

# THE ARTS OF RESISTANCE IN THE POETRY OF LINTON KWESI JOHNSON

## AS ARTES DA RESISTÊNCIA NA POESIA DE LINTON KWESI JOHNSON

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### Resumo

*Este artigo analisa insubordinação e resistência manifestas na poesia pós-colonial contemporânea como forma de subverter os discursos dominantes no ocidente. Mais especificamente, a análise centra-se em estratégias textuais de resistência no trabalho do poeta britânico-jamaicano Linton Kwesi Johnson. A qualidade sincretista em sua obra relaciona-se com diáspora, hibridismo e criouliização como formas de re[escre]ver discursos hegemônicos com bases (neo)coloniais. Críticas pós-coloniais, em geral, irão enquadrar esta análise. Este estudo está organizado em três debates fundamentais: um breve relato biográfico do autor e a contextualização sociopolítica em que sua obra se insere, alguns exames críticos da poesia de LKJ e um estudo das estratégias de resistência diaspórica e hibridismo cultural empregados na sua poesia. Este artigo visa, portanto, a fazer uma análise literária de poemas pós-coloniais como técnicas estratégicas de descentramento da retórica ocidental dominante, a qual tenta naturalizar desigualdades e injustiças em ambos os contextos local e global.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Poesia Contemporânea, Crítica Pós-colonial, Diáspora, Criouliização, Resistência.*

## **Abstract**

*This paper analyses insubordination and resistance manifested in contemporary postcolonial poetry as ways of subverting dominant Western discourses. More specifically, I focus my analysis on textual strategies of resistance in the works of the British-Jamaican poet Linton Kwesi Johnson. The syncretistic quality in his oeuvre is related to diaspora, hybridity and creolisation as forms of writ[h]ing against (neo)colonially-based hegemonic discourses. Thus postcolonial critiques at large will frame this analysis. This article is arranged in three pivotal tasks: a brief discussion on the poet's biographical account and the socio-political concerns in his work, some critical comments on LKJ's poems and a study of strategies of diasporic resistance and cultural hybridism employed in his poetry. This paper aims therefore to carry out a literary analysis on contemporary poetry as strategic techniques to decentre dominant Western rhetoric that tries to naturalise inequalities and injustices in both local and global contexts.*

**Key words:** *Contemporary Poetry, Postcolonial Critique, Diaspora, Creolisation, Resistance.*

## **I Introduction**

In this paper, I will proceed first by briefly introducing a biographical account of Linton Kwesi Johnson and the intellectual trends that shape his work, covering issues such as his moving from Jamaica to England, dub music and poetry, the socio-political concern of his work and so on. Then I will shortly go on to read some critical works on his poems and thereafter I will offer my own analysis of a couple of poems clearly foregrounding this rationale: firstly, the poetic strategies by which the formalisms of standard English language are deconstructed; secondly, the depiction of public spaces populated by migrants, diasporans and working class dealing with state violence, unemployment and racism; and finally, the support of social movements and differing, hybrid identities as reversal discourse to hegemonic power.

## **2 A Short Account of the Poet's Life and Work**

Linton Kwesi Johnson (also known as and henceforth LKJ) was born on 24 August 1952 in Chapelton, a locality of Clarendon, Jamaica, and initially lived with his parents in Kingston and then with his grandmother in the countryside.<sup>1</sup> At the age of 11, he moved to England to join his mother, who had immigrated earlier to look for a better job and live in Brixton, South London. He attended Tulse Hill high school and Goldsmith College, University of London, where he obtained a degree in Sociology in 1973. While still a student, during the early 1970s, he started to appreciate

poetry and soon joined the Black Panther Youth league, a militant and Black Nationalist group inspired by the 1960s' US Black Power movement. While in this movement he helped to organise poetry training courses in association with Rasta Love, a grouping of drummers and poets with whom LKJ produced some of the poems that were released in his first album *Dread Beat an' Blood* (1978). The connections in this political and cultural environment provided LKJ with the inspiration and commitment to write his poetry and perform it publicly. LKJ's verses make witty use of the unpatterned dictation of Jamaican Creole blended with the dub style. His poetry usually entails the reciting of his own verses over dub music, and its discursive contexts are significantly influenced by political activity and social engagement.

