



The Celtic Nations and the African Americas

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The Celtic Nations and the African Americas

Daniel Williams has put together an extraordinarily interesting collection of essays on cultural interactions -- mergers and antagonisms -- between Gaelic, African American, and Afro-Caribbean identities. In presenting fresh archival work and new close readings, the essays are also attentive issues of linguistic and racial difference and to changing theories of belonging.

Michael Newton offers the first full examination of Gaelic-speaking Scottish Highlanders and black Americans in the US, pursuing especially leads toward the presence of black speakers of Gaelic, thus opening a theoretical discussion about the significance race and language in notions of group membership and about alternative models of assimilation. He is right in assuming that the anecdote he begins with and that he returns to at the end was common among other immigrant groups as well: thus *Deborah*, the German-language women's supplement to Isaac Meyer Wise's Cincinnati *Israelite*, featured a version of this joke in its edition of December 21, 1855. When a Swabian immigrant greenhorn meets a German-speaking Negro who addresses him as "Landsmann," the Swabian asks him for how many years he has been in America. When he gets the reply seven years (in German), he says, in stage-Swabian, "and already so black. I think I'll rather go back soon to Swabia" (vol. 1, n. 18, p. 143). And *Die Emigranten*, a play published in German in St. Louis in 1882 included the following scene:

Louischen: And yesterday I met a coalblack woman, and she starts speaking German to me, and then I ask her how long she's been gone from Germany, and she says with a laugh: Only five years, but that the sun had burned her so. Well, in five years, I'd be only twenty-one years old.

Karl: Oh, so you are afraid for your pretty white complexion and believe that you'll turn black, too, and will then not find a husband, or only a black one?

Louischen: Oh, how terrible.

Karl: Well, don't worry – this must have been only the joke of a Negro woman who has learned German somewhere. (My transl.)

Daniel Williams, the editor of this issue, takes his point of departure from an episode in a James Baldwin novel and, in a close examination of four cases develops a critique of the notion of “nationalism vs. assimilationism,” convincingly offering the substitute terms “conservationist” vs. “contributionist nationalism” as more appropriate for understanding Martin Robison Delany and Michael D. Jones on the one hand and Frederick Douglass and Samuel Roberts on the other, thus also demonstrating the usefulness of the theoretical critique of an African American paradigm advanced by Wilson Moses to the Welsh situation. Since an important part of the essay is devoted to the issue of “miscegenation,” an additional irony lies in the fact that the main author of the anonymously published *Miscegenation* pamphlet, David Goodman Croly, was born in County Cork before moving to America with his parents at an early age.

Heather Williams focuses on Breton-African American interactions and examines the case of Langston Hughes in Breton translations, translations that move away from some black American specificities toward what Vera Kutzinski called “inclusive abstractions”: generalizing strategies that would make it easier to apply Hughes’s works to Breton issues, too. Per Denez’s 1961 Breton variation upon a poem by Hughes takes this process one step further. Williams also gives room to the irony that the connection between Harlem Renaissance and Négritude writers came through Paris, through the francophone world that Breton radicals defined themselves against.

Michael Malouf opens with Claude McKay and a consideration of two phases of Jamaican modernism in order to approach the relationship of Derek Walcott’s *Sea at Dauphin* and J. W. Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* in the light of Natalie Melas’s term “dissimulation,” offering a broad political-historical contextualization as well as a comparative plot analysis that centers on differentiation rather than identity.

Justin Edwards also undertakes a comparative analysis that juxtaposes the work of the Guyanese writer Denis Williams – especially his *Other Leopards* – with that of his daughter Charlotte Williams, who grew up “half Welsh and half Afro-Caribbean” “in a small Welsh town.” Her insight that “belonging can’t just be plucked off a tree like a juicy mango” could also serve as epigraph for this special issue of *Comparative American Studies* that calls attention to the complex cross sections of linguistic and ancestral, place- and race-related factors in belonging, here exemplified in cases of Afro-Gaelic identities.

