

“inna Landan tiddey”. ‘De-colonising’ London in Linton Kwesi Johnson’s Dub Poetry

Abstract: One of the basic assumptions of Decolonialism is that the “coloniality of power” does not end with Colonialism and that the Modern capitalist World-system imposes a racial/ethnic classification of people around the world as a basis of its power structures. Linton Kwesi Johnson’s dub poetry stands as a space of resistance to these very structures; mixing Caribbean dialect and the rhythms of reggae it speaks to the heart of the British experience of inner-city (Brixton based) black youth. In such poems as ‘Inglan is a Bitch’ (1980), ‘Mekin Histri’ (1984) and ‘New Craas Massakah’ (1984) London is portrayed as a site of conflict between those who perform and those who try to resist discrimination. Johnson’s is an artistic/critical language overcoming theory (and prefixes), a poetry to be performed and not just read, which asks its readers/listeners to perform themselves the resistance required to preserve and assert their own difference.

Keywords: *Linton Kwesi Johnson, dub poetry, London, bass, decolonialism*

One of the basic assumptions of Decolonialism is that the “coloniality of power”¹ does not end with colonialism and that the capitalist world order implies a ‘racial’ classification of persons around the globe as a basis of its power structures. In this sense, if on the one side the effort of decolonial thinkers, such as Walter Dignolo, is to help people understand how “the colonial matrix of power (CMP) was constituted, managed, and transformed from its historical foundation in the sixteenth century to the present”, on the other, they help us grasp how the very idea of “decoloniality undoes, disobeys, and delinks from this matrix; constructing paths and praxis toward an otherwise of thinking, sensing, believing, doing, and living”². In our view Linton Kwesi Johnson’s dub poetry stands as an embodiment of this “otherwise”, counterpointing modernity and its power structures. Johnson’s poetry stands as a space of resistance – as a critical “interruption”³ – in relation to these very structures; mixing different forms of Jamaican and English creole with the rhythms of reggae and dub, it speaks to the heart of the British experience of inner-city (Brixton based) black youth. In his poems the metropolis is portrayed as a site of conflict between those who enact and those who try to resist⁴ discrimination; in this perspective, the whole body of his work stands as an attempt to ‘de-colonise’⁵ London and give voice to its black communities.

In a pioneering 1986 study Christian Habekost, defines dub poetry “a social, revolutionary art form where a radical voice shouts of the struggle of the oppressed all around the world”.⁶ In this sense, Dub

¹ Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America”, *Nepantla: Views from South*, 1.3 (2000), 533-580.

² Walter Dignolo and Catherine Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (London and Durham: Duke U.P., 2018), 4.

³ Iain Chambers, *Postcolonial Interruptions: Unauthorised Modernities* (London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).

⁴ For Duncombe, cultural resistance provides a *free space* for developing ideas and practices: “Freed from the limits and constraints of the dominant culture, you can experiment with new ways of seeing and being and develop tools and resources for resistance. And as culture is usually something shared, it becomes a focal point around which to build a community”. Johnson’s poetry offers in this sense a new way of seeing and (listening to) the city which he will share with a whole community. Stephen Duncombe, “Introduction”, in Stephen Duncombe, ed., *The Cultural Resistance Reader* (London: Verso, 2002), 5-6.

⁵ As we will see Johnson’s pioneering efforts and committed art project towards more recent cultural practices. A few years ago, a London-based network called *Decoloniality London* was created. As we read in their site the network is “committed to replacing the modern/colonial world system with justice; creating both physical and intellectual spaces to facilitate the production, collation, dissemination and application of decolonial thought and praxis” (<https://www.decolonialitylondon.org>, accessed 22 May 2020).

⁶ Christian Habekost, *Dub Poetry: 19 Poets from England and Jamaica* (Neustadt: Publishers Michael Swinn, 1986), 17. See also Christian Habekost, *Verbal Riddim: The Politics and Aesthetics of African-Caribbean Dub Poetry* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993).

poets seem to endorse the same function of griots, acting as memory banks and critical voices capable of awakening people’s consciousness in relation to such issues as racism and social injustice.

As London performer and musicologist David Toop observes, the griot is indeed:

a professional singer ... who combines the functions of living history book and newspaper with vocal and instrumental virtuosity ... although they are popularly known as praise singers, griots might combine appreciation of a rich employer with gossip and satire or turn their vocal expertise into an attack on the politically powerful or the financially stingy.⁷

One of dub poetry’s main features is its dialogical relationship with music and more specifically with reggae – which, developed out of ska, and rocksteady in mid-Sixties Jamaica. The term dub poetry refers, indeed, to the vital link between a specific form of oral poetry and one of reggae’s most fascinating early Seventies developments: dub. Toop himself, in *Ocean of Sound*, defines dub “a long echo delay, looping through time”.⁸ Dub indeed implies the process of:

Stripping a vocal from its backing track and then manipulating the instrumental arrangement with techniques and effects; drop-out, extreme equalisation, long delay, short delay, space echo, reverb, flange, phase, noise gates, echo feedback, shotgun snare drums, rubber bass, zipping highs, cavernous lows. The effects are there for enhancement, but for a dubmaster they can displace, time shift the beat, heighten a mood, suspend a moment.⁹

Dub offers short different sonic perspectives (on) and multiple incarnations of popular reggae tunes; as Toop puts it “when you double, or dub, you replicate, reinvent, make one of many versions”¹⁰ in a process which problematizes the very notion of ‘original-ity’ and authorship. In his monumental study on reggae, entitled *Bass Culture*, Bradley notes how dub also implies an “astonishing capacity for recycling. It involves taking either the recent or ancient past [...] and refashioning it to fit the contemporary requirements of the present”.¹¹ One of these requirements was providing poets and toasters such as I Roy, U Roy and Big Youth with backdrops, with sonic canvases (which could even coincide with a ‘simple’ drum and bass line) on which they could enunciate their verses during a sound system performance. These toasters – with their powerful lines and their peculiar ‘vocal grain’¹² – became highly influential artists for dub poets such as Oku Onuora, Michael Smith, and Linton Kwesi Johnson himself. If dub implies a process of refashioning/rewriting, which transforms the sonic perspective of a musical picture, then metropolitan dub poetry stands as an attempt to remix, to remap the postmodern city – in Johnson’s case, London – in terms of the voices of its black people, shaping what Gilroy calls “an alternative public sphere”.¹³ What happens in Johnson’s poetry is basically a process of sonic inversion, in which marginal voices come in the foreground and mainstream voices and contexts are placed in the background.

LKJ was born in 1952 in Chapelton, a small rural town in Jamaica, where he spent his early childhood immersed in oral narratives. The poet remembers how in those early years he got most of his folk culture from his grandmother:

⁷ David Toop, *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop* (London: Pluto, 1984), 31-32. On dub poetry in relation to African orality and on the griot, see Pierpaolo Martino, “Transnational Metamorphoses of African Orality: L. K. Johnson’s Dub Poetry”, *Journal des Africanistes*, 80 (2010), 193-204.

⁸ David Toop, *Ocean of Sound: Aether Talk, Ambient Sounds and Imaginary Worlds* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1995), 115.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 116. On dub, see also David Maskowitz, *Caribbean Popular Music: An Encyclopedia of Reggae, Mento, Ska, Rocksteady and Dancehall* (Abingdon: Greenwood Press, 2005).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹¹ Lloyd Bradley, *Bass Culture: When Reggae Was King* (London: Penguin, 2001), 310.

¹² Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice”, in Stephen Heath, ed., *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), 179-189.

¹³ Paul Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*, Second edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 304.

In the kind of environment we lived in there was no entertainment. No radio, no television, no books in the house. I didn't grow up with books. The only book we had in the house was the Bible. And so for entertainment, my grandmother, especially on a full moon night, would tell us stories, duppy stories, and she would make us guess riddles and that sort of thing and that was our entertainment.¹⁴

In 1963 Johnson moved to Britain to join his mother who had emigrated to London two years before, went to Tulse Hill Comprehensive in Lambeth and studied Sociology at Goldsmiths College. While he was still at school, he joined the Black Panthers, which were influenced by black resistance in America, and which made him aware of black people's subaltern condition in Britain; he helped to organize a poetry workshop within the movement and developed his work with Rasta Love, a group of poets and musicians, with whom Johnson would “improvise on different kinds of drums and [...] make up words to go along with the rhythms”.¹⁵ These were also the years in which the poet embraced the “influences and energies of the streets – especially the social events, parties, sound systems, reggae records, toasters and DJs beloved of Brixton's young people”¹⁶.

Joining the (Brixton-based) Panthers Johnson had the chance to encounter the works of Eric Williams, C.L. R. James and most importantly W.E.B. DuBois, author of *The Souls of Black Folks*¹⁷ which inspired him to start writing his own works and in particular his poetry. In these years LKJ – as the poet then dubbed himself – became also involved in the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) – which grew out of a small informal meeting of West Indians intellectuals in Edward Kamau Brathwaite's basement flat in London in 1966. The seminal debates that took place within the movement on the very shape and meaning of the “artistic production among members of the Caribbean exile community in Britain”¹⁸ will involve key intellectuals such as Andrew Salkey, Stuart Hall and John La Rose. La Rose – who in 1966 founded New Beacon Books, the first Caribbean publishing house in England – became a key figure for LKJ, introducing him to the works of Aimé Césaire. As James notes, when as an organisation CAM ended in 1972, it not only “had made a major impact on the emergence of a Caribbean cultural identity, [but also] changed attitudes within the host community”.¹⁹

The driving spirit of CAM was undoubtedly Brathwaite, who like LKJ conducted a personal life suspended between different cultures and continents. Brathwaite who was born in 1930 in Barbados, won a scholarship that took him to England to read History at Cambridge's Pembroke College. In England Brathwaite felt “neglected and misunderstood”²⁰ writing poems that got rejected by the Cambridge literary magazines; but after graduation he moved to Ghana for a long job experience. Here he attained the “awareness and understanding of community, of cultural wholeness, of the place of the individual within the tribe, in society”.²¹ When he went back to the Caribbean, he discovered how he had never really left Africa: “that it was still Africa; Africa in the Caribbean”;²² in a way, LKJ developed a similar perception of the vital presence of Caribbean culture in his London community.

