

‘Me zo bet sklav’: African Americans and Breton Literature

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Theories of colonialism, and a people’s sense of themselves as having been colonized, derive from analogies. Here the use made of the African American experience in Breton literature is explored, making comparison with other international reference points in Breton literature. First I trace what I call an ‘international outlook’ in Breton culture, before turning to translation, and the specific example of translations into Breton of poems by Langston Hughes. This leads to a discussion of the Parisian reception of Harlem writing, of *négritude*, and of the issue of poetic language in its connection with political oppression. Finally I suggest some ways in which Brittany’s relationship with African American writing might be considered distinctive.

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Since its renaissance in the early twentieth century, Breton-language culture has only ever been the affair of a small minority.¹ Although there is no doubting the ambition and energy of the literature produced by the *Gwalarn* school and its heirs, their journals were often short-lived, their distribution limited, and print-runs small.² It may seem paradoxical to some that this same culture has been characterized by a strikingly international outlook. Breton writers looked beyond their small audience to world literature — be it canonical or that produced by other lesser-known cultures — both for inspiration and in terms of ambition. This was partly a deliberate avoidance of subject-matter that had become cliché since the nineteenth-century cultural revival (*le bretonisme*), and partly a way of offering alternatives to French culture and language as the filter through which Bretons apprehended the wider world. We cannot understand the culture of modern Brittany without taking account of its relationship with the French state, and especially of the complex relationship between Brittany’s two languages. Recent attempts at thinking of Brittany in postcolonial terms have shown the value of comparative approaches.

The principles and insights of contemporary translation studies and postcolonial literary studies have only very recently begun to be applied to Brittany, and much

later than in the case of other Celtic cultures such as Ireland, Scotland and Wales. This is in part because postcolonial literary criticism is largely an Anglophone phenomenon that has been slow to give serious attention to French-language material, and this despite relying heavily on French theory (Forsdick and Murphy, 2003: 1–14). Also, Celtic cultures were originally excluded from postcolonial studies as a result of a view made manifest in this oft-quoted statement from a seminal work in the field: 'While it is possible to argue that these societies were the first victims of English expansion, their subsequent complicity in the British imperial enterprise makes it difficult for colonized peoples outside Britain to accept their identity as post-colonial' (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1989: 33). However, some thought-provoking work on the Celtic peripheries of Europe, now stretching back some decades, has been achieved on the margins of mainstream postcolonial theory. Although it is generally accepted that Ireland led the way in the application of postcolonialism to the Celtic 'internal colonies' of the British Isles, McCormack's influential description of the discourse inaugurated by Ernest Renan (in France) and Matthew Arnold (in Britain) as 'Celticism' had been anticipated in Ned Thomas's innovative writings on Wales (Thomas, 1984. McCormack, 1985: 220). This approach has been furthered in the influential work of Declan Kiberd, for instance in his *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (1996), by M. Wynn Thomas in his comparative work re-reading the two literatures of Wales through the lens of postcolonial criticism and translation studies (Thomas, 1999), and by Robert Crawford in his seminal study of Scottish literature, *Devolving English Literature* (1992). Although postcolonial readings of Ireland, Scotland and Wales have proliferated since 2000, postcolonial criticism has only very recently begun to have an impact on the study of the literatures of Brittany, notably in the work of critics at the *Centre d'Études des Littératures et Civilisations Francophones* at the University of Rennes, who have adapted the framework to the particular bicultural situation in modern Brittany, and put it in parallel with other better-publicized examples of 'métissage', such as the Maghreb and Québec. 'Métissage', or hybridity, is a key concept in the pioneering analyses of Francophone Breton works that have appeared in the centre's journal *Plurial*, and also in book-length studies by its most prolific contributors.

