

DREAD POETRY AND FREEDOM

‘David Austin offers nothing less than a radical geography of black art in his (re)sounding of Linton Kwesi Johnson. You don’t play with Johnson’s revolutionary poetry, Austin teaches, and *Dread Poetry and Freedom* is as serious, and beautiful, as our life.’

—Fred Moten, poet, critic and theorist

‘A moving and dialogic musing on freedom. Austin’s richly textured study reads LKJ’s poetry in relation to an expansive tradition of black radical politics and poetics. It captures both the urgency of Johnson’s historical moment and his resonance for ours.’

—Shalini Puri, Professor of English, University of Pittsburgh

‘With the intensity of a devotee and the precision of a scholar, David Austin skilfully traverses the dread terrain of Linton Kwesi Johnson’s politics and poetry, engaging readers in an illuminating dialogue with diverse interlocutors who haunt the writer’s imagination.’

—Carolyn Cooper, cultural critic, author of *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the ‘Vulgar’ Body of Jamaican Popular Culture*

‘*Dread Poetry and Freedom* offers an expansive exploration of Caribbean political and cultural history, from Rastafari in Jamaica and Walter Rodney and Guyana to the Cuban Revolution with impressive articulations of the significance of Fanonism. Caribbean political theory is animating literary and cultural studies diasporically; this work demonstrates this elegantly.’

—Carole Boyce Davies, author of *Caribbean Spaces*, Professor of Africana Studies and Literature at Cornell University

DREAD POETRY AND FREEDOM

Linton Kwesi Johnson and
the Unfinished Revolution

David Austin

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and

Between the Lines

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PROLOGUE

SOMETIME IN 1993 a friend, Richard Iton, who would later author the fabulous book *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, asked me whether or not I was familiar with Linton Kwesi Johnson's work. I wasn't, and Richard's sense of disbelief was obvious, as if to suggest 'you can't be serious'. His incredulous expression was not completely unfounded. He knew that I was born in London, England and that I had lived there for the first ten years of my life. Also, given my 'socialist proclivities' and political involvement at the time – I was an undergraduate university student who was active in both campus and community politics, and Richard and I, along with two other friends, were co-hosts of a radio programme (*Soul Perspectives*) on CKUT Radio that combined music with cultural and political commentary – it seemed only natural that I would have heard of Johnson, one of the deans of 'dub poetry'. Add to this the fact that I had been familiar with the work of Jamaican poets Mutabaruka and Oku Onuora and was aware of well-established Toronto-based poets Lillian Allen, Afua Cooper and Clifton Joseph, I too began to wonder why I was not familiar with Johnson's poetry. One day, just before one of our weekly radio shows, Richard handed me a cassette tape of Johnson's classic *Dread Beat an' Blood*, the album that first brought the poet international attention. Given Richard's persistence, I was now keen to listen, and when I did finally listen to the tape, I was stunned. I had not heard anything like it before.

There are not many artists like Johnson, and few have been as effective in blending creative talent with politics. Since his emergence on the poetry scene in the 1970s, Johnson has produced some of the best received and bestselling reggae recordings of his generation. He has developed a following

throughout the world – South Africa, Japan, Brazil, among other places – and he is particularly well known and respected in France, where he has performed before thousands, as well as in Germany, Italy and other parts of Europe. His poetry has also been translated into German and Italian, and in 2002, a collection of his poetry was published under the Penguin Modern Classics series, making him only the second living poet at the time to be published in this series (the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz is the other). Johnson has influenced a whole generation of poets, hip-hop artists and political activists. In Britain, he has been described as ‘the most conscientious godfather’ of black British arts, and in 1987 he was nominated for a Grammy for the album *LK7 Live in Concert with the Dub Band*.

Listening to Johnson for the very first time in 1993 was a thoroughly new experience for me. First, the reggae music that accompanied his ominous verse was mystical and foreboding, but also decidedly urban compared to the Jamaican-based reggae that I grew up listening to as a child in the South London district of Peckham and in the streets and record shops in Brixton. The music gripped me as if I had been transposed into the place and time in which his poetry and music was set.