Johnson acknowledges the centrality of Brathwaite's work in breaking the poetic conventions, which were in part the heritage of British colonial education. LKJ notes how in his poetry Brathwaite incorporated “the rhythms of Caribbean speech [...] blues rhythms, calypso rhythms and so on”, in a sense what Johnson had been doing with “reggae poetry is to consolidate that revolution that was started

¹⁴ Roxy Harris and Sarah White, *Changing Britannia: Life Experience with Britain* (London and Port of Spain: New Beacon, 1999), 52.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁶ John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 131.

¹⁷ William Edward Burghart DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks: Essays and Sketches* (London: Longmans, Green, 1965).

¹⁸ Ashley Dawson, *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 73.

¹⁹ Louis James, “The Caribbean Artist Movement”, in Bill Schwarz, ed., *West Indians Intellectuals in Britain* (Manchester: Manchester U.P., 2010), 210.

²⁰ Mervyn Morris, “Overlapping Journeys: The Arrivants”, in Stuart Brown, ed., *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite* (Bridgend Wales: Seren, 1995), 117-31, 117.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

²² *Ibid.*

by Brathwaite in terms of the language and in terms of the aesthetics”.²³ Brathwaite, nourished indeed his pages not only of poetry from other poets but also, and most importantly, of timbres, melodies and rhythms coming from at least two continents, namely Africa and America, trying to convey the sense of the fascinating dialectic which connects Caribbean music and Afro-American expressions such as jazz and blues.

Brathwaite became in this sense a major source of inspiration for Johnson because he managed to subvert “the whole canon of English poetry. There were elements of jazz, you could hear the drums and the language of West Indian folk tales”.²⁴ In his 1984 study *History of the Voice* – in which he introduced his theory of a Caribbean “nation language”²⁵ – Brathwaite himself made reference to Johnson’s important work; besides, in 1981 the two had been the protagonists of a special event at London’s Institute for Contemporary Arts for the series ICA Talks, entitled *Linton Kwesi Johnson and Edward Brathwaite. Poet as Historical Witness*.²⁶ In this occasion, both alternated their observations on migration with powerful performances of their poems. Their *last meeting* also took place through poetry, when in February 2020 in order to pay a personal tribute to his ‘Maestro’ – who died on 4 February – LKJ recorded a dub rendition of Brathwaite’s poem “Negus” with producer Dennis Bowell.

In short, the poetic revolution started in the mid-seventies by Johnson himself introduced an inventiveness at the level of speech and rhythm which powerfully connects it with Brathwaite. It is important, however, to point to some differences: in *The Arrivants*²⁷ trilogy Brathwaite narrates the Caribbean experience, through the creation of powerful links with an African past, that is pointing to the presence of that past, even at the level of style, through a creative combination of English, Caribbean patois and African languages (and myths). Johnson’s exile to London had its proper soundtrack; Johnson’s migration took place in the same historical moment in which reggae and more specifically Bob Marley – who recorded in London his masterpiece *Exodus* – migrated to England²⁸ and conquered it. In this sense, if in Brathwaite’s poems one can listen to the rhythms of the African drum²⁹ in Johnson’s one is immediately immersed into the grain and the vibrations of reggae’s key musical voice, namely the bass.

Johnson celebrates the reggae bass in a poem entitled ‘Bass Culture’ in which musical sounds become social voices, powerful and disturbing voices which the poet contrasts with those of white repressive culture, that would like to silence them:

muzik of blood
black reared
pain reared
heart geared

²³ Jason Gross, “Interview with Linton Kwesi Johnson”, *Perfect Sound Forever* (1/1997), www.furious.com/perfect/lkj.html, accessed 10 November 2020.

²⁴ Nicholas Wroe, “I Did My Own Thing” (Interview with Linton Kwesi Johnson), *The Guardian* (8 March 2008), www.theguardian.com/books/2008/mar/08/featuresreviews.guardianreview11, accessed 10 November 2020.

²⁵ “Nation language is the language which is influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean heritage. English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sounds explosions, it is not English, even though the words, as you hear them, might be English to a greater or lesser degree”. Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice* (London and Port of Spain: New Beacon, 1984), 13.

²⁶ The interview is accessible through the British Library Sound Archive, www.sounds.bl.uk/Arts-literature-and-performance/ICA-talks/024M-C0095X0002XX-0100V0, accessed 10 November 2020.