His poetry first appeared in the magazine *Race Today*, a publication of Race Today Collective which, under the leadership of LKJ's friend Darcus Howe, has become a leading force in British with a radical black political orientation, and for which LKJ became an official member and arts editor by 1976. Through this publication, he launched his first collection of poetry, *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (1974; it includes a play). His second collection, *Dread Beat An Blood*, was published in 1975. The following years saw the release of *Inglan is a Bitch* (1980) and *Tings an Times* (1991). LKJ's best known sound recordings comprise his debut semi-album *Poet and Roots* (1977), and then the first full-length record edition *Dread Beat an' Blood* (1978), followed by *Forces of Victory* (1979), *Bass Culture* (1980), *Making History* (1984), *In Concert with the Dub Band* (1985), *Tings an' Times* (1991) and *More Time* (1998). Throughout these records, we find classics of dub poetry performance – and, in fact, of reggae itself – such as *Dread Beat an Blood*, *Independent Intavenshan*, *Inglan is a Bitch*, *New Craas Massahkah*, *Sonny's Lettah* and *Want fi goh Rave*. LKJ was a discerning activist and his track *All Wi Doin Is Defendin* accurately foresees the Brixton riots in 1981. Regarding the beginning of LKJ's career, Ashley Dawson (2006) comments as follows:

LKJ was quickly immersed in the radical currents that circulated throughout the black and Asian diasporic world at the time. The Black Panthers, whose youth wing he joined while still attending secondary school, exposed LKJ to the fertile blend of socialist political-economic analysis and black consciousness that characterizes the internationalist strands of the black radical tradition. In addition, as a young member of the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) in London during the early 1970s, LKJ participated in the groundbreaking debates that took place within that organization concerning the appropriate forms and themes of artistic production among members of the Caribbean exile community in Britain. Popular culture acquired increasing significance as these artists struggled, under the weight of the increasingly incendiary political events of the period, to forge a role for themselves as artists and popular leaders (p. 54).

The greatest part of LKJ's poetry is politically oriented, and one of the topics he chiefly addresses in his writing is the experience of being a black Briton and a West-Indian descendant in London.

Apart from his ethnic-racial and diasporic concerns, he has also dealt with other issues such as British foreign policy and support for the working-class British community. His most famous poems were composed during the Thatcher era. These poems give vivid accounts of the routine police violence against minorities occurring at the time, as in the case of the death of Clement Blear Peach, a New Zealander special-needs schoolteacher who became a symbol of resistance and anti-racist struggle.<sup>2</sup>

### **Reggae fi Peach**

everywhere yu goh it's di tak af di day  
everywhere yu goh yu hear people say  
dat di Special Patrol dem are murder, murder  
wi cant make dem get noh further  
(...)

kaw dem kill Blear Peach, di teacher (Johnson, disc 1, track 17, 1998: transcription mine).

During the 1980s he dedicated much of his efforts to journalistic writing, working closely with *Race Today*. Among many cultural activities, LKJ has promoted international poetry readings and concerts, narrated his 10-part radio serial about Jamaican folk music for BBC Radio 1 called "From Mento to Lovers Rock", and also presented a BBC television documentary on Carifesta called "From Brixton to Barbados". One of only two living poets to have had a Penguin Classics collection devoted to his work, LKJ in 2004 was elected as an Honorary Visiting Professor at Middlesex University in London. Since the late 1970s the author has received awards and honours including fellowships and prizes. In 2005, he was honoured with the silver Musgrave medal from the Institute of Jamaica for distinguished reputation in the art of poetry.

### **3 Critical Readings of Linton Kwesi Johnson's Poetry**

In a recent newspaper interview, journalist Nicholas Wroe begins with the following comments about the importance of LKJ's poetry in changing the attitude of British teenagers in the late 1970s:

Thirty years ago, it was not uncommon to encounter white, middle-class suburban and provincial teenagers wearing badges that proclaimed "SMASH THE SPG". The primary spark for their opposition to the Metropolitan Police's Special Patrol Group and its role in policing London's immigrant communities came from the work of Linton Kwesi Johnson. When the SPG was eventually disbanded in 1986, it was under a deluge of public condemnation. It is not too outlandish to suggest that Johnson's poetry and music shaped that opinion: so much for Auden's claim that "poetry makes nothing happen" (Wroe, 2008: *online*).