As Daniel Williams shows in his introduction, the essays collected in “The Celtic Nations and the African Americas” open new critical perspectives and complicate the all-too-frequent identification of Englishness and Britishness and call attention to the still too little-studied contacts between the black and the Gaelic world that came to some prominence when Paul Robeson starred in the film *Proud Valley* (1940). They invite more work on Gaelic and African American intellectuals and artists who, like the Yale University literary critic Hazel V. Carby or the Berlin-based film-maker Branwen Okpako, have Afro-Gaelic origins. Carby is the daughter of a Jamaican RAF-man father and a Welsh, Llantrisan-born mother in post-WWII Britain, spending every summer in Pontyclun. Her current work-in-progress, “Child of Empire: Racializing Subjects in Post WWII Britain,” is an autobiographic exploration. Okpako, who directed such films as *Brannigan* (1997), *Dreckfresser* (Dirt for Dinner, 2000) and *Tal der Ahnungslosen* (Valley of the Innocent, 2003), is the daughter of a Nigerian and a Welsh woman. In the imaginative documentary *Searching for Taid* (1997) she explored her brother Edore’s search for their Welsh grandfather, whom he never met, suggesting that an unsuspected grandpaternal legacy might explain her brother’s way of hitting a golf ball.

African-American poetic encounters with Celtic world date back quite far. The African American poet Albery Allson Whitman’s “Saville” (from *Not A Man and Yet a Man*) was first published in 1877. For example, Albery Whitman’s rhymed couplets present a long catalogue of refugees seeking a new home in the town of Saville, along the “waters of the Mississippi,” including “pale wanderers”

From old determined Brit[ai]n; morose Wales---
Where life's as stately as a ship with sails---
From Scotia's genial bourne of soul and song,
Where poverty, though simple, spurns the wrong,
Where love and labor meet fraternally;
Fair land of Burns and wand'ring minstrelsy;

.....

And from priest-ridden Erin's suppliant isle,
Escaping bands from Famine, Tyranny
And Ignorance, fled here for liberty.

The long listing of places of origins serves to build up a contrast with the existence of racial slavery, and this "evil seed," Albery Whitman argues, marks a crime that stains the American utopia, including its Welsh and Scots and Irish immigrants.

In 1965, nearly a century later, the San Francisco African American Beat poet Bob Kaufman (born 1946) published "Afterwards, They Shall Dance," a paean to artists, bohemians, saints, and singers from Saint Francis to Edgar Allan Poe and from Billie Holiday to Maxwell Bodenheim. In his stanza on Dylan Thomas, Bob Kaufman writes:

Dylan took the stone cat's nap at St. Vincent's, vaticaned
beer, no defense;
That poem shouted from his nun-filled room, an insult to the
brain, nerves,
Save now from Swansea, white horses, beer birds, snore
poems, Wales-bird.

Kaufman, as he does in other poems of his *Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness* (1965), sees a bond among all artists on edge, whether African American or Welsh.

The poem, "Europe Becomes Blacker," by Kingston-born Michelle Cliff (published in 1985 in her collection *The Land of Look Behind: Prose and Poetry*) takes the broad Afro-European approach that its title promises. Opening with an epigraph from James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*, "The world is white no longer, and it will never be

white again,” its free-verse lines sketch the outlines of a multiracial and racially mixed Europe going back to Hannibal, Pushkin, and Dumas père and continuing in the present:

Some of the blood in Europe runs right
back to Africa

. . . .