²⁷ Kamau Brathwaite, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1973). *The Arrivants* includes the three collections of poems *Rights of Passage* (1967), *Masks* (1968) and *Islands* (1969); as Brown perfectly summarizes the theme of the trilogy, “is that of re-birth, re-discovery, reclamation of identity for West Indian people through an examination of their roots in the African past. In all his work [...] Brathwaite explores the ways in which an acceptance of those roots will begin to heal the negative self-images established by the experience of middle-passage, plantation and colonial life”. Stewart Brown, “Introduction”, in Stewart Brown, ed., *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite* (Bridgend Wales: Seren, 1995), 9-10.

²⁸ Marley’s song, “Punky Reggae Party”, tells the story of the emergence of a fecund dialogue involving two forms of music giving voice to the dispossessed, namely punk and reggae.

²⁹ See the poem “The Making of the Drum” included in *Masks*.

all tensed up
in the bubble an the bounce
an the leap an the weight-drop

it is the beat of the heart
this pulsing of blood
that is a bubblin bass
a bad bad beat
pushin gainst the wall
whey bar black blood

an is a whole heappa
passion a gather
like a frightful form
like a righteous harm
giving off wild like is madness ...³⁰

As MacPhee brilliantly observes here “the pumping bass is both the music that encodes the memories of oppression and resistance that sustain community, and the pulse of the heart that sustains each individual life and its social conditions of possibility”.³¹ Hitchcock – who like McPhee acknowledges the centrality, within Johnson’s work of the dialectic individual-community – notes, besides, how ‘Bass Culture’ also seems to literally stage what he refers to in terms of “(sub)cultural (sub)version of dub”, in this sense, the title puns on bass as being both the instrument of the beat and as being somehow obnoxious or repulsive:

it is a poem about dread, both as threat and as cultural identity (“dread people”); the violence it registers has everything to do with the tropical storm it imitates and the history of oppression it records and from which it learns; the voice is both musical as it follows the bass line, and noisy, as it makes a thunder crack (“SCATTA-MATTA-SHATTA-SHACK”) a slogan of defiance; the voice is specific about its own musical moment (“an di beat will shi!/as di culture altah/when oppression scatta”) which will pass according to a particular historical situation; in acknowledging the power of the voice (partially indicated in the dedication to Mr. Talk-Over, “Big Yout”) it makes no claims as to its originality but instead emphasizes a shared sense of “latent powa” as a bloodline of history, a “muzik of blood”; and the dread is a threat because it challenges the norm (“the false fold”) in its language, its riddim, and, of course, in its title.³²

In is interesting to see how, more recently, Louisa Layne has focused on Johnson’s bass as a powerful ‘instrument’ to face the legacy of racism that structures, as Hitchcock suggests, England’s national selfhood:

[Johnson’s] poetry can, in many ways, be said to aspire towards to the strong visceral effects of bass. By mimicking the violent and powerful bodily effects of dub music through his use of diction, capitalization, and line breaks, he attempts to use poetry to shock, move, and shake the reader to a state of heightened political consciousness.³³

³⁰ Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Mi Revalueshanary Fren: Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2002), 14.

³¹ Graham MacPhee, *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P., 2011), 136.

³² Peter Hitchcock, “It Dread inna Ingran. Linton Kwesi Johnson, Dread and Dub Identity”, *Postmodern Culture*, 4.1 (September, 1993), www.pomoculture.org/2013/09/25/it-dread-inna-ingran-linton-kwesi-johnson-dread-and-dub-identity/, accessed 10 November 2020.

³³ Louisa Layne, “Reading ‘Bass Culture’: Linton Kwesi Johnson’s Politics of Rhythm and Bass”, *Postcolonial Writers Make Worlds* (2017), www.writersmakeworlds.com/essay-johnson-bass-culture/, accessed 10 November 2020.

In this sense, Layne offers a very fascinating analysis of another poem included in the *Bass Culture* album, namely ‘Reggae Sounds’ and in particular of its fifth stanza which provides an example of “Johnson’s interest in how bass and rhythm itself can reflect history and society in a way that makes it political”:³⁴

Shock-black bubble-doun-beat bouncing
rock-wise tumble-doun sound music;
foot-drop, find drum blood story,
bass history is a-moving
is a-hurting black story.³⁵

As Layne notes, “the first line repeats the labial plosive sound ‘b’ six times and creates an impression of the low tones of bass. The emphasis on the particularity of how bass sounds evolves into a claim about ‘a hurting black story’. Meanwhile, the juxtaposition of ‘drum’ and ‘blood story’, separated by just a comma, marks the close proximity of the musical and the political in the poem”.³⁶ And yet what seems absolutely striking is that, in the album version, the very last line of the stanza stages the bass both verbally and musically, indeed the (song’s) bass line and the verse de-fining the “bass hist’ry” become one, the two languages the verbal and the musical tell simultaneously the same story.

In an interview published on *Spin* magazine in 1985 Johnson affirmed: “I don’t write music but I begin with the bass. You know the bass line in reggae gives you the melody. It is not simply the rhythm instrument: it’s a melodic instrument. So when I’m writing my poems I always have a bass line going in the back of my head. It’s simply a matter of bringing out the line itself and working it”.³⁷ In this sense, in order to work on new ideas Johnson plays the bass himself while for concerts with the band and for his albums he relies on professional bass players (such as bassist and producer Dennis Bowell). Bass becomes, in short, the very soul of his verses and the protagonist of his concerts.

