

**Léon Gontran Damas
and the Meanderings of Black Awareness at Georgetown University**

The troublesome relationship I have with the pronunciation of any word starting, ending or just containing any kind of a “th” sound does not fool anyone. I am and will remain a French speaker forever. In the midst of a class about postcolonial thinkers of the Global South, this linguistically embarrassing feature trapped me into having to briefly introduce the main Francophone writers of the French African and Caribbean periphery. Even if it is true that I majored in French literature and hold a Masters of Comparative Literature (French and Spanish), I am not sure I qualify as an expert (or even novice) as regards Francophone literature. After all, the department I graduated from was called French and Romance Languages and Letters, not Francophone...

The persistent lack of awareness of European institutions toward their former colonies and the absence of any course including French speaking writers outside of Europe in my academic journey extend the scope of this paper –and should probably inform a longer and more detailed research project (my Ph.D. dissertation?). While preparing a brief introduction of the main Francophone writers of the French African and Caribbean periphery, which I knew nothing about, there was something else that caught my attention. In 1970, one of the main Francophone-not-from-Europe poets and founder of the *Négritude* movement, Léon Gontran Damas, moved from his native French Guyana to Washington, D.C. to teach at Georgetown University. This was a pretty big deal! Not only because nobody remembers the famous French Guianese black poet’s stay at Georgetown, but also because Léon Damas was one of the first Black professors at Georgetown University. Invited in 1970 to teach for a summer, Léon Damas came as a supportive

figure right in the middle of a general effort from the part of Georgetown to turn its institution into a more inclusive and diverse university.

Starting in 1968-1969, one year before Léon Damas' visiting position, the few Black students attending Georgetown (144 out of 7000) claimed the right to gain recognition on campus and formed what will become the Black Student Alliance (BSA still active in 2019)¹. As the following letter from Nancy M. Adams to the Academic Vice President at the time, Reverent Thomas P. Fitzgerald, shows, the academic year of 1968-1969 opened up a period of tensions and negotiations: on one side, black students eager to gather; on the other, "bitterness," and "anger" that Nancy M. Adams presents as "counter-indications" to the well-being of such a group.

August 4, 1969

Rev. Thomas P. Fitzgerald, S.J.
Academic Vice President
Georgetown University
Washington, D.C. 20057

Dear Father Fitzgerald:

Thank you for your comments on the proposed group for black students.

I had been talked to some of the black student leaders even before talking to the Deans and your qualms as to whether these students want such a program are well justified. Since some of the black students did recognize that such a group might prove useful I investigated the funding possibilities. However, after a luncheon with a number of students last week I feel that, at present the bitterness and anger are very definite counter-indications to forming such a group. When one hears the incidents and attitudes to which these students have been exposed, their lack of enthusiasm is understandable.

I, and perhaps only I, refuse to believe that there are no ways of handling these problems other than to let these students remain bitter. Surely the university community in the first place can should try since, if we fail for lack of trying, it portends serious outcomes in the larger society. I plan to keep on considering alternatives.

I do not advocate making white students out of black students but rather finding a way for black students to feel integral to the university while maintaining their own identity or perhaps finding it.

I enclose a reprint of an article by Carl Fields of Princeton University which presents some ideas that I share.

The only comment which you made with which I could not agree is that the proposed group would not include the more fortunate black students. I feel such a separation would only further isolate the less favored black students. Beyond that, middle class blacks may be the best teachers of the upwardly mobile but less sophisticated youngsters.

I appreciate the value of these past few weeks of trying to communicate with the administration and the black students lives in the

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the fact that some genuine contacts were made with black students and the administration's response has been overwhelmingly supportive and gratifying.

We here, here at the Psychological Services, that some of the black students will come in this year for help of various kinds. We do not feel, at this time, that any funding is necessary but perhaps we could contact the Deans of the various schools should some of their particular Community Scholars come to us for help. Of course if this is not possible, we will see any student any time regardless of ability to pay our fees.

Thank you again for your interest and helpful comments.