As a matter of fact, it is not prudent to place all the weight of LKJ's influence in his writing solely, because his music has been also very important in spreading his work (Caesar, 1996, p. 67). A couple of words may therefore be required to describe the influence of dub music on LKJ's poetry. Indeed, critical analyses of LKJ's verses are often associated with the study of dub poetry.

Rhythm and poetry were blended to generate not only a prominent music style known as rap music, but also another one, less known to audiences, so-called dub poetry. By the late 1970s, a new poetic movement, related to students of the Jamaica School of Drama, had emerged. Dub poetry was the label given to the new style of verse that reflected a revival of orality in Caribbean "sound" poetry, and is commonly referred to as a kind of poetic recital or performance art that mixes (usually politically oriented) rhymes with an instrumental basis on reggae music. Dub is instrumental reggae with various sound mixing effects (echoes, loops, reverberation, vocal bites, et cetera) replacing the removed lead vocal track. Like in rap and techno music, it challenges the ideology of the artist as original creator or performer. And dub poetry lays down a voice closely allied to the beat of the reggae rhythm (Hitchcock, 1993).

In such cases, shall we see, LKJ's writings played a pioneering role in relation to the conflictive scenario affecting West Indian immigrants in Brixton and London, as his poetry (especially the 1970s verses) was particularly intended to provide evidence of this environment of discrimination and violent incident. As the poet himself makes known in an interview:

My initial impetus to write was political – from the very beginning – it wasn't a need to clear things of my chest or to, in any way, express any profound, deep inner emotion or anything like that. From the very beginning I saw myself as giving voice to, and documenting, the experiences of my generation (*in* Caesar 1996, p. 66-67).

Hence LKJ's poetic career has been dedicated to express his community's anger and frustrations, hopes and aspirations, first within the Black Panthers and then with the Race Today Collective. Although Donnell and Welsh recognise LKJ's pioneering voice and great influence in confronting a pervasively, visibly racist British society, they are also aware of the fact that the oppositional and subversive stance assumed in LKJ's early verses "has not always worked in favour of the reception of dub poetry" (1996, p. 18). As they argue, "it has enacted to 'muddy the waters' of any critical appreciation by instigating the notion that dub poetry dealt only in the kind of protest rhetoric" (1996, p. 18). This perception has hindered, for instance, the appreciation of dub poetry as a fully fledged literary form, and it has been sidelined by a great deal of literary critics.

By making an effort to give a voice to a community forged on the borders of privation and marginalisation, dub poetry is composed of a deeply antagonistic and conflictive nature (as most of the legitimate claims made from the minorities' perspective). This poetic genre affirms the existence of an insurgent and interstitial culture through the performance of a migrant voice; a voice coming from the margin of the empire, coming out of endurance, to make itself socially, culturally and historically visible in a hostile, excluding modern world. Consequently, the zenith of aspirations in this literary art is to reach a space of social articulation of differences, contributing to redefine the British ideal of community and society.

From the viewpoint of "interstitial perspective" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 18), dub poetry heats up the debate on solidarity, social, historical and ideological limits of the community understood as a system resulting from contiguous transmissions of historical and cultural traditions. Therefore, dub poetry aims to be considered as a sign of the rising of a community whose revisionist spirit reconstructs current political conditions, as long as it depicts a social scenario where there is an open possibility of acceding to or preserving the difference, without entailing the hazard of an implicit reaffirmation of a Western dogma of universality.

Dub poetry and reggae music are interesting examples of how all these phenomena occur, as long as such artistic trends bring colonial subjects to the forefront, as protagonists, and look for an autonomous discourse that joins colonialist and colonised forces in an environment of commitment that inspires and looks forward to democratic liberty. Thus, the colonial and postcolonial encounters do not always lead to blood, death and tragedy; they can also precipitate scenarios of two-way exchange and constructive agreement.

One example of that could be the concept of creolisation, which gains a special and thoughtful contribution in LKJ's lively poetic style since his writing looks at the Caribbean and its social and cultural body beyond the boundaries of geographical circumscription as well as racial, linguistic and nationalist determinisms. Thus his work explores the construction of self in the interstices of domination and resistance, coloniser and colonised, oppression and subversion in accordance with the view that

"in-between" spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1-2).