Second, the cadence of Johnson’s monotone baritone voice was also surprisingly sonorous and his haunting chants had an almost wailing effect, reflecting the pain, suffering and woe of the people ‘down below’, that is to say his generation of black youth in Britain and the sufferers in Jamaica. His poetry not only resonated in Babylonian Britain where black youth confronted brutal police officers and their batons, but across the Atlantic in Canada where police killings of black youth have been carried out with impunity. In fact, unbeknownst to me at the time, the then Montreal-based Bahamian poet Michael Pintard had adopted a line from Johnson’s ‘Reggae fi Peach’ to highlight the killing of black youth in the city. And such was the allure of the militant tone and the pulsating baseline of the musical accompaniment to his poetry that he had developed an underground following among young punks and skinheads in the UK.

Third, Johnson's verse was graphic, vivid and very compelling, and alongside his adept deployment of metaphors he left little doubt as to his thoughts on the internecine violence that had cast a shadow over London's black youth, and the all-too-common brutal police attacks on young blacks.

Fourth, unlike many of his dub poetry counterparts – Johnson himself has never fully embraced this term as a description of his poetry – I discovered in his verse a very familiar underlying phenomenological spirit. The theme of *Dread Beat an' Blood* was about the violence of the 'babylonian tyrants', fratricide, and, ultimately, the violence that he warned would be unleashed against the police and the state by their victims if the British bobbies and the government did not cease terrorizing them. But beneath his testimony on the fraternal bloodletting and the violence that Johnson had himself experienced at the hands of the police, and underneath his apparent call to arms, lay an underlying sense of human possibilities. In other words, he did not simply describe what *is* but also what can *be* within that delicate continuity and tension between being and becoming. Johnson projected the feeling that, despite the prevailing circumstances of dread, no situation was static and that genuine social change was not only desirable but necessary and also possible.

There were obvious parallels between Johnson's analysis of violent phenomena in Britain and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, and particularly the first chapter of that book, 'On Violence'. The similarities were too conspicuous to ignore, and later I discovered Johnson's 1976 essay, 'Jamaican Rebel Music', published in the UK journal *Race & Class*, in which he outlined the parallels between Fanon's phenomenological probe of violent phenomena under colonialism and his own assessment on the contemporary conditions in Jamaica. This now classic essay on the sociology of reggae not only confirmed my suspicion that his poetry has been profoundly influenced by Fanon's prose, but it also alerted me to his ability to step outside his art and analyse some of the very themes that his poetry addressed, but this time in poetic prose.

Linton Kwesi Johnson is not only a poet. He is, or at least has been, a political *engagé*, a French word that in this context is preferable to activist, as the latter has a ring of professionalism as if to suggest that ‘activism’ or activist work is a special vocation that only a select minority can undertake, as opposed to being engaged out of political necessity. Johnson has been actively engaged in grassroots political work since the early 1970s. His political life has infused his poetry, permitting an organic legitimacy that has nourished and sustained his art over the years and that is evident in his description of the plight of black British youth in England and the emergence of a black British bourgeoisie, as well as in his accounts of working-class struggles, the rise of Solidarity in Poland, the demise of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, and the future of socialism. It is hard to imagine another poet who has contributed more to our political understanding of such a wide range of political events and phenomena, qualifying him, in my estimation, as a ‘political poet par excellence’, an accolade that he once accorded the esteemed Guyanese poet Martin Carter.

Johnson’s early poetry forewarns of a new day, at times anticipating violent reactions to colonial oppression in Britain, at other times blending a Jamesian socialist critique with biblical metaphors deployed as an artistic and political motif, as he does in the poem ‘Di Good Life’. His poetry reflects, but is in no way reducible to, the sum total of the personalities, literary and political figures, and experiences that have touched his life: from his grandmother and the Bible during his childhood in Jamaica, the poetic chanting of the Jamaican reggae chanter Big Youth; the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, and C.L.R. James whom he discovered as a member of the British Black Panther Movement in London, and his involvement in the political organization Race Today; to the contributions of his mentors in Britain – the poet-publisher John La Rose and poet-novelist Andrew Salkey – and the poetry of Aimé Césaire, Amiri Baraka, The Last Poets and Kamau Brathwaite.