Sincerely,
Nancy M. Adams, Ph.D.

ndf/MSA
Enclosures
cc: Dean Davis
Dean Mann
Michael Barton

¹ For the number of black students at Georgetown in 1969, see *Georgetown University News Services*, August 14th 1969, conserved in the Booth Family Center for Special Collections at Georgetown University Library; for the website of the Black Student Alliance, see <https://hoyalink.georgetown.edu/organization/GUBlackStudentAlliance>

Figure 1: Letter from Dr. Nancy M. Adams to the Academic Vice President at the time, Reverent Thomas P. Fitzgerald, 1969 (Booth Family Center for Special Collections, folder Diversity African American, at Georgetown University Library)²

This document, attesting to a crucial moment for Black awareness at Georgetown is only one of many conserved at the Booth Family Center for Special Collections on the fifth floor of the Lauinger Library at Georgetown University. Hidden in the academic archives of the university and in the midst of old and dusty editions of “The Georgetown Voice” and “The Hoya,” dozens of letters, opinion pieces, news releases, official documents, pictures and pamphlets remind us of the hard fight of Black students at Georgetown University³. But before delving deeper into the fields classified under “Diversity” at the Booth Family Center and the role Léon Damas played in the formation of Black consciousness on campus, let’s introduce the main character of this story.

Léon-Gontran Damas, also known as Léon Damas, is a French Guianese black poet. Born on March 28, 1912 in Cayenne, Guyana, he lived and studied in the French overseas territories, Guyana and Martinique, before moving to Paris for his Ph.D. In Paris, he met Léopold Sedar Senghor, later to become the president of Senegal, and reconnected with the Martiniquais Aimé Césaire who he knew while studying at the Lycée Victor Schoelcher in Martinique. Together, the three friends created *L'Étudiant noir* (1935), the literary journal that provided the foundation for what became the *Négritude* movement.

The word *négritude*, coined by Aimé Césaire, is often translated in English as *blackness*, or *negritude*. In an address to the English-speaking public, Senghor further explains that the English

² When the letter of Nancy M. Adams attesting to “counter-indications” to the creation of a “group for black students” present in 1969, the Black Student Alliance website mentions the year 1968 as its creation date. Building on that discrepancy, we can probably infer that the BSA was unofficially created between 1968-1969 but experienced some difficulty in its official recognition by the university. Another interpretation could be that Nancy M. Adams considers an alternative or sub-group of the already existing Black Student Alliance. I however did not find official mention of the BSA prior to 1968.

³ This work would not have been possible without the precious help of Lynn Conway, archivist at the Booth Family Center for Special Collections at Georgetown University Library. For an overview of the material available, please see annex 1.

word *negritude* should not be confused with the word *nigritude*, which the English-French Harraps's dictionary translates as "noirceur" (which means "of black color" in French). *Négritude*, argues Senghor, has less to do with "the color of the skin" than with "the warmth of the soil" (Senghor 270). Using the Latin suffix *-itas* and *-itudo* as an example, he explains that the word *négr-itude* better expresses the "whole range of values of civilization of all black peoples in the world," in a similar way that the word *latin-ite* (*Latinity* in English) refers to the qualities of Latin civilization as a whole (Senghor 270).

After its first usage in the French journal *L'Étudiant noir*, the term *négritude* led to what became the *Négritude* movement: a literary movement whose aim is to raise awareness among Black populations and cultivate a form of Black consciousness across Africa and its diaspora. Such objective is not without remembering the Harlem Renaissance literary style developed in Manhattan in the 1920s and 1930s. The work of Léon Damas, in particular, contains the mark of black American writers such as Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes, whose poems Damas translates into French. On the other hand, American writers such as Richard Wright and Samuel Allen are influenced by Damas and his two friends, especially when collaborating with the *Négritude* movement through publications in the Pan-African quarterly cultural, literary, and political magazine, *Présence Africaine*. These artistic connections, along with the publications of Damas and Senghor's respective anthologies *Poètes d'expression française 1900–1945* (1947) and *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (1948) mark the international expansion of the *Négritude* movement worldwide.