It is important to stress how in dub poetry performers may decide to perform with their ensembles providing the soundscape, the beats onto which the poet can enunciate their verses or they may choose to perform a cappella, that is in a solo voice performance. LKJ is familiar with both forms, even if in a recent conversation with Paul Gilroy at Oxford University³⁸ has confessed he prefers playing solo sets. What, however, seems absolutely striking about Johnson’s performances is the capacity of the artist to translate his voice into an instrument providing the beat and the melody of all reggae and dubs tunes; that is, the voice becomes the bass and vice versa.

Dub and reggae’s tendency to privilege the bass as possibly the most relevant instrument in the band has its political implications. Mainstream popular music tends, indeed, to confine the bass to its function of accompanying instrument turning it in a subaltern instrument to be perceived – along with the drums – ‘below’ the level of the singer’s voice. As Tagg³⁹ and Frith⁴⁰ have proved, songs present an inner social complexity. Pop songs are, generally, produced and organized according to straight hierarchical principles; in this sense, dub and reggae’s tendency to give prominence to the bass represent an attempt to subvert pop industry’s imperatives.⁴¹

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*, 17.

³⁶ Louisa, Layne “Reading ‘Bass Culture’”.

³⁷ Roger Steffens, “The Fire This Time”, *Spin*, 4 (August 1985), 56.

³⁸ “Great Writers Inspire at Home: Linton Kwesi Johnson and Paul Gilroy”, www.writersmakeworlds.com/video-linton-kwesi-johnson-paul-gilroy/, accessed 10 November 2020.

³⁹ Philip Tagg, “Music in Mass Media Studies: Reading Sounds for Example”, *Popular Music Research* 2, 103-115.

⁴⁰ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites* (Oxford and New York: Oxford U.P., 2002).

⁴¹ In terms of sonic perspective, bass and drums are, especially in dub, in the foreground while the melody is in the background. On this aspect see Theo van Leeuwen, *Speech, Music, Sound* (London: Macmillan, 1999) who, using Tagg (1990) as a point of departure, discusses another genre of black music namely drum’n’bass which – privileging bass and drums [...] accompaniment over melody, reverses “the traditional pattern of European Music”, but also of traditional British/American Rock’n’roll where

In 2012 *The Wire* magazine dedicated a special issue to the bass, entitling it “Low End Theories”: in one of the articles included, Joe Muggs approaches the bass through a (critical) language which interestingly seems to be interrogated and almost deconstructed by its object of enquiry:

Bass leads us in. It’s the reverberating throb from the underground or loft; the first clue, the ravesignal number one – sensed not with the ears but with the entire body – that tells us we’re in the right place (or the wrong place). It’s the most powerful and direct signal of the antisocial and hyper-social, marking locations, crating zones of safety and danger, and we react to it with pre-modern excitement and apprehension as we first unconsciously sense it, then think we sense it, then pick up the rhythm.⁴²

Then making reference to the experience of listening to bass in subcultural contexts (as London’s Dmz club or Jah Shaka’s hall in Stockwell) through powerful sound systems he adds:

When you are surrounded by ... sounds bigger than you, you are embraced in a safe space, but filled with a will to action. Learning through acclimatisation and repetition how to act in that space ... is learning to be a part of the subcultural machine. But although bass defines the subcultural space, and although you can be inside it or outside, the boundaries are ever sharp the space is always porous and never quite congruent with the other physical and cultural spaces with which it overlaps and coexists.⁴³

LKJ’s is voice as bass, it implies vibration, immersion; it gives voice to an urban “bass culture” which cannot be confined that is imprisoned in limited, restrictive spaces. If the voice of the bass is a metropolitan one, which connects – in such genres as reggae, dub, dubstep and drum’n’bass – underground and marginal spaces and existences, then the grain of Johnson’s voice becomes metaphor and vehicle of a ‘language’ which speaks directly to the body, working as a sonic bridge connecting different urban bodies.

The fluid dimension of Johnson’s voice also defines his very language, which exceeds any standardised form, to stand as a key aspect of Johnson’s process of dubbing the city, creating a dissonant and yet vivid soundtrack to the lives of second-generation Caribbean immigrants.

