interesting to recognize that the darker-skinned Léro insisted on

37Omerod, 64.
Antilleans seeing themselves as oppressed black people foremost. Gratiant, on the other hand, was probably more aware of his French ancestry because he could afford to be. It would have been in his interest to tout a France that recognizes him as a lost son; Léron had nothing to gain by doing so. Yet both authors drew similar conclusions: That French society had to be changed in order for men of color to have a true place in it. They pushed unique conceptions through their writings and left their mark.
CHAPTER IV
CONCLUSION

The writers discussed in this paper were never described as proponents of Negritude, although their work is often loosely grouped in anthologies and studies of the period that gave birth to the phenomenon. Yet each obviously influenced both the principal actors who are credited with developing the concept—Senghor, Damas, Césaire—and the ideas associated with it. Negritude proposed a pan-African literary response to a deforming atmosphere or as Damas referred to it, "la tribalisation" of students of African descent living in the Latin Quarter of Paris.¹ Focused largely on refurbishing a self-image, Negritude was meant to develop a racial awareness that would unify students who felt exiled from their own people. It led to a process of self-examination expressed in a range of literary genres: poetry, essays, theater, novels. However, as much as the literary developments sought to devise an African soul or personality, there was no consensus on what that encompassed, therefore, several interpretations evolved.

Jacques Roumain suggested in his writing a return to the folk cultures of Haiti and an exploration of peasant

¹Kesteloot, 91.
society. His work in *La Revue Indigène* propelled a careful analysis of folk life that would later be seen among writers of *L'Etudiant Noir*, who turned to Leo Frobenius and Maurice Delafosse to examine the people and cultures indigenous to Africa. He criticized the pseudo-colonial system in Haiti, which left workers and peasants wallowing in poverty while agents of French imperialism remained rich. This is the point of *Gouverneurs de la Rosée*, a tale of redemption for a small Haitian village with an ideological framework that asserts Haitian peasants can and must determine their fate. The penchant toward self-determination and racial consciousness can be traced to many who came after Roumain.

In particular, the discontent with an older generation of Haitian writers, which Roumain expressed in both stories and articles, can be seen in the efforts of the students who published *L'Etudiant Noir*. His focus on ethnological studies that stressed cultural linkages to Africa, and his assertion of a Haitian soul, ("l'âme haitienne") found an echo in the writings of authors such as Senghor. An African broadly exposed to French literature and culture, Senghor insisted on retracing his African origins. Vaillant describes in her biography of Senghor the influence of West Indians in his self-discovery: "The West Indian students began to probe Senghor for information about their newly discovered heritage. This pushed Senghor to articulate what that heritage was." In large part, this search for his African

---

2Vaillant, 101.
heritage, an Africa of his childhood, led Senghor to write a poetry that recognized himself "such as he was." \(^3\)

Roumain's work reflected a rebellion against the system of imitative imagery that was associated with Haiti's elite. His development mirrored as well the turning toward the French peasant and life of the countryside that was found among the French Naturalists in the latter half of the 19th century, particularly in Emile Zola's treatment of the poor in France. It was not, as with some other authors, a false exaltation of rural life and an excuse to pass a lingering pen over the Haitian landscape. Rather, his realism sought to exalt the natural surroundings and conditions that had shaped a people.

In doing so, he hoped to conjure a collective spirit ("l'âme collective") in reaction to the absence of self worth and identity that had been left behind by French colonialism. Implicit in his efforts, therefore, was a condemnation of the French legacy. This is seen particularly in his use of language, notably the creole phrases employed so as to make them understandable to a skilled reader of French and a speaker of creole. Senghor would later often refer to "la personnalité collective négro-africaine" (the collective personality of the African-Negro) as the essence of Negritude, noting that an open view of Negritude is a

\(^3\)Ibid., 128.
form of humanism. In looking carefully at the Haitian condition, Roumain sought to draw links to Africa and the rest of the world, striking a more universal, humanist theme:

Afrique j’ai gardé ta mémoire, Afrique / tu es en moi /... Pourtant / Je ne veux être que de votre race / ouvriers paysans de tous les pays.  

He saw in Africa a history worth recognizing, but he viewed his life more broadly, in terms of the "race" of workers and peasants of the world, "les damnés de la terre." This broader perspective is suggestive of the class analysis Roumain embraced as a Marxist activist. The ideological viewpoint underlying his prose would influence a generation of young Haitian poets, such as René Dépestre, who attacked the racial politics of the Negritude writing as an oversimplification of black society. His poem, "Le baiser au leader" from Etincelles, expresses a respect for Roumain explicitly, and "Piété Filiale" is considered to be a revisiting of themes Roumain embraced:

O terre d'Afrique / Je veux aujourd'hui parler uniquement pour toi / 

Mais j'entends dans le lointain / Monter la sourde clameur d'une mosaïque de souffrances / La grondante symphonie des abandonnés / Blonds, jaunes, noirs peu importe / ils versent tous un sang rouge  

---


6 Dash, Literature and Ideology, 166.
Dépestre pays homage to Africa, while suggesting that it is humanity as a whole that occupies his thoughts. His reference to the abandoned of society is not unlike Roumain's exalting of the wretched of the earth. The fact that all races of humanity suffer, reflected in the red blood that everyone bleeds, is a powerful assertion of a universal humanism. This clearly counterposes a view of world culture to the concept of a universal, homogeneous black culture. This same tension in Negritude comes to light in examining Léro and Gratiant.