As a result, the poet's discourse dovetails with works that look through and analyse Caribbean

nationalism and its relation to Creole identities, cultural hybridity, and the importance of creolisation to diaspora studies. Such a perspective comes especially from the historical interchange of multiple heritages that are repeatedly fragmented and recreated to accommodate new configurations. Examples of studies addressing these questions are Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Brent Edwards' *The practice of diaspora* (2003) and Shalini Puri's *The Caribbean postcolonial* (2004). By and large, such authors tackle the problematic around the violence in the Atlantic crossing, black transnational culture and the huge ethnic heritages brought from the African continent to re-elaborate, transform and be transformed in the so-called New World.

The poet Linton Kwesi Johnson is aware of this multi-faceted culture and its tensioned reality, and he uses his work to make a draft of the official history and show its interstices and lapses. The poet does not deny the so-called classic culture, but he revisits and rewrites it, subverting it by inserting his diasporic, Afro-Caribbean experience into it. For this reason, his writing is sometimes ambiguous and can present aspects of Jamaican oral tradition, concerns for civil rights and minority struggles, as well as rhythmic inspiration from reggae music. That is why his literary style is conventionally labelled as "dub poetry".

#### **4 Creolisation, Diaspora, Difference and Grassroots Movement in Linton Kwesi Johnson's Poems**

It is beyond the scope of this paper to look at all poems of Linton Kwesi Johnson in detail, as time and space permit only the examination of a few examples of his work. I will therefore try to do my best to cover some of LKJ's classic poems in three different decades: the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Presenting LKJ's selected poems according to this scheme will also be a stimulus for the readers, whose interest in his poetry may be stirred up since they will be allowed an insightful perspective on his most important poems and the topics of discussion arising from them.

At this initial stage, it is worth giving heed to the multiple aesthetic interpretations that LKJ's work is open to, ranging from the postmodern forms of combining discursive texts and contexts of popular culture and "high art", to the expressions and celebrations of voices of the disadvantaged, the oppressed, the subalterns, the diasporans, as well as to the poeticising of bottom-up movements making grassroots demands in the socio-political scenario. The most evident aspect of his work tackles the problem of putting neglected and peripheral narratives onto the pertinent stage of postmodernity and difference. He is entirely aware of the power of words and discourses as modes of recognition and domination. Thus, if discourses have the capacity to establish the

patterns of recognition and domination, his poetry aims at discursive formats as pertinent spaces to articulate the enunciative potential of a peripheral modernity. Such spaces are composed of a hybridisation/creolisation formed in-between the contact zones of imperialist powers and postcolonial territories and peoples.

This heterogeneity is the first element to be noticed when the poet employs the Jamaican Creole to distort the formalisms of Standard English so as to create a different space of enunciation, as we can infer from the majority of his poems. Let us take “Want fi Goh Rave” as an example:

I woz  
waakin doun di road  
di adah day  
when I hear a likkle yout-man say

him seh:  
yu noh si mi situation  
mi dont have noh acamadaeshan  
mi haffi sign awn at di stayshon  
at six in di evenin  
mi seh mi life gat noh meanin  
I jus livin widout feelin

still  
mi haffi mek a raze<sup>3</sup>  
kaw mi come af age  
an mi want fi goh rave (Johnson, 2006, p. 33).

As usual in his compositions, the poet turns a blind eye to the formal patterns dictated by English grammar and makes a sheer written carnivalisation with the orality of creolised and slang languages. Journalist Vicky Allan (2004) once observed that the poetic fusion of the Caribbean language of LKJ's home and the urban patois of the street with rhythms of reggae was partly “the best means of expression for his message, but also he liked the idea of subverting the English language, of knocking at the foundations of ‘Queen’s English’” (p. 7). In the particular message of “Want fi Goh Rave” the poet provides a setting where common young people suffer constantly from the pressures of not having a roof over their heads, lack of jobs, lack of security, but still keeping alive the hope of getting some money at least for going to a rave. This poetic perspective resounds in Julia Kristeva's (1986) argument that

carnavalesque discourse breaks through the laws of a language censored by grammar and semantics and, at the same time, is a social and political protest. There is no equivalence, but rather, identity between challenging official linguistic codes and challenging official law (p. 36).