Further comparativist work is required. On one level this could involve tracing links between Brittany and other cultures; asking what its non-domestic reference points tell us about a literature, and perhaps searching for biographical details of real connections, and evidence of what used to confidently be called literary influence. On another level, this could mean studying different literary movements across the globe, and comparing their issues and individual aims at a given point in history, to see what light this might throw on one particular lesser-studied literature. Rather than ask simply whether any comparison between Brittany's culture or political struggle and that of African Americans is legitimate, my aim in this article is to discuss the use made of Black American writing as a reference point in an emergent, minority literature in the twentieth century. In addressing this question, comparison with other international reference points in Breton literature is made. First I trace what I call an 'international outlook' in Breton culture, before turning to translation, and the specific example of translations into Breton of Langston Hughes. This leads to a discussion of the Parisian reception of Harlem writing, of *négritude*, and of the issue of poetic language in its connection with political oppression. Finally I suggest some

ways in which Brittany's relationship with African American writing might be considered distinctive. My focus throughout is on literary issues rather than the politics of the Breton movement.

Breton internationalism

The 'international outlook' of the modern Breton movement can be traced to the early nineteenth century, and the birth of Celtic Studies as a discipline, in the wake of European Romanticism. In the French context of a new Republic (following the Revolution of 1789), the past had to be reinterpreted for the new and equal citizens. Celts came into favour since they were considered the true origins of the people ('le peuple') whereas the Franks were tainted by association with the aristocracy and the *ancien régime*. The time was ripe for the founding of the 'Académie celtique' in 1805 under Napoleon Bonaparte, and the popularization of the slogan 'nos ancêtres les Gaulois' ['our ancestors the Gauls']. At this time Breton enthusiasts — linguists, antiquarians and poets — looked to other Celtic countries, particularly Wales, thanks to the similarity of the languages and the wealth of manuscripts that had survived in Wales. Key points of contact include Hersart de La Villemarqué's visit to Wales in 1838, and his subsequent use of Welsh literature in his writing, and Ernest Renan's similar use of Welsh literature in his landmark essay 'La poésie des races celtiques' (1854). By the twentieth century Bretons looked to their fellow Celts in a different way, as the Breton movement became more explicitly politicized. From the early twentieth century Ireland was an inspiration. The years following the second world war were extremely difficult for Breton cultural and political nationalists, because of the collaboration of a small number of Breton nationalists with the German invaders.³ Writer Roparz Hemon, for example, was convicted of the new crime of 'indignité nationale',⁴ and then exiled in Dublin, from where he continued to publish work in all genres, and fire up his fellow Bretons. Others at this difficult time turned their sights towards Wales, some travelling and even settling there, such as François Jaffrennou ('Taldir') and J. R. F. Piette ('Arzel Even'). This is reflected in the richness of the Breton collection at the National Library of Wales.

In the course of the twentieth century the Breton movement also looked more and more to other oppressed or small nations and peoples. For obvious political reasons, they were especially sensitive to other cultures that were suffering oppression at the hands of the French State, be this economic, cultural or linguistic. An anti-colonial strain runs through the Breton movement, and can be traced through contributions to its key publications. For instance in 1935 and 1936 *Breiz atao* ['Brittany forever'], the journal of the Breton autonomous movement, condemns French attitudes towards Ethiopia (*Breiz atao* 231, 1935), and questions the alleged 'savagery' of Ethiopians (*Breiz atao* 242, 1936). In 1936 it urges its Breton readers not to take up the French Government's offer of farms in Algeria (*Breiz atao* 264, 1936), and in 1937 it condemns the policies of Blum in North Africa (*Breiz atao* 273, 1937). In *Gwalarn*, the literary supplement to *Breiz atao*, we see France referred to as cultural enemy as well as a political and administrative one, and detect the beginnings of the discourse of 'internal colonialism'. By the 1960s this topic had become key, and *Al Liamm* ['The Link'], the journal that essentially took over from *Gwalarn* in 1945, devotes much attention to Africa, especially Algeria, as in an important piece by Yann-Ber Piriou,