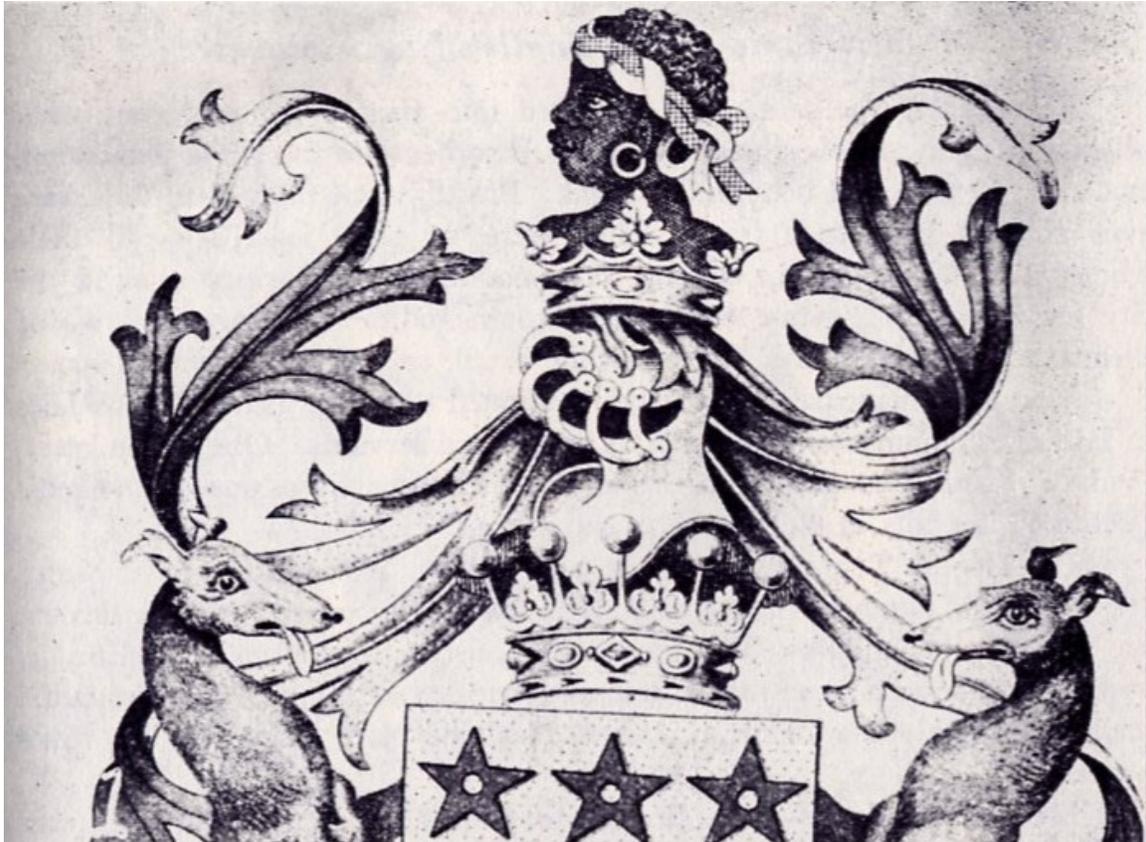
And now more colored folks are coming home to roost
And I'm not talking about Bricktop's [boîte]
Mabel Mercer---who swore she was Welsh
or nightspots like Le Joyeux Nègre
Those days are gone.

The Welsh reference, hidden in a *praeteritio* of what the poetic speaker says she is *not* talking about, is to cabaret singer Mabel Mercer who was born in Burton-upon-Trent—born to a British mother, an actress, and an African American jazz musician father and was raised by her kind grandmother in North Wales. Mabel Mercer became famous at Bricktop's in Paris in the 1930s and at New York nightclubs in the 1940s. Cliff's praise-song for the millions of crossover babies, Mischlinge, bambini di sangue misto that mark the blackening of Europe is tempered by sharp allusions to xenophobia, exploitation, and the Holocaust, most especially the genocide of the gypsies who were “dark people too.”

From Albery Whitman's national stain of slavery in the American dream of Welsh immigrants through Bob Kaufman's artistic transnationalism without racial boundaries that makes him sing to Dylan Thomas as well as to Billie Holiday, and finally to Michelle Cliff's ambivalently multiracial song to the blackening of Europe that includes Mabel Mercer, but even more so the nameless masses of colored laborers—these three poems may also suggest the transformation of African American poetry from a national to a global frame.