So LKJ's basic strategies of resistance to challenge official codes and traditional poetic formulas are mostly based on language experimentation with the objective of amplifying the practice and comprehension of radical literature and political uneasiness.

LKJ describes the link of this orally-linguistic experimentation to real-life experience and community thus:

The kind of thing that I write and the way I say it is as a result of the tension between Jamaican Creole and Jamaican English and between those and English English. And 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 (*apud* Salkey, 1975, p. 8).

From the very beginning, the reader will notice LKJ's purpose is focused on the language of the poem, in order to establish a new way of interacting with that reader. When creating ruptures in the written language, sometimes difficult to comprehend, the poet demands a less passive behaviour from the receptor so as to decode the message. As a result, the reader is invited to cross the conventional boundaries of poetry and writing, and has more participation in the construction of meanings. In addition, the poet will use the ruptures with formal language for several purposes: the political non-conformity is a way to rethink poetic practice; the incorporation of elements least recurrent in traditional or canonical poetic conventions; the subversion of grammatical rules and discourse codes is also a denouncement of tainted power structures. Such linguistic and ideological ruptures can be seen, for instance, in the poem "Di Anfinish Revalueshan":

now watchya mistah man  
mi noh like di way yu tan  
an yu tan soh too lang yu know man  
a meditate yu a meditate pan di same sang soh lang? (Johnson, 2006, p. 107).

Here the interference and influence of hegemonic power (=standard language) is taken and understood as a phenomenon that reaches the most recondite realms of everyday life and that belongs to the domain of perception and experience. Employing a Creole code, LKJ is therefore able to defy the "mistah man" in a conflictive opposition as well as using the typical weapons of the weak such as sabotage, dissimulation, feigned ignorance, slander, foot-dragging, rumours, among others (Scott, 1985).

As a matter of fact, LKJ's poetic style relies widely on a blending pattern where aesthetics and politics are used to depict public spaces. In such milieus everyday facts of life are surrounded by

common people (especially young people) suffering from shortage of employment, police violence, segregation, misgovernance, scepticism, lack of perspective. Also, the exploration of poetic language by depicting public, open spaces of conflict and hardship brings forward a preoccupation with the crisis of public spaces in contemporary urbanised societies. Projecting a perspective of experimental poetic creation, generally in association with left-wing politics, LKJ's ditty is both an addition to other critical worldviews of social problems and a mouthpiece to claim representation for marginalised individuals.

last satdey  
I nevah deh pan no faam,  
so I decide fi tek a walk  
doun a Brixton  
an see wha gwaan.

di bredrin dem stan-up  
outside a Hip City,<sup>4</sup>  
as usual, a look pretty;  
dem a lawf big lawf  
dem a talk dread talk  
dem a shuv an shuffle dem feet,  
soakin in di sweet musical beat.

but when nite come  
policeman run dem dung;  
beat dem dung a grung,  
kick dem ass,  
sen dem paas justice  
to prison walls of gloom (Johnson, 2006, p. 3).

The poetic discourse, despite dealing with local problems in a creolised language description, also presents a state of affairs that is adaptable to the need of widening our perspective to the facts of both globalism and difference. For instance, it points out differences carefully scrutinised, in a scenario of accommodation of knowledge where the subaltern assumes their own voice, their own history. From the moment when the poet denounces politicians as morally corrupt and policemen as gratuitously violent, and when he gives space for the "likkle yout-man [to] say" what he thinks and what afflicts him, there will come to the front line a crucial deconstruction of several categories that classifies such individuals as distinct, or subaltern, or second-class citizens. This is due to the fact that recognition of differences emerges from the spaces of marginalised zones, which is not always prone to share the Western tendency to rationalise monolithically. And such a transit is enunciated permanently within both the physical and subjective displacement observed in contemporaneity, where there is room for developing particular and collective, local and global imaginaries.