'Barzhed er Gorventenn' ['Poets of the Storm'] (1961), which directly compares Breton and Algerian problems, and contains translation into Breton of poems of combat by Herri Krea, Hocine Bouhazer, Malek Haddad and Ferid. Further translations of African poetry in *Al Liamm* include 'Barzhonegou Berber' [Berber poems] by Erwan Evenou and others (1969), 'Kan ar Roeñverien', from Birago Diop's 'Le Chant des rameurs' by Yann Talbot (1969), 'Me kanin Afrika', from Bernard Dadié's 'Chanter l'Afrique' by Yann Talbot 143 (1970), and 'Kan da Afrika', from Dadié, again by Yann Talbot (1971). The Ivorian Dadié was undoubtedly selected for reasons of political as well as literary empathy, as he had been detained for 16 months for taking part in demonstrations opposing French colonial government. The same is probably true of Erwan Evenou's article 'Alda Do Espirito Santo, Barzhez Afrikat' (*Al Liamm*, 1967), as the verse of this poet from Sao Tomé and Príncipe, an island in the Gulf of Guinea, was considered subversive and dangerous by the Portuguese, and she had been imprisoned and tortured after protesting against a massacre in 1953.

Alongside these literary pieces we find references to Algeria in particular in the journalistic 'Notennou' ['notes'] section of *Al Liamm*, which provides a round-up of news that will interest those devoted to the Breton cause. For instance a short piece on Breton radio 'Ar radio e Breizh' [Radio in Brittany] (1962) that compares the status of Breton and Arabic on the radio, a discussion of the place of Arabic in the French education system 'Ar Yezhou estren e skoliou Bro-C'hall hag er vachelouriezh' [foreign languages in French schools and in the baccalauréat] (1964), a report on the plans of the Algerian minister for education 'Kaset e vezo an arabekaat da benn en Aljeria' ['A policy of Arabization will be pursued in Algeria'] (1966), and a piece on the cultural decolonization of Algeria 'Prederiadennoù a-zivout Didrevaderezh Sevenadurel Aljeria' ['Thoughts on the cultural decolonization of Algeria'] (1967). *Al Liamm* also contains an important article by Pêr Denez on the idea and theory of a colonized writer, 'Ar skrivager en ur vro drevadennet' ['The writer in a colonized country'] (1970). A feeling of solidarity with other oppressed minorities reached a peak in Brittany in the 1970s, as we see in a work such as Yann-Ber Piriou's bilingual collection *Défense de cracher par terre et de parler breton: poèmes de combat* (1971). Here Piriou compares the new generation of Breton poets with Algerians who have lost their mother tongue, and Basques, and he dedicates the work: 'aux Africains et aux Antillais qui savent ce qu'"être colonisé" veut dire; aux Français; aux Occitans, aux Catalans; aux Basques de l'Hexagone' ['to the Africans and Antillais who know the meaning of "being colonized"; to the French, the Occitans, the Catalans, the Basques of mainland France'] (Piriou, 1971: 36). Such statements of solidarity, and the very act of translation, allowed the mapping of political allegiances.

Translating Black into Breton

African American writing also has a presence in Breton-language culture. There is a small number of articles, for instance a translation of an article by Langston Hughes 'Ar vorianed e lennegezh hag arzoù an USA' ['Blacks in the literature and arts of the USA'] was published in *Al Liamm* in (1951), and later the same journal published a more general non-literary discussion of cultural diversity in the United States: 'An Indianed er Stadoù —Unanet' ['Indians in the United States'] (1972); *Ar Bed Keltiek* (a monthly established in 1951) carried an article comparing the USA and the UK 'Emrenerezh d'ar Vorianed?' ['Autonomy for Blacks?'] (1968). However there is

one privileged reference point among African American writers, and that is the poet Langston Hughes, who is translated or adapted by more than one Breton writer, and who inspired three separate pieces in one issue of *Al Liamm* from 1951. The first is ‘Kanaouenn evit ar plac’h du’, a translation by Ronan Huon of Hughes’s ‘Song for a Dark Girl’. The second ‘Barzhonegoù Amerika du’ [‘Poems of Black America’], a tri-partite poem translated or adapted by Ronan Huon (*Al Liamm* 24, 1951: 9), and the third ‘Ar vorianed e lennegezh hag arzoù an USA’ [Blacks in literature and the arts in the USA], the article by Hughes mentioned above and translated by Pêr Denez (*Al Liamm* 24, 1951: 12).