In 1948, after the success of these anthologies, both considered as manifestos for the movement, the *Négritude* movement became part of a broader postcolonial conversation. After highlighting the existence of Black consciousness across Africa and its diaspora, the literary movement also opened worldwide discussions about the peripheral position of former colonies in

general and their exclusion from linguistic and literary traditions. This international recognition led Damas, who had joined the French army during the Second World War, to be elected to the French National Assembly as the Guyanese deputy, before joining the UNESCO as a representative for the *Société Africaine de Culture*. During this time, Damas also worked as the overseas editor of the journal *Présence Africaine* and the radio station Radio France, while giving lectures and traveling extensively in Africa, the Caribbean, Latin American, and the United States to collect material for his studies on black contributions to occidental literature and culture. In 1970, he was offered a position as a visiting professor at the Georgetown Summer School in the American capital. Being a perfect opportunity to reinforce his link with the country of his favorite black American “soul poets,” as he calls them, and to learn more about the rhythms of American jazz that he is passionate about, he accepted and started teaching a class titled “Panoramic View of Afro-American Writing from Outside the United States” on June 16th, 1970.

This appointment took place in a larger effort at Georgetown University to develop diversity in the curriculum. At the beginning of the 1969-1970 academic year, Dr. Roger Slakey, head of the English Department, announced two new undergrad courses focusing on both African and African American (or “American Negro” as it was called at the time) literature. The first course, taught by Dr. Thomas Walsh, was initially part of the Master’s degree in teaching program. In an interview for the weekly Georgetown newspaper *The Hoya*, Dr. Walsh explains that noticing a need to prepare future teachers to the possibility of teaching inner city’s students, he created a course that included some references to African American literature. To follow up on the demands of several undergraduate Black students, he then adjusted this course to a sophomore level after “looking more closely” at a literature he “did not know well enough or at all,” but became passionate about (*The Hoya*, March 12th, 1970: 3). Writers such as Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Eldridge Cleaver, and the interesting choice of William Faulkner (a “white writer of black characters” in Dr.

Walsh's words) (*The Hoya*, March 12th, 1970: 3) became thus part of the curriculum and undergraduate students at Georgetown have access for the first time to a class titled *The Negro in American Literature* in the Fall of 1969.

In addition to Dr. Walsh's class, undergraduate students enrolled at Georgetown during the Spring of 1970 were offered a second option: Dr. Donald Herdeck's class on *African Literature in English*. This class, explains Dr. Herdeck in *The Hoya*, has three objectives: (1) to let students read African authors writing about themselves; (2) to open a door into the living realities of African culture and experience; and (3) to offer a way for students to watch modern African writers develop literature of their own within foreign forms and an alien tongue, that is, English (*The Hoya*, March 12th, 1970: 3). The archives of the *Georgetown University News Services* also reveal that following the initiative of the English department, other departments worked on offering course in Black studies for the 1969-1970 academic year such as "The Negro in American history" (History department), "The Black in America" (Sociology department), "Black Theology: Relations and Racism" (department of Theology), "Marketing in the Inner city" (Economic department), and "Race, Relations, and Politics" (Government studies) (*Georgetown University News Services*, August 14th 1969).

As these new opportunities show, the faculty at Georgetown deployed a real effort to bring more diversity in the curriculum in 1969. The interviews conducted for the *Hoya* magazine in 1970, along with the information conserved in the *Georgetown University News Services* for the year 1969-1970 are very explicit: if some universities in the United States are offering Black studies courses just to respond to "a rush to be fashionable" and follow a general trend toward courses that "explore the black man's culture," it is not the case of Georgetown. The Jesuit institution is creating significant opportunities in the curriculum for Black Studies, while encouraging critical and

intellectual approaches to the matter for “the ultimate benefit of blacks and non-blacks” (The Hoya, March 12th, 1970: 3).

It is in this general context that Léon Damas was invited to teach during the summer of 1970. As the archives of the *Georgetown University News Services* of 1969 show, in addition to bringing more diversity to the curriculum, Georgetown was eager to bring more diversity into the faculty. “We will be visiting with department chairmen before Christmas when the hiring for the next academic year is done,” explains Wendell C. Robinson, president of the Black Student Alliance; “hopefully, we can present the names of some good black Ph.D.’s who are just finishing their graduate work for possible hiring” (Georgetown University News Services, August 14th 1969). He then adds that the Georgetown administration has been very cooperative in arranging for the new black studies courses and providing the necessary money to pay for them.