When all is said and done, *Dread Poetry and Freedom* is about social change – the need for dramatic change in our time, and

Johnson is the vehicle through which I explore this issue in so far as his poetry typifies Brathwaite's description of artists as seers or harbingers of change who often perceive and anticipate developments long before they actually unfold; and Aristotle's description of the universal character of poetry and its ability to 'to describe what can happen, that is, what is possible because it is either likely or necessary'. Of all art forms, I suggest that poetry is particularly well placed to articulate society's needs and to at least hint at social developments to come. In some cases, this ability not only reflects artists' rare gifts but also their freedom to articulate in verse, and particularly in dread or destitute times, what others dare not say, or cannot see. Society often turns to its poets to shed light on the contemporary social situation, to pose difficult questions and, at times, to provide answers, or at least present political possibilities. Great artists are often well placed, even best placed, to assist us as we probe human possibilities, and poets are particularly well suited for this role.

'A poem is grounded in its time, whether it articulates its consciousness of this or not, and it does not have to manifest a direct awareness of its historical situation in order to be significant and to fulfill a rich definition of poetry.' But in addition to its context, the poetic image 'eludes causality' and is self-created in ways that cannot be reduced to being the product of external influences outside of the poetic images themselves.¹ Poets' great gifts include the ability to perceive what is often imperceptible to most and to project those observations in artistic form, but they can never be *fully* conscious of *all* the various strains, vibrations, events and influences that shape, motivate and compel them to do what they do because much of this creative process often happens behind their backs, leading to 'something larger than its author's conscious purpose, and something remote from its origins', according to T.S. Eliot, one of Linton Kwesi Johnson's favourite poets.² In this sense, the creative imagery of poetry enters into our consciousness as a phenomenon, a phenomenology of the heart and soul, produced by 'a flicker of the soul' that grips our being according to Gaston Bachelard,³ imagery that we internalize as it touches our imaginations.⁴ The end result is

varied interpretations that may differ from the poet's presumed meaning.⁵ Eliot goes as far as to suggest that not only may the reader's interpretation of a given poem differ considerably from the poet's, but that this interpretation may be both 'equally valid' or 'may even be better' than the author's, and in some instances might provide poets with insight into their own work.⁶ All of this provides fertile ground for critical interpretation, including of the particular social-political context that has presumably shaped the poet's work. While it would be more than presumptuous for me to suggest that my interpretation of Johnson's poems are even better than his own, and given that this book is grounded in the lofty desire to make a modest contribution towards creating a just and equitable world, *Dread Poetry and Freedom* is not about Linton Kwesi Johnson's poetry; or put another way, it is about his poetry in so far as his poetry *qua* poetry is an expression of politics, or provides poetic insight into politics, again, premised on the presumption that poets are well placed to inform our understanding of political possibilities. In this spirit, this is not solely a book of criticism, but is written with what Bachelard refers to as 'pride', that is to say a phenomenological 'soulful' appreciation of the poet that is partial to the poetic aesthetics of his politics.⁷

I certainly take some poetic licence with Johnson's poetry, and although I would like to think that he would appreciate at least some of this book's insights, and at the risk of becoming what Sylvia Wynter once described as 'maggots' who feed 'on the decaying corpse of that which gives it a brief predatory life',⁸ my main preoccupation here is to open a space for political reflection through poetry. However, as a meditation on the dynamics of social transformation I in no way want to suggest that social change is inevitable. The insanity that presently governs the world is real, coupled by a technological capacity that almost three decades after the end of the Cold War, still threatens to destroy the planet as we know it. Yet sinking into a calamitous sea of despair is neither desirable nor helpful. Change does not fall from the sky or miraculously appear in a single sweeping, cataclysmic flourish. As Johnson constantly reminds us, it is the

‘each an evry wan a wi’ that makes change and possibilities for change often emerge ‘like a thief in the night’, as a wise man once said, when it appears least likely to. Dread and destitute times can anticipate better days ahead.