Ronan Huon was an English teacher, and was thus easily able to look beyond Francophone Black writing for inspiration. He, like many other Breton writers at the time, also translated into Breton from other languages, as translation was a key part of the Breton movement’s strategy, especially from *Gwalarn* onwards (Sven-Myer, 1998), of stretching the resources of Breton in order to produce a literature of and for the modern world. *Al Liamm* contains translations from Welsh, English, Russian, German and French, as well as other languages. The article translated by Denez is a straightforwardly political piece, which surveys the contribution of black people to cultural life in the US, and ends by condemning the US for failing to be a democracy for all: ‘na vezo ket Amerika un demokratelezh evit an holl’ (*Al Liamm*, 1951: 15). The poem chosen by Huon, ‘Kanaouenn evit ur plac’h du’, is likewise political, but at the same time it belongs to the genre of love poetry, and has a private, meditative quality.

Kanaouenn evit ur plac’h du

Du-hont er Su en Dixie

(ra dorro ar galon din-me)

o deus drouget va c’haredig yaouank du

ouzh ur wezenn kroazhent.

Du-hont er Su en Dixie

(korf blonseg uhel en aer)

’m eus goulennet gant an aotrou Jezuz gwenn

da betra eta e servije ar bedenn.

Du-hont er Su en Dixie

(ra dorro ar galon din-me)

ar garantez zo ur skeud noaz

war ur wezenn garv ha noaz. (*Al Liamm* 24, 1951: 8)

Song for a Dark Girl

Way Down South in Dixie

(Break the heart of me)

They hung my black young lover

To a cross roads tree.

Way Down South in Dixie
 (Bruised body high in air)
 I asked the white Lord Jesus
 What was the use of prayer.

Way Down South in Dixie
 (Break the heart of me)

Love is a naked shadow

On a gnarled and naked tree. (Rampersad and Roessel, 1996: 104)

The issue of colour is of course central, with Dark becoming 'Du' ('black'), and Jesus being 'gwenn' ('white'), perhaps recalling the symbol of the Breton struggle, the 'Gwenn-ha-du' of Brittany's flag. Religious hypocrisy is also tied to the politics of colour, with Jesus being white, and prayer being of no use. There is also a more abstract 'them' and 'me' dynamic ('they' / 'o deus' line 3), and a sense of disillusionment and loss that would have universal appeal. This is what Kutzinski, in a similar context, has called 'inclusive abstractions': the kind of ideas that she argues in her study of the reframing of Hughes's poems as they pass from English to Latin American Spanish might be preferred by translators over material that is specifically black (Kutzinski, 2006: 555). The centrality of the natural imagery in this poem would have a special resonance for Bretons, as the negative adjectives 'gnarled' and 'naked' qualifying 'tree' provide the opportunity for a Breton writer to undermine the pastoral imagery of Bretonness that had become cliché in the nineteenth century and that so many twentieth-century poets sought to subvert.

In the case of a second poem in the same issue of *Al Liamm* from 1951, 'Barzhonegoù Amerika du', it is not clear from the way that the Breton poem is presented whether it is a translation or an original poem by Ronan Huon. It is less explicitly political, but uses the rhythm and repetition familiar from Hughes's work in its meditation on the whistle of a goods train. Much later in 1978, the same journal featured 'Kan ar glav e miz Ebrel', a translation by Yann-Ber Piriou of Hughes's 'April Rain Song'.

Kan ar glav e miz Ebrel

Laoskit ar glav da bokat deoc'h

Laoskit ar glav da bavata war ho penn gant takadennoù arc'hantet

Laoskit ar glav da ganan deoc'h ul luskellerez

Ar glav a ra poullou sioul war ribl an hent

Ar glav a lak rinieroù bihan da redek en toufleziou

Ar glav a c'hoari ur son da gouskat war ho toenn d'an noz

Ha karout a ran ar glav. (*Al Liamm* 189, 1978: 231)

April Rain Song

Let the rain kiss you.

Let the rain beat upon your head with silver liquid drops.

Let the rain sing you a lullaby.

The rain makes still pools on the sidewalk.

The rain makes running pools in the gutter.