If no official document attests that professor Damas was hired as a result of the Black Student Alliance’s request, the date of his visiting position matches the demand of the newly formed Black Student Alliance. Hired as a visiting professor for the summer 1970, Léon Damas teaches a course titled “Panoramic View of Afro-American Writing from Outside the United States” from June 16th to July 23rd. His course, which intended to cover Afro-American writing of South America and the Caribbean is presented in the *Georgetown University Bulletin* of the Summer School of 1970 as follows:

English Department:

A Panoramic View of Afro-American Writing from Outside the United States (035197) (First Session) (3cr.) (1:45-3:15 p.m.) Professor Demas [sic]

An increasingly recognized but still poorly studied literature is that of the African-Latino living in the Caribbean-South American world. Part of the Creole cultures of Franco and Hispan-America [sic], these writers also came to absorb Anglo-Saxon culture from England and Harlem and on migrating north and to London and Paris began an even richer period of experimentation and development. The great theme of “negritude” was first evolved in the Paris of the 1930’s by young Antillan [sic] and African writers (Demas, Cesaire, and Senghor) [sic] and this in turn kicked off new renaissance in the United States, Africa, Brazil and the Caribbean. (*Georgetown University Bulletin*, Summer 1970)

With the exception of the spelling mistake (“Demas” instead of “Damas”) and the decision to place professor’s Damas’s course in the English department when he is mainly a poet of French expression, the description of his course corresponds exactly to his previous work and area of expertise. The mention of Africa, Brazil, Harlem, Paris, and the Caribbean, alongside the notion of *negritude* announces already since the course description his desire to place black consciousness into a transnational dialogue and open broader postcolonial conversations.

It has been hard to find out how many students attended Damas’ class. If the documents conserved at the Booth Family Center under the labels “Summer/Continuing Education Catalog” and “Old Archives of the Summer School,” including the *Report to the President of Georgetown University on the Summer School and Office of Special Programs*, do not comment on the reception of professor Damas’ course, they reveal however, along with the testimonies available in the archives of *The Hoya* and the other Georgetown magazine *The Georgetown Voice*, the students’ reactions towards not only a changing curriculum, but also more diversity at large. In *The Hoya* of April 30th, 1970, for instance Wendell Robinson, president of the Black Student Alliance, criticizes the lack of black attendance at the “Black Awareness Week,” a 7-day event organized by the Black Student Alliance a few weeks before Léon Damas’ visit (April 13-19 1970). In his report of the event, he argues that “most Georgetown Blacks hold an almost unprecedented position for apathy, egotism, general lethargy, and reply that they have better things to do than go to that week” before pleading the following: “to those majority of Blacks at Georgetown University that care less about Black people and think one of themselves, I say God bless you and rejoice that you’re not at the University of Alabama, Mississippi or Georgia” (*The Hoya*, April 30th, 1970: 6). He then concludes: “When and if the Georgetown University White student body ever turns against Blacks like they do at some southern schools and seek to ostracize you socially, politically and economically, where

will you run? When the professors start coming down on you, and when the Administration starts dismissing you, where will your run? It is one of the most ambivalent divergents in history when students from predominantly Black schools in a city over 71 percent Black can't find a common bond with their own race at a predominantly White institution” (The Hoya, April 30th, 1970: 6).

As this testimony shows, if 1969 marks the beginning of a wave of changes toward more diversity at Georgetown University, the process is long and delicate for both white and black students. When the Georgetown administration was working on a joint effort to bring more diversity in the curriculum and on campus, the incipient awareness toward black students and culture was undercut by some students’ lethargy or reticence. On April 15th, 1970, for instance, the editorial board of *The Georgetown Voice* (whose members were mostly white at the time) warns against “emotional fervor” when dealing with “environment, anti-draft, and black awareness,” three topics presented together as fomenting too often “emotionalism” over “rational solutions” (*The Georgetown Voice*, April 15th, 1970: 6). And a few days later, in *The Hoya*, a white student and representant of Fifth Copley and Old North district, Jerry Nora, concludes a complaint about “many basic human problems” such running water fountain, broken windows on Fifth Copley, or a urinal placed too high for short people saying “so, you see, Hoya, Georgetown women and black students are not the only oppressed minorities that must be liberated” (The Hoya, April 23rd, 1970: 14).