In the 1975 collection of poems *Dread, Beat and Blood*, Johnson himself – quoted in the introduction written by CAM’s Andrew Sulky – confesses how at the core of his writing and performing there is “a tension between Jamaican Creole and Jamaican English and between those and English English” and explains how

All that, really is the consequence of having been brought up in a colonial society and then coming over here to live and go to school in England soon afterwards. The tension builds up. You can see it in the writing. You can hear it. And something else: my poems may look sort of flat on the page. Well, that is because they’re actually oral poems, as such. They were definitely written to be read aloud, in the community.⁴⁴

Here Johnson not only insists on the dialogicity at the core of his urban language, but also points to the relevance of the modality in which his words are transcribed on the page. According to Morris, LKJ’s spelling represents “a guide to the Creole pronunciation”, indeed “in first encountering the Linton Johnson poems in *Inglan Is a Bitch* the reader is required to sound syllable by syllable the words which look unfamiliar. But Johnson’s approach is fairly consistent [...] if you are not a Creole speaker and you want to say the poem, his spelling helps you get the word-sounds right”.⁴⁵ In a way, Johnson not only wants the poem to look like a poem on the page, he wants it also to ‘sound’; when the reader is looking

“singers or solo instruments ... scream and shout to be heard across the din” (21-22). Interestingly punk, even though sharing reggae’s oppositional stance privileges high over bass frequencies.

⁴² Joe Muggs, “Meditate on Bass Weight”, *The Wire*, 341 (July 2012), 33.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Dread Beat and Blood* (London: Bogle. L’Ouvverture), 8.

⁴⁵ Mervyn Morris, “Printing the Performance”, in *Is English We Speaking and Other Essays* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1999), 47.

at the ‘transcription’ on the book, she is in a sense invited to speak the word (and not to leave it in her head).

In 2002 Johnson was the first black poet and the second living poet⁴⁶ to see his poems published in Penguin Modern Classics under the title *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*. Johnson’s disruptive access into the publishing establishment was a “noisy”⁴⁷ one: people who have no familiarity with his performances are disturbed by a language which is ‘english’ without being English, and in which London is, as we will see, powerfully translated into “Landan”, an alternative, musical, even dissonant city which exceeds the conventional representations of the cultural establishment.

As Dick Hebdige writes in the introductory notes to his cult essay *Cut’n’Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music*:

African, Afro-American and Caribbean music is based on quite different principles from the European classical music. The collective voice is given precedence over the individual voice of the artist or he composer. Rhythm and percussion play a much more central role. In the end there is a link in thee non-European musics with public life, with speech, with the textures and the grain of the living human voice.⁴⁸

In Johnson’s music the voice of the individual artist becomes, as we have seen, that of the collectivity; LKJ himself in a seminal article written for *Race and Class* in 1976 wrote:

The musician, singer and Dub-lyricist are mostly ‘sufferers’. Through music, song and poetry they give spiritual expression to their own inner beings, to their own experience. But in so doing they are also giving spiritual expression to the collective experience of sufferation that is shared by all sufferers.⁴⁹

If a poet has learned, according to Voloshinov,⁵⁰ to give a meaning and an intonation to his enunciations, throughout his life, listening to the world around him, then Johnson’s poems represent “mobile homes”⁵¹ in which we can hear the voices and echoes of both poet and people. In this sense, Johnson’s voice and poetry offer his community a shared language enunciated, as Hitchcock notes, through a shared cultural practice, through which the poet can comment on social injustice racial discrimination, asking for an active/committed reaction from the community, that is from people who have suffered racist attacks and injuries of different kinds. Indeed, in such poems as “Inglan Is a Bitch” (1980), “Mekin Histri” (1984) and “New Craas Massakah” (1984) London is portrayed as a site of conflict between those who perform and those who try to resist racism and discrimination.

“Inglan Is a Bitch” – which is significantly included in the 1980 *Bass Culture* album and which, according to Dhondy, can be considered “the first working-class hymn of the black community”⁵² – records the experiences of an adult migrant who, after working in hotels and in the Underground, discovers that London is not the land of opportunity it seems:

wen mi jus come to Landan toun,
mi use to work pan di andahgroun
but workin pan di andahgroun
yu dont get fi know your way aroun

⁴⁶ During his lifetime Johnson has received several awards and honors for his poetical work; in 2012 he was awarded the Golden PEN Award for a “Lifetime’s Distinguished Service to Literature”.

⁴⁷ Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the Vulgar Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993).

⁴⁸ Dick Hebdige, *Cut’n’Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 11.

⁴⁹ Linton Kwesi Johnson, “Jamaican Rebel Music”, *Race and Class*, 17.4, 397-412, 399.

⁵⁰ Valentin Voloshinov, “Discourse in Life and Discourse in Poetry: Questions of Sociological Poetics”, in Ann Shukamn, ed., *Bakhtin School Papers* (Oxford: RPT Publications, 1983), 5-30.

⁵¹ Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁵² Farrukh Dhondy, “Introduction”, in Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Inglan Is a Bitch* (London: Race Today Publications, 1980), 5.

Inglan is a bitch
 dere’s no escapin it
 Inglan is a bitch
 dere’s no runin whe fram it

mi get a likkle jab in a big otell
 an awftah a while, mi woz doin quite well
 dem staat mi awf as a dish-washah
 but wen mi tek a stack, mi noh tun clack-watchah!