The rain plays a little sleep-song on our roof at night —

And I love the rain. (Rampersad and Roessel, 1996: 597)

This is no political tract, but we can see the particular appeal to Bretons once again in the focus on nature and the elements, accompanied by some ‘inclusive abstractions’. The sample of poems translated into Breton is rather too small for us to be able to draw meaningful conclusions about the possible agendas of the Breton writers who translated them. However, we can still usefully keep in mind the question that Kutzinski has asked in the case of Latin America, whether the translators are appropriating poems ‘for their own nationalist agendas rather than using them to spread the seeds of “black” political awareness’ (Kutzinski, 2006: 551). Of course the same question can be adapted to Bretons’ appropriations of poems belonging to other oppressed peoples.

The most explicitly political of the pieces connected to African American writing is not a translation, but is presented as having been inspired by Hughes: ‘Negro song’ by Pêr Denez, is written ‘in the style of Langston Hughes’.⁵

Negro Song

E doare Langston Hughes

Me zo Breizhad.

Me zo bet sklav.

Galeour ez on bet e bagoù ar Roue Loeiz.
Toulllet em eus hentoù, douget va samm a vein,
Savet em eus, en o c’hêrbenn, o falezioù.

Me zo bet soudard.

Va obidou em eus kanet e lannegi Planwour.
Breinet em eus en erc’hegi Rusia,
Breinet em eus e rizegi Hanoi,
Tufet va gwad e fozioù pri Verdun.
Lazhet ’m eus ar re zu
Ha distrujet an doueed a azeulent.

Me zo bet mevel.

Mousc’hoarzh ar re faezhet em eus bet o servij.
Desket em eus d’an dud komz evel va mistri.
Ruzet em eus va zreid war bavezioù Pariz.

Ha graet em eus dezho c’hoarzhin

Rak me zo bet farouell.

Me zo bet merzher.

Per Denez (Al Liamm 87, 1961: 224).

Negro Song

In the manner of Langston Hughes

I am Breton.

I’ve been a slave

I have been a galley slave on King Louis’s ships
Dug roads, carried my load of stones,
And built, in their capital, their palaces.

I've been a soldier
 My funeral sung on the moors of Planwour
 I have rotted in the snowfields of Russia
 Rotted in the paddy-fields of Hanoi
 Coughed blood in the mud of the Verdun trenches
 I have killed blacks
 And destroyed the gods they worshipped.

I've been a servant
 I have worn the smile of the defeated whilst serving
 I have taught people to speak like my masters
 I have dragged my feet along the pavements of Paris.

And I made them laugh
 As I have been a minstrel

I've been a martyr.

Per Denez

Formally, the poem is a Breton variation on Hughes's early poem 'Negro', first published in *The Crisis* in January 1922. The poem begins:

I am a Negro
 Black as the night is black,
 Black like the depths of my Africa.

I've been a slave:
 Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean.
 I brushed the boots of Washington. (Rampersad and Roessel, 1996: 24)

While Denez's 'me zo Breizhad' ('I am Breton') leads inexorably through slavery, war and ridicule to 'Me zo bet merzher' ('I have been a martyr'), Hughes proceeds to describe the Negro's oppression as worker, and creativity as singer, before concluding:

I've been a victim:
 The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.
 They lynch me still in Mississippi.

I am a Negro:
 Black as the night is black,
 Black like the depths of my Africa.

While clearly suggesting that the Breton's position in France is comparable to that of the Negro in America, Denez does not ignore the Breton role in colonization. Hughes's reference to Belgian atrocities in the Congo thus exists in dialogue with Denez's reference to the 'killing of blacks', but the suggestion is that it is their servitude to the French state has lead Bretons to act as imperialists. The idea of the mask, of hiding one's own identity in order to assimilate is clearly being evoked here by Denez as he describes the Breton as a 'minstrel' who makes his masters laugh. While Hughes does not make use of the trope of minstrelsy in 'Negro' he does so elsewhere in his poetry with, for example, the speaker opening his mouth to laugh in the face

of his social alienation in 'Homesick Blues' (72), the 'Minstrel Man' (61) noting that his mouth, which is 'wide with laughter' hides an 'inner cry' of 'pain', 'The Jester' who describes himself as 'The dumb clown of the world / The booted, booted fool of silly men' (56–7), and most interestingly in the present context the 'Black Pierrot' whose 'once gay-colored soul' has 'shrunk like a balloon without air' (31). Hughes's 'Black Pierrot', which is written in the same form as 'Negro', begins:

I am a black Pierrot:
 She did not love me,
 So I crept away into the night
 And the night was black, too. (31)

The Pierrot was a stock character of *Commedia dell'Arte*, the French variant of the Italian Pedrolino. His character was that of the sad clown, pining for love of Columbine, who inevitably breaks his heart and leaves him for Harlequin. What is perhaps most significant here is that the Pierrot would usually have a face covered in flour to distinguish him from the 'blackface' of the cunning Harlequin (Rampersad and Roessel, 1995: 622). This process of masking may be connected imagistically in Hughes's poetry to the tradition of blackface minstrelsy in which facial greasepaint or burnt cork was used to darken the skin in a tradition of impersonation that was fundamentally based on trivializing black aspirations to full citizenship, and offered white travesties and imitations of black culture.⁶ The idea of masking, of hiding one's true feelings through socially acceptable behaviour is a reiterated theme of the poems in Hughes's *The Weary Blues*, and may be considered here as a metaphor for the process of translation itself. If Hughes draws on a French theatrical convention to comment on the African American experience, Denez may be seen to wear the African American mask as means of distinguishing his own Breton identity from that of the dominant French culture. The ambivalences and tensions inherent in any process of cultural appropriation may thus be seen embodied in the figures of the 'Black Pierrot' and the 'Breton minstrel'.

Britanny, négritude and decolonization

While drawing on some of the imagery of Hughes's work, Denez's poem of 1961 has a stronger political edge than Hughes's poem of the 1920s, and is closer to the African American poetry of the politicized 1960s than to the cultural emphasis that was characteristic of the Harlem Renaissance. The notion of a minority being forced to act in a way that is antithetical to its own interests is prevalent in the African American poetry of the 1960s as in Nikki Giovanni's controversial 'The True Import of Present Dialogue: Black vs Negro', where she notes that the 'Negro' kills for 'UN & NATO & SEATO & US', polices Europe and commits atrocities in Vietnam, while never fighting for 'BLACK' (Randall, 1971: 318). In his references to Verdun and Vietnam, Denez may be seen to use the form of Hughes's early poetry to express sentiments that are closer to those of a later generation. Indeed, this poem, published in 1961, is an early example of the discourse that the self-styled Breton 'poets of decolonization' were soon to make their own. Translations and discussions of Francophone African poets, and more general articles about Algeria in particular, reach a peak in Brittany

in the late 1960s, and the discourse of 'internal colonialism' is fine tuned in the 1970s (Williams, 2003). However, it remains the case that the Breton-language journals invariably give more attention to the political and cultural struggles of fellow Celts, or to other countries oppressed by France, than to African America.

Paradoxically, the Bretons' awareness of African American writing — just like their awareness of Francophone African writing — very probably came via Paris, the very centre of the Frenchness that symbolized their oppression. It seems likely, though, that any actual translation would have been undertaken directly from English, and it is worth noting that Ronan Huon's translations of Hughes published in 1951 pre-date Jean Wagner's landmark book *Les Poètes nègres des Etats-unis* by over a decade. The connections between the Harlem Renaissance and Paris are of course close ones. Black Americans — rightly or wrongly — idealized France as a whole (Fabre, 1991: 2), and were lured by Paris in particular. Langston Hughes was himself attracted to the capital, and lived off the Boulevard de Clichy in 1923, working as a 'chasseur' at a club, and later in the kitchens (Rampersad, 1986: 83; Fabre, 1991: 64). The work of Black Americans appeared in French translation in Paris, for instance in *La Dépêche Africaine*, and *Europe* (Edwards, 2001: 293; Fabre, 2001: 321). In 1931 the *Revue du Monde Noir*, a bilingual French-English publication began, and featured Hughes's 'I, Too' in its third issue. It was around this time, also in Paris, that *négritude* — a movement of Francophone Black writers — crystallized; a single issue of *Légitime Défense* (1932) is often considered to mark the first burgeoning of *négritude* in a metropolitan context (Edwards, 2001: 304). It is linked to the name Léopold Sédar Senghor more than to any other; Senghor was certainly familiar with American writers, and probably first learnt about Harlem at the apartment of Achilles, a West Indian in Paris, who had been professor in the US (Vaillant, 91). Senghor probably first read new black American poetry in the bilingual *Revue du Monde Noir*, as did Aimé Césaire. Senghor went on to translate Hughes in 1945, and was also responsible for an anthology *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (1948), which included the famous preface 'Orphée noir' by Jean-Paul Sartre, which is often thought to be the first sustained attempt to theorize the phenomenon of black writing. The stature of a writer such as Sartre certainly raised awareness, and brought the issue into the mainstream of French literature. It is worth remembering that this was shortly before the 1951 edition of *Al Liamm* that contained a critical mass of material indebted to Langston Hughes.