Leaving to the reader the choice to decide between irony or sarcasm regarding this last example, I will just conclude that after his visiting position, Léon Damas left Georgetown campus. Shortly after another temporary position at the Federal City College, he then finally joined Howard University as a Distinguished Professor of African Literature where he decided to stay and become the director of the African Studies Program until his death in 1978. The Black Student Alliance,

for its part, kept growing in number and influence after Damas' departure. And in 1974, *The Hoya* magazine announced class '74 as the most diversified ever (*The Hoya*, September 6th, 1970).

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<http://washingtonart.com/beltway/damas.html>. Accessed 16 Nov. 2019.

Annex 1:

Details of the material available in the Booth Family Center for Special Collections at Georgetown University Library in relation to this project:

1. On-site archives

- a) "Summer/Continuing Education Catalog" 1970 (TN 8326)
 - *Georgetown University Bulletin* of the Summer School (1970)
 - b) Georgetown University News Release (January-June 1970)
 - c) Georgetown University News Release (July-December 1970)
 - d) *The Georgetown Voice* (vol. 1-2, March 1969-March 1971)
 - e) *The Hoya* (years 1969, 1970, available online)
 - f) Folder labeled "Diversity in the curriculum"
 - Georgetown University News Service (August 14th, 1969)
 - g) Folder labeled "Diversity in general"
 - 1970 Essays in Black en White (*Georgetown Today*, March 1970)
 - 1971 GU seeks minorities (*The Georgetown Voice*, October 26th, 1971)
 - A Selection of over 200 Years of Records from the University Archives
 - Class of '74, Most Diversified Ever (*The Hoya*, September 6th, 1970)
-

- Community Scholars Program

h) Folder labeled “Black Students at Georgetown”

- 1969, Black Alliance Speaks out (*The Hoya*, September 25th, 1969)
- The Black Student Alliance, an expending organization (*Georgetown Today*, July 1971)
- Focus on Minorities (*Georgetown Today*, March 1973)
- Announcement for the Black Awareness Week

i) Folder labeled “African American”

- “The Isolated Life of the Negroes at G.U.” (*The Hoya*)
- 1968-1969 Annual Report (July 1969)
- 1969 Letter from Dr. Nancy M. Adams to Reverent Thomas P. Fitzgerald
- 1970 Letter from Dr. John C. Rose to the Subcommittee on Public Health
- Hoya Black Athletes (*The Hoya*, February 27, 1970)
- Black Courses developed (*The Hoya*, March 12, 1970)
- Chalmers Cities Efforts to Recruit D.C. Blacks (*The Hoya*, November 19th, 1970)
- Negro, Youngest Member Named to Board (*Georgetown Today*, September 1970)
- News from Georgetown University about Diversity (1971)
- Black Students React Favorably to Weekend (*The Hoyas*, September 11th, 1972)
- Georgetown Adds Black Courses (*The Washington Post*, August 19th, 1969)
- Library Adds Black Literature (*The Hoya*, February 19th, 1970)

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Location

Booth Family Center for Special Collections at Georgetown University Library (5th floor of the Lauinger Library)

Hours: 9:00am-5:00pm (closed on weekends)

2. Off-site archives

“Old Archives of the Summer School”

- Howard University African and Afro-American Studies
- Conference on African Armies in Politics and National Building (June 25-26, 1970)
- 1970 Summer School faculty listing
- 1970 Summer School pamphlet
- Report to the President of Georgetown University on the Summer School and Office of Special Programs (November 2, 1970)
- Pamphlet of the lecture Serie of the Summer School
- Pamphlet of the courses offered by the English Department during the Summer School of 1970
- 1970 Summer Programs at Georgetown University poster
- Georgetown University Summer School information newspaper announcement
- Summer Activities Office
- Georgetown University Summer School Newsletter (July 1970)
- Georgetown University Summer School newspaper clippings

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The material can be brought to the Booth Family Center for Special Collections at Georgetown University Library (5th floor of the Lauinger Library)
Hours: 9:00am-5:00pm (closed on weekends)