The Kingston-born (*1946) Michelle Cliff's perspective seems particularly close to that of a Jamaican American writer and journalist of an earlier generation who made it his life's work to study the mixed-race past and present of the world and who wrote about Hannibal, Dumas, Pushkin, and diasporic laborers in his volumes, also giving us a few

Celtic examples along the way. I mean J. A. [Joel Augustus] Rogers who was born in Negril, Jamaica, around 1883. He wrote for the Negro weekly, George Schuyler's *Pittsburgh Courier*, and for H. L. Mencken's *American Mercury*, and published such books as *Sex and Race: Negro-Caucasian Mixing in All Ages and All Lands* (1941ff.) and *Nature Knows No Color-Line* (1952). Rogers includes the Afro-Gaelic illustration of a Moor's head on the coat of arms of the Earl of Drogheda (*Sex and Race*, vol. 1, 203).



In his overviews of race-mixing around the globe, writings that were pointedly targeted against segregationist phobias and ideologies in the United States, Rogers repeatedly mentions Black-Welsh relations. In volume I of *Sex and Race: Negro-Caucasian Mixing in All Ages and All Lands* (St. Petersburg, FL: Helga M. Rogers, ninth ed., repr. 1967) he specifically raises the question what happened to all the Africans who were imported to the British Isles, since probably only around 350 were ever shipped back to Africa (in 1787, with their white wives). His answer was that they intermarried and settled in places like the “largest Negro district” in Cardiff. In *Nature Knows No Color-Line* (first

published in 1952) he states that the Negro colony there dates back to 1850.¹ Among the sources Rogers quotes is a letter by Agatha Pemba to the London *Spectator* (July 3, 1926) on the question of how mixed couples fared in the British Isles. Pemba worried that often half or more than half the crew of a ship are blacks and that on shore, these black sailors “have nowhere to go, any more than white seamen who are landed far from their homes. (It is one of the crying scandals of our port-towns that there is no place for seamen to go but the public-house, except such institutions as the “Flying Angel” or the “Sailors’ Rest,” and there are men who object to such places.)” Yet Pemba also reports having once asked a gentle refined woman with three children of various shades of color, all with woolly hair, how she could have brought herself to marry a black man, and what sort of future she expected for the children, and this was her answer: “They make good husbands these men. They are so thankful to us women for marrying them that they treat us like queens; they give us plenty of money; they don’t drink; they are good to the children; the pay is regular while they are away, and they always come back to us. There’s many a woman with a white husband worse off. The children? Well, there are such a lot of them now that nobody seems to think much about it; they don’t mind them in the schools. They won’t hurt.” That, apparently, was the prevailing attitude in those South Welsh ports; the writer is unable to speak as to others. People did not seem to think much about it.²

Rogers seconds this view with his comment that the English Negroes’ “mulatto children looked healthy and on Sundays were well-dressed according to their class. In Cardiff, for instance, the only wrecks I saw in the Negro neighborhood, were white men.”³ Yet Rogers also mentions the bloody anti-black race riots of 1919: “Race riots swept East London, Cardiff, Liverpool, South Shields, Hull and elsewhere, precisely as they swept the United States about the same time.”⁴

¹ J. A. Rogers, *Nature Knows No Color-Line: Research into the Negro Ancestry in the White Race* (© 1952; St. Petersburg, FL: Helga M. Rogers, 3rd ed., repr., 1980), 183.

² Pemba, “Negroes in British Ports,” letter to the London *Spectator* (July 3, 1926); quoted, with slight changes, in Rogers, 213

³ J. A. Rogers, “Race-Mixing in the British Isles,” 213.

⁴ J.A. Rogers, “The American Negro in Europe” from *American Mercury* (May, 1930): 6.

In his 1930 report to Mencken's *American Mercury*, J. A. Rogers gave his fullest account of black and mixed-race Cardiff:

The largest Negro settlement in the United Kingdom, perhaps in Europe, is at Cardiff. It is an evil-looking dump, with ugly two-story cottages and alleys full of refuse, which bears the appropriate name of Tiger Bay. This name, it is said, came from the terrible fights that used to take place there between seamen. The regular Negro population is about 4,000, with a floating one of several thousand more. This figure includes another settlement nearby, named Barry. . . . Negroes were living in Cardiff before the coming of the steamship, and some now there have been there for more than fifty years. Most of the men have white wives; the rest, colored ones who were born there of white mothers. There are apparently no foreign colored women. . . .