The Bretons would have been more conscious than most of the irony inherent in *négritude*, and indeed in the African Americans' attitudes towards France. Although Paris was fêted by some as a 'gateway to Africa', it had nevertheless been the centre of French colonial expansion (Edwards, 2001: 291). *Négritude* has been criticized for being 'essentialist' or complicit with Eurocentric attitudes, and individuals such as Senghor — the first African in the Académie française (1984), educated in Paris, immersed in the French literary tradition, considered neither French nor African. But as I have suggested, *négritude* has a strong presence in Breton cultural consciousness, with the theorists of 'Francophone Breton literature' in the 1970s relying on it heavily (Williams, 2003). Both Black American and *négritude* had to work out their relationship with the language of the oppressor — English and French, respectively. In Brittany, a later generation of poets and theorists in the 1960s and 1970s grappled

with this problem, against the political backdrop of 'internal colonialism'. At this time we find 'Black writing' used as a powerful metaphor rather than as material for translation into Breton. Many of the poets in the 1970s had learnt Breton as a second language, and felt that they had been deprived of their mother tongue. The so-called 'poets of decolonization' — Christian Keginer, Paul Keineg, Yann-Ber Piriou and others — felt that their relationship with the French language, the language of the oppressor, was similar to that of the African American writer's relationship with English. Christian Keginer describes Breton poetry of French expression as necessarily political, and revolutionary, in a trenchant piece on the definition of French-language Breton literature.

Il ne suffit pas pour cela qu'il y ait en Bretagne des poètes s'exprimant en français. Il faut encore que ces poètes aient conscience de parler breton, même dans une langue étrangère imposée ou non comme, par exemple, le français; pour cela, une saisie politique de l'existence d'un peuple breton est nécessaire, tout comme, dans la même situation, le poète noir qui écrit en français doit saisir qu'il est Noir pour cesser d'écrire dans la langue française, et parler enfin dans la langue noire, même si c'est avec des mots français. [...] On comprend donc qu'il est inutile d'ajouter le mot révolutionnaire à l'expression poésie bretonne de langue français qui signifie, par le caractère subversif de sa seule existence: poésie révolutionnaire' (Keginer 1972, 69).

[It is not enough for there to be in Brittany poets who express themselves in French. These poets must be conscious of speaking Breton, even in an imposed foreign language such as French; to this end a political consciousness of the existence of the Breton people is necessary, just as, in the same situation, the black writer who writes in French must be conscious that he is Black so as to stop writing in the French language, and to write at last in black language, even while using French words [...]. Thus we see that there is no need to add the word revolutionary to the phrase French-language Breton poetry, because since its very existence is subversive, it already means: revolutionary poetry]

Jean-Paul Sartre had asked a similar question as early as 1948, in his essay 'Orphée noir', mentioned above. Here Sartre asked why Black Francophone writing was the only great revolutionary poetry, but his text contains nothing of the violence that we see in this extract from Keginer, and that characterizes the Breton rhetoric a generation later.