The very fact of displacements and transits of subjects from the periphery to the centre of power puts forward the deconstruction of a marginal subjectivity marked territorially, culturally, ethnically, linguistically. The physical phenomenon of dislocation and resettlement, the backbone of diasporic movements, disrupts old structures of meanings and reshapes central, hegemonic discourses on the grounds of postmodernity, postcoloniality, globalisation, hybridisation and difference. Working as an operative means to provoke and persuade the central discursive programs, this “incursion” has nothing to do with an analysis of external forms surrounding a centrality. Indeed, it is a reality that entails comprehending, internalising, and reshaping the practices of knowledge and colonial discourses that have been historically based on the recognition of the other as an odd figure. But this other comes from the multiplicity, the plurality that is part of us, and therefore it is increasingly and permanently linked to ontological questions in contemporaneity.

This diasporised Caribbeanness and its flexibility in appearing in different corners of the world are sometimes explored by LKJ as a way of protest and resistance. An example of it occurs in the poem “It Dread inna Ingran”, in which LKJ pays homage to George Lindo, a Jamaican worker living in Bradford, a “family man” living in the melting pot of England who “nevah do no wrang” and despite that was wrongfully convicted of armed robbery under the regime of Margaret Thatcher. So LKJ’s poem, despite campaigning for Lindo’s release, sounds like a very utterance for diasporans to unite and “stan firm inna Ingran” against a hegemonic power that insists in treating the different, or the “minority”, as a subaltern:

mi seh dem frame-up George Lindo  
up in Bradford Toun  
but di Bradford Blacks  
dem a rally roun...

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... (Johnson, 2006, p. 25).

Hence, as Hitchcock (1993) once noticed, the Afro-Caribbean peoples and their postcolonial Asian fellows are caught up in the Manichean logic of exclusion/inclusion that drives the British hegemonic ethnic group. When questioned about the notion of black British identity and how it fits into the whole experience of afro-diaspora, Linton Kwesi Johnson answered more or less in consonance with V. S. Naipaul's conclusion when, after graduating at Oxford, the latter found himself on his own in early 1950s London, racially marginalised, without a job or prospects, unable to have his first literary attempts published, desolately homesick, but reluctant to admit defeat and return to Trinidad, even after his father's death. Then LKJ's stance is pro diaspora as a way of realistic resistance:

From an early age, in fact from when I was in the Panthers, I realised that black people were in this country [Great Britain] to stay and we had to accept that we weren't going anywhere, and this whole thing that our parents had come with, a dream of coming to work for a few years and then going back home, that wasn't on at all and we had to accept that we're a part of Britain and that we had to build our own independent institutions here – cultural, political and social institutions – and accept the reality of our situation (*in Caesar, 1996, p. 69*).

This clear-cut political vision in LKJ's work, which as Kozain (1994) argues, "calls attention to and asserts, in a defiant and confrontational manner, the presence of black West Indians in Britain" (p. 84), is particularly present in the late-1970s and 1980s verses, a period marked by radical change in the political awareness of West Indian immigrants in the British metropolis. As a result, when LKJ establishes the Jamaican diction and Creole language as a pattern for his poetic writings, he helps to consolidate the idea that black communities were not only immigrants living in England and serving as blue-collar workers, but were in fact legally and historically British citizens. LKJ always takes a clear stance that he has been living in Europe since he was 11 years old, so he has put down roots in British soil: "Whether we want to accept it or not, our children and grandchildren are Europeans". And he does not mean that merely in a racial sense, but in a geopolitical sense as well:

We are Europeans and we are part of Europe. In the same way that one can speak about African-Americans, one can talk about black Europeans, because we are part of Europe. Europe will never be white again. Never (*in Caesar, 1996, p. 76-77*).

To the same extent it is also crucial to begin the deconstruction of the myth that Africa is the black man's land, given the complexities and diversities of the continent. In addition, diaspora and globalisation are currently changing the demographic maps of the world, so determinisms based on the association of racial typologies with different territories will sooner or later vanish.

“Inglan is a Bitch” is another poem dealing with the West Indian migrant experience in Great Britain. In this poem LKJ empathises with the immigrants, recording the many difficulties they have to go through to survive in the “land of opportunity”. Apart from the diasporic element reflected upon, the protest element is easily noticed: protest against alienating chores, inequality, racism, class prejudice, exploitation, oppression and so forth:

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

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

...

well mi dhu day wok an mi dhu nite wok  
mi dhu clean wok an mi dhu dutty wok  
dem seh dat black man is very lazy  
but if yu si how mi wok yu woodah seh mi crazy (Johnson, 2006, p. 39-40).