* * *

I began writing the first draft of this book in October/November 2001 and completed the first draft (is a draft ever completed?) on 17 May 2002. That unwieldy draft was written in a moment of brooding self-reflection. After paring it down to a reasonable size I attempted to find a publisher. Several expressed interest but then ultimately declined – including the current publisher – on the basis that the manuscript did not fit within the conventional academic boundaries of literary criticism, politics or the social sciences in general. After several failed attempts I let the manuscript sit for over eleven years before returning to it in fits and starts. However, as my late Jamaican grandmother Ethilda James was fond of saying, ‘nothing comes before time’, and I have benefited from both recent work on Johnson and the kind of intellectual maturity that, one hopes, comes with the passage of time.

Having said that, this book would perhaps have been published earlier were it not for two other books: Fred Moten’s *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* and Richard Iton’s *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. In different ways, both books were important in terms of rethinking the relationship between art and politics in general, and in relation to Afro diasporic peoples in particular.

Drawing on the work of various poets, philosophers, poet-philosophers and political and cultural theorists, Chapter 1 probes the ways in which poetry permits us to think beyond the here and now and to envision new possibilities, at times precisely because the possible and impossible appear to be least possible. The chapter then turns to Johnson’s poetic and political evolution in the 1970s in London, including the impact of the British Black Panther Movement and Race Today and the life

and work of W.E.B. Du Bois, John La Rose, Frantz Fanon and C.L.R. James on the poet's work.

Chapter 2 draws on Johnson's early essays on Jamaican popular music and Rastafari to explore the apocalyptic concept of dread and the impact of dread dialectics, via Rastafari and the Bible, on the poet, despite the fact that he is an atheist. As we shall see, the concept of dread – in both its Jamaican/Rastafarian and English-language sense of the word – is crucial to appreciating the poet's early work. The chapter also examines the phenomenology of the reggae aesthetic and gender dynamics through the prism of several Caribbean and Afro diasporic 'dread' poets, including Jean Binta Breeze and d'bi young anitafrika.

Chapter 3 probes Frantz Fanon's phenomenology – Fanonology – of violence and Aimé Césaire surrealism – Césairealism – in Johnson's 'blood poems' of dread. In invoking Fanon, not only does Johnson posit a notion of violence that describes the police brutality and state oppression that proscribed black youth life chances in the 1970s, but in so doing, he proffers a vision of social change as a dynamic, unfolding dialectical process that casts light on Fanon's conception of humanism and freedom.

Chapter 4 explores Johnson's *Making History* poems and his deployment of the elegy as a form of poetic-political expression in the poem 'Reggae fi Radni', a poem about the late Guyanese pan-Africanist, Marxist, historian and political figure, Walter Rodney. Rodney was killed in Guyana in June 1980. In the poem, his life becomes the embodiment of eclipsed dreams, but also the possibility of new possibilities if – as both Johnson and C.L.R. James suggest – we can learn from Rodney's political practice and the circumstances under which his unseemly death occurred.

Originally written in the municipality of Vedado in Havana in December–January 2002 as Cuba grappled with its socialist past and attempted to chart a course for a renewed socialist future, Chapters 5 and 6 scan Johnson's *Tings an' Times* in which he meditates on past struggles, the impending collapse of apartheid, the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the relevance of socialism. Drawing on C.L.R. James's conception of socialism as

self-organization – as well as biblical lore as metaphor, including the symbolism of Moses and the promised land and the birth, death and resurrection of Christ, and nursery rhymes that harken back to his childhood – the poet interprets the rise and fall of the communist wall as part of the cycle of death and rebirth and as a precursor to genuine socialism or freedom in our time.

Chapter 7 probes the concepts of time, technology, mortality and the relationship between leisure and the human capacity to creatively create. Johnson's elegy 'Reggae fi May Ayim' and the poem 'More Time' are examined alongside the work of several theorists (John La Rose, David Harvey and Jonathon Martineau, among others) in order to probe the relationship between alienation, time and politics.

Continuing from the previous chapter, Chapter 8 concludes by positing a vision of social change that is influenced by the creative capacity that is inherent in poetry. I argue that if fundamental social change is indeed possible, we will have to break with outmoded notions that hamper or stifle our creativity and the ability to build healthy communities and societies, and that poetry, and art in general, often points the way towards new horizons of possibility.