Breton culture may be distinguished from those of the other Celtic countries when it comes to relations with African Americans because Brittany turns naturally to Africa, the Antilles and other parts of the French empire because of its different colonial experience. Bretons have a special interest in Francophone writers partly because they feel united by a common enemy, but these writers are also more often referred to by Bretons for the practical reason that they now — like it or not — share a language. Breton culture is also different to the cultures of other Celtic nations due to the huge impact of the Algerian war on Brittany, and indeed on France. It has been called a watershed in the Breton movement (Favereau: 72), and is given prominence in a key piece by Marc Gontard on the very notion of French-language Breton writing, where he argues that the war metaphorically reveals to Brittany its own colonial status (Gontard, 1995: 26), as well as in a mission-statement pamphlet, published by the Union Démocratique Bretonne in 1972: *Bretagne=colonie*. This tract

explains that the UDB was founded in 1964 'par un groupe de jeunes qui avaient pris conscience, à la lumière de la guerre d'Algérie et des premières manifestations populaires, du malaise breton, de la situation coloniale de la Bretagne au sein de l'Etat français', p. 105 ['by a group of young people who had become conscious, in the light of the Algerian war and the first popular protests, of the Breton malaise, of the colonial situation of Brittany within the French State']. It further explains how the search for a democratic solution to the Algerian problem led them to a full realization of the colonial situation of the Bretons, and a commitment to socialism.

Conclusion

African Americans and their culture and literature are, for Breton writers, just one international point of reference in a long list. Langston Hughes certainly stands out, but the number of translations and references are small. The Bretons' main interest seems to be in Africans who have been oppressed by France's colonial ambitions. Five Celtic cultures were oppressed by an English-speaking neighbour, and one — Brittany — was oppressed by France, thus making the colonial experience (both external and internal) very different. A key example is the way that the Algerian war has coloured Breton political life, identity and literature. This difference questions the premise of looking at 'the Celts' as a block, and reminds us that although there are important points of convergence in the histories of the various Celtic cultures, examining the points of divergence is equally important. However, theories of colonialism, and a people's sense of themselves as having been colonized, derive from the process of making analogies. I hope to have indicated that the way in which African American texts were made to speak to the Breton experience is a minor, but revealing, chapter in that process.

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Notes

¹ I am extremely grateful to Gwenno Piette and Rhisiart Hincks for their expert help with the Breton language, and to Daniel Williams for his guidance and knowledge of Langston Hughes's work.

² *Gwalarn* ('Northwesterly') was a Breton language literary journal of which 166 issues (numbered from 0 to 165) appeared between 1925 and May 1944. For an overview in English, see William Calin, *Minority Literatures and Modernism: Scots, Breton, and Occitan, 1920–1990* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), or Per Denez, 'Modern Breton Literature', in *Literature in Celtic Countries*, ed. by J. E. Caerwyn Williams [Taliesin Congress

Lectures] (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1971), pp.113–36. In French the most authoritative recent work is Francis Favereau, *Anthologie de la littérature bretonne au XXe siècle: Breiz Atao et les autres en littérature 1919/1944*, vol. 2 (Morlaix: Skol Vreizh, 2003).

³ Gwenno Piette, in her recent *A Concise History of Brittany* points out that 'the number of Breton nationalists who agreed with Mordrel and Debauvais [PNB leaders] in seeing the forthcoming war with Germany as a golden opportunity for Brittany was literally a handful, and their actions and beliefs were completely out of step with the rest of the

population who regarded Germany as the enemy', p.122.

- ⁴ This consisted of having 'postérieurement au 16 juin 1940, soit sciemment apporté en France ou à l'étranger une aide directe ou indirecte à l'Allemagne ou à ses alliés, soit porté atteinte à l'unité de la nation ou à la liberté des Français, ou à l'égalité entre ceux-ci' [after 16 June 1940, either knowingly helped Germany or its allies, directly or indirectly, in France or abroad, or threatened the national unity or liberty of the French, or the equality between them].

⁵ This is also printed, with Welsh translation by Dewi Morris Jones in *Gwyn a Du, Gwenn ha Du: Cerddi Cyfoes o Lydaw* (Talybont: Y Lolfa, 1982), pp.20–21; and with French translation in Piriou 1971, pp.52–52. The poem became more widely known when it was set to music by the Breton harpist and vocalist Alan Stivell on his album *Trema'n Inis* (Keltia III, 1976).

⁶ Lott's *Love and Theft* (1993) is an excellent account of the practice and meaning of blackface minstrelsy.

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