The depiction of public spaces and mass organisations, intertwined with discursive resources for storytelling and dub sounds, are also a common base in the construction of LKJ’s ditties. As an instance of this engagement, we can inspect the poem “Forces of Victri”, a poem that sounds like a rally chant dedicated to the Race Today Renegades and the Carnival Development Committee, the pro-carnivalists who won over the anti-carnivalist forces that tried to prohibit the Notting Hill Carnival in the late 1970s. Like a griot of the people, LKJ brings together story, poem, song and dance in a couple of dub verses that celebrate the maintenance of the carnival as a symbolic weapon, as well as a “niche” of autonomy where people find their dignity as a subordinated group:

we’re di forces af victri  
an wi comin rite through  
we’re di forces af victri  
now wat yu gonna do

wi mek a likkle date  
fi nineteen-seventy-eight  
an wi fite an wi fite  
an defeat di State  
den all a wi jus fahwod  
up to Not’n’ Hill Gate (Johnson, 2006, p. 37).

The poet himself remembers with great enthusiasm the deeds of the event in an interview:

“Forces of Victory” itself was a celebration of the victory that the pro-carnivalists had won over those people who had tried to ban the Notting Hill Carnival, because, remember, they tried to police the carnival off the streets with so many policemen in 1976 it led to a riot, and another riot again in 1977. And in 1978 I celebrated because Race Today Renegades, which is the mas’ band to which I belonged at the time, were playing a mas’ called “The Forces of Victory” and the mas’ was also symbolic of the victory of the pro-carnivalist forces against the anti-carnivalist forces, and it was a military mas’ with tanks, infantry, airforce, sailors and so on and so forth (*in Caesar, 1996, p. 69*).

In his analysis of the configuration of social conflicts, LKJ brings forward an environment of deep social and economic problems, where the functionality of State usually does not reach, and into which a brutal police force is brought instead. The result is a fuelling of tensions as crowds gather to manifest, protest and fight for their political and economic rights, in a practical demonstration of the objective coordinates of social class disputes. This is also a parameter LKJ uses to reflect immediately on the struggles of social movements and their demands for improvement of public politics. On the other hand, the poet does not think twice to express his disapproval when these movements seem to be internally fragmented, oriented to liquidate their own autonomies, leaving room therefore for the truculent repressive strategies of the State to be continued. No doubt the poet also recognises the challenges of social movements and exhorts the willing possibility of situating such struggles in a horizon of rights conquest and gaining the battle of ideas.

As an example of strategies of resistance of social movements in urban areas, it is worthwhile to emphasise the Notting Hill Carnival conflicts and the violent 1981 Brixton riots. Both events were described by LKJ’s verses respectively as “Forces of Victri” and “Di Great Insohreckshan”. These confrontational events highlighted the need to put pressure on the government to assure the end of institutional racism in the Metropolitan Police, the continuous harassment the (black) population felt they were under, the combating of segregation and social inequality, and the promotion of a positive general view of the dynamic celebration of Britain’s multicultural diversity. Doing battle with the degeneracy of a conservative intelligentsia, and avoiding the traps of ideological cocoons, have been essential steps for social movements like these ones continually adjusting to urban spaces in a changing world. Such movements have then too much to say about modern-day postcolonial trends, such as hybridisation, third spaces, creolisation, diaspora, et cetera. As a matter of fact, hybridity with an inbuilt tendency to resist and transform has been an implicit subject in Bhabha’s (1994) theories:

The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation (p. 211).

## Di Great Insohreckshan

it woz in april nineteen eighty wan  
doun inna di ghetto af Brixtan  
dat di babylan dem cauz such a frickshan  
dat it bring about a great insohreckshan  
an it spread all owevah di naeshan  
it woz truly an historikal occayshan

it woz event af di year  
an I wish I ad been dere  
wen wi run riat all owevah Brixtan  
wen wi mash-up plenty police van  
wen wi mash-up di wicked wan plan  
wen wi mash-up di Swamp Eighty Wan<sup>5</sup>  
fi wha?  
fi mek di rulah dem andastan  
dat wi naw tek noh more a dem oppreshan (Johnson, 2006, p. 60).

