

# In memory of Jacques Coursil, 1938-2020

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If postcolonial studies still have some sort of sense beyond being just an empty label flapping in the wind of our career-prone academic departments, certainly Jacques Coursil filled that void with an overwhelming and precious presence. I had met him as a young woman of sixteen during my studies at the prestigious United Nations International School in New York City, where he landed suddenly as a professor of French literature in the late sixties. A handsome, tall, athletic black man in his early thirties, smoking a pipe at times, deep basso voice, long graceful hands that played his favourite jazz instrument – the trumpet – and a ground breaking view of what literature – and language – should be and are. His lessons on Stendhal's *Le rouge et le noir* already contained the imperative that what is *inside* the text is linked to what is *outside* the text, a notion that brought him to consider both Saussure and Benveniste – at the heart of two of his scholarly titles<sup>1</sup> – as well as the passionate political manifestos of his fellow Martinicans Fanon, Césaire, and Glissant – a personal friend.

Born in the Paris *banlieu* from immigrant parents, he started early his path towards liberation from the heavy burden of the slave African past by joining the *négritude* movement of Senghor as an adjunct in his government and then moved to the Big Apple in the wake of Malcolm X's assassination, where he started jazz experimenting with Sunny Murray and Frank Wright producing a few years later – back in Europe – his first album *Black Suite*. After a thirty-five years span in which he left his trumpet on the nail for two PhDs in Linguistics and in Mathematics and a teaching career in literature, linguistics, and philosophy at the University of Caen in Normandy (where I met

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<sup>1</sup> *La fonction muette du langage* (2000) and *Valeurs pures, le programme systemique de F. de Saussure* (2015).

him last in 1976), and at the University of the West Indies in Martinique, at Cornell University and University of California Irvine, he joined his former UNIS student John Zorn in 2005 and released his comeback recording *Minimal Brass*. Coursil recently conceived new voice, sound and text experiences with his album *Clameurs* where he recites an outstanding rethinking of Fanon's 1952 classic *Peau noire masques blancs*, and the long monologue in music *Trail of Tears* where he "investigates the forced migration of tens of thousands of Indigenous North Americans throughout the nineteenth century, situating this atrocity alongside the transatlantic slave trade, two foundational processes of racial capitalism",<sup>2</sup> reaching with his art a final statement: "Je ne veux plus être l'esclave de l'esclavage".

In a paper he presented at a meeting in Siena in 2010 dedicated to Caribbean literatures,<sup>3</sup> Coursil defined what he thought was the 'dead end' of definitions pertaining to Black Studies and African post-colonial awareness since a 'grammar' that is still based on the duality Prospero-Caliban cannot account for "l'accident historique d'avoir été engagé, transbordé et mis à la chaîne", and for this same reason "toute chaîne possède deux bouts aux points desquels se trouvent des sujets; chacun dit sa version fragmentaire et imaginaire d'une même histoire réelle", forever uniting us whites to our 'mirrored' counterparts which European colonialism has ravished centuries ago from our common Mother Africa.

Jacques died on June 26 at 82 years of age in Aachen, Germany, and he is survived by his wife Irene and two children.

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<sup>2</sup> Scott, C. (2020). "A Tribute to Jacques Coursil". *Music & Literature*, July 21, 2020. <https://www.musicandliterature.org/features/2020/7/21/a-tribute-to-jacques-coursil>.

<sup>3</sup> "NÉGRITUDE: La Grammaire de Caliban". *Francofonia*, 61, 2011, 13-26. I have quoted Coursil's critical insight of 'assigning to a place, its subject' in my recent essay "Challenging Past and Present: Translating David Fennario's Bilingual Theatre". Di Vito, S. (a cura di), *Lingue nella contemporaneità: Analisi linguistica, didattica e traduzione tra nuovi media e nuove sfide del multilinguismo*. Roma: Aracne editrice, 2018, 167-81.