The white women themselves are vigorous in defense of their black husbands and go waspishly after those who attack them. . . . They take great interest in their men's activities, and at the Marcus Garvey hall in the East End of London, they shouted the "Back to Africa!" battlecry as enthusiastically as the men. Indeed, the London leader of the Garvey movement was himself married to a white woman.

[A]t . . . Tiger Bay there is no segregation. White and colored families live in the same cottages. Children are plentiful, all the colored ones being mulattoes. . . . There are about 600 such colored children. In one street of three blocks—Nelson street—there are seventy-two, one man alone having twelve. . . . There is little opportunity for these children, even when they win scholarships and are taught grades. The boys usually end by going to sea, while the girls go into domestic service, marry, or go on the stage. There are three groups among the Negroes and hostilities between them are perhaps sharper than the feelings of prejudiced whites towards them. These classes are, those from the West Indies, who are usually the more educated; the Christian Africans, who come from West Africa, and make up with shrewdness for what they lack in education; and the Mohammedans, who came mostly from East Africa and that part of Asia which lies around the Red Sea. . . . Nevertheless, during the Cardiff riots, all of these

blacks stood solidly together and defied the white men to come in, with the result that they suffered less than elsewhere. Most of the Negroes killed or wounded were outside the Black Belt at the time.⁵

In the use Rogers makes of this article in his book *Sex and Race*, he specifically mentions meeting the rich West African with the race horse.⁶ Since Rogers spent much time, and at least three consecutive years (starting in 1927) researching interracialism in Europe⁷, a future biographer of Rogers might come across more sources for Rogers' personal encounters with some of the inhabitants of Cardiff's Butetown.

Although Raymond Williams warned that "specific local features" could make some political movements "attract and be corrupted by a falsely inward-looking, regressive, and complacent localism," he stressed that in "late capitalist societies some of the most powerful campaigns begin from specific unabsorbed (and therefore necessarily marginal) experiences and situations." It is for this reason, Williams argued in his 1971 essay "Who Speaks for Wales?" (the opening piece of Raymond Williams's writing on Wales that Daniel Williams edited under the same general title): "Black Power in the United States, civil rights in Ulster, the language in Wales, are experiences comparable in this respect to the student movement and to women's liberation. In their early stages these campaigns tend to stress as absolutes those local experiences which are of course authentic and yet most important as indices of the crisis of the wider society."⁸ Looking at meetings of African American and European intellectuals would hold the promise of bringing different localisms (stressed as if they were "absolutes") together, thus drawing out larger issues of pacifist and anti-racist campaigns, of utopian moments among intellectuals against the background of fascist and Stalinist ideologies in the twentieth century. One

⁵ J.A. Rogers, "The American Negro in Europe," *American Mercury* (May, 1930): 8-9.

⁶ J. A. Rogers, "Race-Mixing in the British Isles," *Sex and Race: Negro-Caucasian Mixing in All Ages and All Lands* vol. 1 (© 1941; St. Petersburg, FL: Helga M. Rogers, ninth ed., repr. 1967), 204. Here he writes: "The richest Negro **I met** in Cardiff was a West African, a former seaman. He owned several houses, lived in a beautifully furnished home, had one of the finest race-horses in England, and owns a prize Alsatian dog, but could neither read nor write. His five mulatto daughters are well educated and used to spend their holidays on the Riviera."

⁷ See Darryl Pinckney, "J. A. Rogers," *Out There: Mavericks of Black Literature* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2002), 1-53, here 23.

⁸ Raymond Williams, *Who Speaks for Wales? Nation, Culture, Identity*, ed. Daniel Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 4.

may look forward to much exciting work to emerge from further examinations of the black and Celtic worlds.

Werner Sollors