Chapter 2

Damas’s Confrontation with Colonialism: Ethnographic Essayism and Anti-Colonial Critique in *Retour de Guyane*

In 1932, Léon–Gontran Damas enrolled in the Institute of Ethnology in Paris, and among his classmates were Michel Leiris and Jacques Roumain.¹ In 1934, Damas embarked upon an ethnographic field trip after having trained in Paris under Professors Marcel Mauss and Paul Rivet.² Mauss and Rivet wished to complete a project devoted to ‘survivances africaines dans le nouveau monde’ in French and Dutch Guyana.³ Because Mauss had argued that cultural exchange was universal, he was intrigued by the case of the nègres bosch and their chosen isolation from other cultures (p. 13). At age 22, Damas was to investigate this cultural isolationism, in the bosch societies of French and Dutch Guyana, whose members were ethnically comprised of Amerindians intermarried with maroon slave descendants, and who lived apart from the prison encampments. The survey presented a project corresponding to Damas’s academic interests: a further opportunity for him to study ‘la civilisation noire’.⁴

Though Damas was originally commissioned by the Musée Trocadero (now the Musée de l’Homme) to study the nègres bosch, he received little financial support for this venture from the museum.⁵ Lucien Vogel, editor of the journals *Lu* and *Vu*, approached Damas and asked him to produce a reportage on Guyane.⁶ Damas developed

---

⁴ Racine, *Léon–Gontran Damas*, p. 27.
his writing, eventually producing articles for journals along with his systematic critique of the colonial situation in *Retour de Guyane*. This project, which he completed over several years, took the form of observational commentaries combining essayism and ethnography.

More immediately over the summer of 1934, Damas also completed his ethnographic fieldwork for the Trocadero, producing a *compte rendu* on the *nègres bosch* and bringing back a collection of artefacts.\(^7\)

Damas’s *Retour de Guyane* was consistent with the shifting of the ethnographic discipline in France away from the trend towards a qualitative understanding of sociological methods to a more demonstrable measuring system which made inferences based on material culture. At the time that Damas wrote *Retour de Guyane*, the Musée de l’Homme was a new venture which sought to bring the academic discipline of ethnology in line with ethnography: to combine the two so as to form a more measurable understanding of cultures.\(^8\)

The type of ethnographic fieldwork in which Damas engaged was considered an initiation into colonial governance, as was the case for individuals such as Félix Éboué, who studied the Ubangi-Shari people in Africa. In ‘Rationalizing Colonial Domination’, and using the example of Éboué, Benoît De L’Estoile explains this tradition in relation to colonial governance:

A monograph by Félix Éboué provides a striking instance of this overlap between administrative and scientific knowledge, all the more so given both the author’s exceptional career and the fact that this study was presented as exemplary during its day.\(^9\)

Scientific knowledge, in the form of ethnography, served the basis of colonial administration through its demonstration of the knowledge required to serve ‘societies to be administered’.\(^10\) Damas’s fieldwork

---

\(^7\) Racine, *Léon–Gontran Damas*, p. 29.