Class, race and color issues shaded the works of the lesser-known writers addressed in this work. Reflecting the diversity of literature of the lesser Antilles, the Martinicans Etienne Léro and Gilbert Gratiant provided a study in contrasts. While Léro pushed for a more racial outlook, rejecting the French influence on the island, Gratiant embraced it wholeheartedly. Gratiant took his turn addressing the folklore of Martinique by pursuing a form of writing in creole. He saw in his double heritage a bonus, not a taint of French culture. Yet he also asserted the importance of the African roots that Martinicans share. If he insisted rather strongly on the role of France and on Martinique as "France d'outre-mer," it was probably because his own color afforded him that distinction. His willingness to see a broadening role for French culture is also seen in works of Senghor, who melded in his life the conception of
the "French Negro," neither French nor African.\textsuperscript{7}

Léro, on the other hand, turned strongly toward Africa and away from France, at least ideologically. He condemned the sort of "dialecte mulâtre"\textsuperscript{8} that earned Gratiant renown. He fought for a literature that focused on the black worker, using a surrealist style to convey his view. While he died at 30, his work, if limited, stands among those influences of Damas and Césaire in particular, both of whom drew from their Martinique experiences in pushing for a closer relationship with things and images associated with Africa, rather than France. Certainly, Césaire, in his \textit{Cahier d'un retour au pays natal}, followed in the surrealist tradition Léro indulged and his racial outlook is also apparent. The hostility toward imitative forms, which Léro expressed in \textit{Légitime Défense}, is also seen in the work of Léon Damas. His sharply worded "Solde" makes the point that the natural impulses of black writers are hamstrung when mimicking the French. Although Damas speaks mainly about mannerisms, clothing and social interaction, his criticism also could be applied to writing.

\begin{quote}
J'ai l'impression d'être ridicule / dans leurs salons dans leurs manières / dans leurs courbettes / dans leurs formules / dans leur multiple besoin de singeries\textsuperscript{9}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{7}Vallant, 133.

\textsuperscript{8}Ibid., 497. Vaillant's phrase means mulatto reasoning, or in turn, a racially mixed reasoning.

\textsuperscript{9}Senghor, \textit{Anthologie}, 11.
Out of these examples and others, stands a diversity of themes that melded the best the French world had to offer at the time with a sharper understanding of African cultures. Critics of Negritude have noted that this necessarily led to some contradictions. Some thought the literature was insincere in its passion for Africa. Others noted that while French political domination may have been scorned, the condemnations were frequently phrased in typically haughty French intellectual style. Similarly, the enamored approach to Africa often bordered on the faddish primitivism and exoticism making the rounds in Paris. Africa was often conceived in vague, mythological terms as a rich motherland of all black people. Noted, G. R. Coulthard:

"In fact, [Dantes] Bellegarde, of the same generation as the leader of the Africanising school, Jean Price-Mars, . . . [points] out what he considers to be the paradox of their behavior as intellectuals--on the one hand Africanising primitivism and on the other French-style hyper-intellectualism."

This question of mixed ancestry was addressed largely along the spectrum that Léro and Gratiant represented: an evaluation of their particular circumstances, with a generalized anger toward the fate of the oppressed as a whole.

The writers examined here struggled to create a new ground for those called "nègre" by the French. Their literary responses showed a significant effort at self-examination and at seeing the world more carefully through

---

10Coulthard, 73.
the prism of the most oppressed of Haitian and Martinican society. As a result, a significant range of attitudes propelling a reevaluation of the role of black people in the world developed with the literature of the French West Indies. Their observations grew especially out of a similarity in historical and social development: slavery, French colonialism and American culture, and ethnic composition. Geography also played a role because the limited size of their countries necessitated travel for further intellectual studies, making them conduits for developments among black Americans and black Africans arriving at a similar understanding. Unlike Senghor, a black African, these authors also had to address the geographic distance from their ancestral homeland and the development of color-caste relations in their lands. All of these factors, as well as periods of self-exile and travel often routine for the intellectuals of their strata, made for a broader perception of the role of blacks in the world. While they may not have been Negritude writers per se, their contributions propelled a conception of Negritude that left a rich collection of works examining self realization of blacks. Their creations helped cast a new understanding of black people in French society.
Bibliography

Periodicals


**Essays**


**Books**