Inglan is a bitch
 dere’s no escapin it
 Inglan is a bitch
 noh baddah try fi hide fram it

wen dem gi you di likkle wage packit
 fus dem rab it wid dem big tax rackit
 yu haffi struggle fi mek enz meet
 an wen yu goh a yu bed yu jus cant sleep ...⁵³

The major mode of the reggae track adds an ironic touch to a poem, which, as we anticipated, gives voice to the protagonist’s bitter disappointment. In this sense, “Inglan Is a Bitch” problematizes the mythical London prized by the generation to whom Johnson’s parents belonged, and which is rendered by the term “Landan toun”. The verbal narrative of “Inglan Is a Bitch” ends with the line “is whe wi a goh about it?”, which is given dramatic effect in the studio recording; interestingly, Johnson “recites the poem accompanied only by bass and drums while the words “bout it?” are made to echo. At this moment, the voice of Brixton’s youth seems to break into the migrant persona asking for a defiant and unbending response to the city’s discriminatory condition”.⁵⁴ Johnson’s “Wi” is really the “I” as “We”, singularity necessarily becoming plurality. As Dawson puts it, the poem shows how:

Black Britons faced discrimination at virtually every turn. Perhaps most importantly, the poem shows, they were usually the last to be hired and the first to be fired from jobs. Yet, despite these obstacles to belonging, “Inglan is a Bitch” concludes on a note of collective solidarity and optimism about the possibility for effecting change.⁵⁵

In the following collection *Mekin Histri* (1984) the poet, seems to project us towards this very idea of change, answering to these very voices – those of Brixton youth – recording the names of those murdered by racists and celebrates those communities who courageously resisted state-endorsed violence; in this way, he remaps once again London in terms of the people, spaces and events of its black communities. The Brixton riots of 1981, which here Johnson celebrates, were really an historical occasion; the riots, as we will see, had indeed the effect of making the British state sit up and take note of the fact that black people had some power and when you have some power ‘they’ make concessions. As LKJ himself would often observe, if today there are some black people in the media and in the government, it is a direct consequence of these actions.

In this sense, Johnson’s 1980s poems stand as literary attempts to portray black British communities in the very process of *Making History*. In the ‘title-track’ the poet – telling his version of history – is indeed writing a different history of Britain, one ‘written’ by blacks themselves:

⁵³ Kwesi Johnson, *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*, 39.

⁵⁴ McLeod, *Postcolonial London*, 133.

⁵⁵ Ashley Dawson, *The Routledge Concise History of Twentieth Century English Literature* (London and New York: Routledge 2013), 160.

now tell mi someting
mistah govahment man
tell mi someting

how lang yu really feel
yu coulda keep wi andah heel
wen di trute done reveal
bout how yu grab an steal
bout how yu mek yu crooked deal
mek yu crooked deal?

well down in Soutall
where Peach did get fall
di Asians dem faam-up a human wall
gense di fashist an dem police sheil
an dem show dat di Asians gat plenty zeal
gat plenty zeal
gat plenty zeal

It is noh mistri
wi mekin histri
it is noh mistri
wi winnin victri ...⁵⁶

Interestingly, here LKJ’s dub poetry connects different communities, Asians, Africans, Caribbeans, who become a single, powerful oppositional force; in an older poem entitled “It Dread inna Ingran” Johnson invites all blacks to stand firm in England and face reality, namely Thatcher’s racist politics. The poem stages – through an African call and response pattern, which powerfully emerges in the recorded version – a peaceful street protest in which the poet and his people speak in defence of George Lindo a (Bradford) Jamaican worker unjustly accused of armed robbery and then imprisoned:

dem frame-up George Lindo
up in Bradford Toun
but de Bradford Blacks
dem a rally round ...

Maggi Tatcha on di go
wid a racist show
but a she haffi go
kaw,
rite now,
African
Asian
West Indian
an Black British
stan firm inna Ingran
inna disya time yah.
far noh mattah wat dey say,
come wat may,
we are here to stay
inna Ingran
inna disya time yah...

⁵⁶ Kwesi Johnson, *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*, 64.

George Lindo
 him is a working man
 George Lindo
 im is a family man
 George Lindo
 him neva do no wrang [...]

George Lindo
 dem haffi let him go
 George Lindo
 dem bettah free him now!⁵⁷

In the darker, somehow disturbing poem entitled “New Craas Massakah” (1984) Johnson makes reference to the racially motivated arson attack at Y. Ruddock’s birthday party in which fourteen young blacks died. This tragic event represented a watershed in the history of black London, indeed it saw the emergence of the “New Cross massacre action committee”, which was a broad-based organization of activists from different areas of England who, on the second of March 1981, organized a memorable event, mobilizing nearly 20,000 people marching from New Cross to Hyde Park to protest the murders and the way the police⁵⁸ had been dealing with it. It also handed in a formal letter of protest to Number 10 Downing Street. As Johnson has recently noted:

It was a watershed moment because it made the British establishment take note of the fact that we had black power and we could mobilize that power and it was during that Thatcherite period that they began to speed on the process whereby a black middle class could emerge. Because before the 1980s black people had been one the periphery of British society, we were marginalized. We come into the Mother country and were treated like fucking third class citizens you know what I mean? We were marginalized. And by the end of Thatcherite period a black middle class began to emerge and by the end of the 20th century we were closer to the center than the periphery.⁵⁹

In short, in the early Eighties, Johnson’s poetry became the expression of a politics of resistance whose results were, as he affirms here, the birth of a black middle-class, through a process, which consisted not in avoiding ‘the enemy’ – that is, racist Britain – but in facing and, in a way, inhabiting it, rechannelling its energies; transforming, in this way, the very physiognomy of British society. Yet, as we will see, in the Brexit-era this very transformation was to be confronted with a dramatic resurgence of conservatism.