From these excerpts we may surmise not only a call-for-action attitude in LKJ's poetry, but also an instrument to mobilise people to celebrate their conquests. The landmark of this social convulsion, which shortly after would literally set afire the streets of the English capital, came when "a bran new breed of blacks" (as LKJ defines the members of his generation in the poem "Yout Rebels") realised that white British ruling class were out to trample upon their legitimate aspirations and rights. It is not fortuitous then that poems such as "It Dread inna Inqlan" and "New Craas Massakah" had been composed in the heyday of community outrage, mobilisation and protests against the judicial proceedings in which the British establishment, particularly the Thatcher government, were accused of both committing violations of rights in the case of George Lindo by finding him guilty of offences he had not perpetrated, and neglecting the racially motivated arson attack at Yvonne Ruddock's birthday party in South London in 1981, which resulted in the deaths of fourteen young blacks and twenty-six seriously injured (Hitchcock, 1993; Johnson, 2006). Racial hatred was certainly the main reason why these individuals either seemed immediately suspicious to or suffered neglect from the police authorities.

In short, besides being a writer, Linton Kwesi Johnson can also be considered a socially engaged activist and performer who contributes greatly to voicing the desperation of oppressed communities at local and global levels. He conveys his political issues in his poetry, songs and performances, as well as through his activism. Even though at times his work levels criticisms against old-fashioned socialist states and the plenty problems of autocratic and bureaucratic control stratagems, such as in the poem "Mi Revalueshanary Fren":

mi revalueshanary fren is nat di same agen

yu know fram wen?  
fram di masses shattah silence—  
staat fi grumble  
fram pawty paramoncy tek a tumble  
fram Hungary to Poelan to Romania  
fram di cozy kyawsl dem staat fi crumble  
wen wi buck-up wananada in a reaznin  
mi fren always en up pan di same ting  
dis is di sang him love fi sing:

Kaydar<sup>6</sup>  
e ad to go  
Zhivkov<sup>7</sup>  
e ad to go  
Husak<sup>8</sup>  
e ad to go  
Honnicka<sup>9</sup>  
e ad to go  
Chowcheskhu<sup>10</sup>  
e ad to go  
jus like apartied  
will av to go (Johnson, 2006, p. 67).

Notwithstanding LKJ certainly remains committed to fair principles of equal sharing of the world's wealth and ending the exploitation of labour the lot of hundreds of millions of civilians across the world live under – as he actually demonstrates in the poem “More Time”. In addition, the poet also shares his theories about what it means to identify oneself as part of a “minority”, as well as his own experiences as a Caribbean immigrant in Britain who tries to find his discourse outside imperial paradigms of recognition by emphasising his own identity and difference.

The adopted route leads to the unveiling of the histories of (post)colonial territories and peoples, leaving an opening for them to represent their geocultural characteristics and mutations. This changing effect is increasingly present in the arts, where most postcolonial production finds its place, as in literature, music, visual arts and so forth. The whole scenario, however, is encapsulated in the unequal development of advanced capitalism, which has serious difficulty in keeping a common cultural logic, and manifests itself permanently in inequalities and imbalances. In the years to come we will see how these complexities of inequalities and imbalances in the contemporary capitalist world will be dealt with in the literary work of other postcolonial writ[h]ers along with the context of history and literature.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> These biographical details are largely based on Chevalier (1991), Dawson (2006), Hitchcock (1993) and

Johnson (2006).

<sup>2</sup> Kozain (1994) mentions elsewhere that one of the poems of note on *Bass Culture* is “Raggae fi Peach”, “a lament in memory of Blair Peach, an anti-racist activist killed by police in South Hall, April 1979, during demonstration protesting against National Front activities” (p. 97).

<sup>3</sup> “mek a raze”: get money.

<sup>4</sup> Desmond’s Hip City: a popular record shop in the 1960s and 1970s for Jamaican music, on Atlantic Road, Brixton.

<sup>5</sup> Swamp 81: code name for Brixton police stop-and-search operation in 1981.

<sup>6</sup> Kadar: last communist leader of Hungary.

<sup>7</sup> Last communist leader of Bulgaria.

<sup>8</sup> Last communist leader of Czechoslovakia.

<sup>9</sup> Honecker: last communist leader of East Germany.

<sup>10</sup> Ceausescu: last communist leader of Romania.

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