In “New Craas Massakah” Johnson interestingly plays with the imagery of fire, the racists’ act causes the “*red wid wage*” of the whole of black Britain. The poet’s words ask, in short, for action, that is reaction to that very violence; indeed, as Sandhu observes “Johnson’s characters don’t button their lips or turn the other cheek when faced with hostility or aggression [...] Johnson’s solution is direct and forceful fighting fire with fire”.⁶⁰

first di comin
 an di goin
 in an out af di pawty

⁵⁷ Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Dread, Beat and Blood* (Island, 1978), LP.

⁵⁸ Several LKJ’s poems focus on the conflict between members of the Black community and the police; “Sonny’s Lettah” (1979) deals the Sus(picion) Law allowing the police to arrest a disproportionate number of black youths.

⁵⁹ Joe Lowndes, “Linton Kwesi Johnson and Black British Struggle”, *Africa Is a Country* (26 May 2017), www.africasacountry.com/2017/05/linton-kwesi-johnson-and-black-british-struggle, accessed 10 November 2020.

⁶⁰ Sakdev Sandhu, *London Calling: How Black and Asian Writers Imagined a City* (London: Harper Perennial, 2003), 357.

di dubbin
 an di rubbin
 an di rackin to di riddim [...]

den di crash
 an di bang
 an di flames staat fi trang ...

aldow plenty people woz surprised
 fi know seh dem kine a ting deh
 couda happen to wi
 inna disya Great Britn
 inna Landan tiddey
 and a few get frightn
 and a few get subdue
 almost evrybody ad to symphahtise
 wid di love wans of di inju an di ded
 far disya massakah mek wi come fi realise
 it coul be mi
 it could be yu
 ar wan a fi wi pickney dem
 who fell victim to di terah by nite ...

but stap
 yu noh remembah
 how di whole a black Britn did rack wid rage
 how di whole a black Britn tun a fiery red
 nat di callous red af di killah's eyes
 but red wid rage like the flames af di fyah.⁶¹

Besides the powerful imagery connected with fire, one of the most effective visual and sonic images created by Johnson in the poem – namely, “inna Landan tiddey” – seems to problematize our very conception of the city in spatial, temporal and political terms. What is London today? We might answer that in 1984 as in (Brexit year) 2020 one should be capable of being at once inside and outside the city, to live the inside as a permeable, open space, through a critical perspective embracing the very notion of outsideness.

In a recent *Guardian* interview LKJ has noted how today not only in London but in Britain “we are living through a time of reaction; the rise of Conservative populism”; for the poet “racism is very much part of the cultural DNA of this country, and most probably has been so from imperial times”; in this sense, against the myth of black people’s reluctance to fit in with British society he remembers how “they wanted desperately to integrate. But they wouldn’t allow us”.⁶² Of course, in the Brexit-era things will progressively get more complicated.

Johnson’s bass stories can, in this perspective, help us ‘de-colonising’ London not just as a physical but as a mental space. It’s a lower London, rethought and rewritten from below which composes a sort of bass history. As we have seen, dub is on open space which conceives no borders. Bass itself questions the very idea of borders and of polarity; bass, again, implies vibrating, with and ‘through’ others, it turns singularity, the single isolated voice into chorality, collectivity. The oppositional fight-back stance – which seems to be the only ‘solution’ suggested by Johnson in his poems – leaves room, in this sense,

⁶¹ Ibid., 54-55.

⁶² Decca Aitkenhaed, “Linton Kewsi Johnson: ‘It Was a Myth that Immigrants Didn’t to Fit into British. They Wouldn’t Allow Us’”, *The Guardian* (27 April 2018), www.theguardian.com/books/2018/apr/27/linton-kwesi-johnson-brixton-windrush-myth-immigrants-didnt-want-fit-british-society-we-werent-allowed, accessed 10 November 2020.

to a more complex strategy in which the ‘answer’, is offered by Johnson’s language itself, that is by his poetry, conceived – in our hard, divisive times – as a threshold in which self and other, inside and outside can constantly redefine themselves.

In this sense, it is the very modality of the enunciation which becomes a critical ‘space’ in Johnson’s work. His dub poetry represents an artistic language, a critical language overcoming theory (and, in a sense, prefixes), a poetry addressing the body, to be performed and not just read, asking its readers/listeners to perform themselves, as musicians, the resistance required to preserve and critically assert their own difference.