

Resistance and the Dub Griot: Four Linton Kwesi Johnson Poems, Policing, and Social Unrest

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“Inglan is a bitch / dere’s no escapin it” - Linton Kwesi Johnson

Although poet Linton Kwesi Johnson (often referred to as LKJ) released “Inglan is a Bitch” on his record *Bass Culture* in 1980, the speaker’s story of hard and “duttu wok” in London speaks to decades of Caribbean diaspora experiences in Britain (38). For the Caribbean diaspora, the 1950s and 1960s were marked by emigration to Britain and the confrontation of colonial hegemony and labor recruitment with social rejection and racial discrimination. The following decades were marked by a growing sense of Black Britishness, recession, and civil unrest. After decades of discriminatory housing, employment, and legislative practices, the sense that “dere’s no escapin it” (39) was acute for increasingly politicized and policed young people with a different relationship to the British nation from that of their parents and grandparents in the *Windrush* generation. This relationship was further shaped by Thatcherite welfare debates, anti-immigrant rhetoric, unemployment, cuts to services, and repeated efforts to redefine the legal limits of Britishness to exclude Black Britons. Johnson’s poetry chronicles the major turns in diaspora and national history and the diaspora’s experiences and reactions, making him an oral historian of his times, a griot of London’s Caribbean diaspora. In the 1978 documentary about Johnson’s work, *Dread Beat an’ Blood* directed by Franco Rosso, and on the cover of his album by the same name released the same year, Johnson performs “It Dred Inna Inglan” in front of the main Bradford police station. Johnson and his audience were at a protest arranged by the George Lindo Action Committee calling for the release of George Lindo, a Black West Indian man wrongly convicted of robbery and later freed and paid £25,000 compensation. To me, this moment and image exemplify Johnson’s role as a poet activist and chronicler of his times. This study focuses on four of Johnson’s poems from the late 1970s and early 1980s as texts of postcolonial social critique situated within the former colonial metropole, markers on a timeline of

Caribbean diaspora and Black British history, and acts of resistance in and of themselves.

The first poem is “Inglan is a Bitch,” which is used as an example of the dub poetry genre and Johnson’s work. The second poem in this study is the anti-“sus” poem “Sonny’s Lettah” from his 1979 album, *Forces of Victory*, in which a son writes to his mother from Brixton Prison to explain his incarceration following an altercation in which a policeman dies when he and his brother are targeted by police for “sus” and resist police brutality. The third poem, which comes from Johnson’s 1983 album *Making History*, is “New Craas Massakah,” a piece dedicated to the fourteen young victims of a fire in a house on New Cross Road in Deptford in January 1981, thought to have been an attack by neofascists. The fourth poem, also from *Making History*, is “Di Great Insohreckshan,” which describes the April 1981 Brixton uprisings as a pivotal moment in Black communities’ resistance to racist oppression. The poems are emblematic of Johnson’s career-long criticism of institutional state-sponsored racism in a postcolonial poetic form—dub poetry—that resists hierarchies of poetic taste and the dominance of the English language.

As a Jamaican-British poet working in the dub poetry tradition, Johnson coined the term “dub poet” in the 1970s, but as soon as the early 1980s he is pointed in distinguishing himself as a poet: “I’m a poet, and I think that poetry should stand on its own, and has enough strength and musicality to stand on its own ... I’m a poet. Period” (qtd. in Davis 164). For poet ahdri zina mandiola, this term was useful as it “got folks to look at & assess the language and style with little or no comparing against english or other standards” (10 [sic]). Dub poetry’s origins are in the dub music and toasting tradition. In *Remixology*, his history of dub, Paul Sullivan notes that this starts with “dubplates, typically instrumental roots reggae pressed onto acetates and played on sound systems,” which deejays would “improvise and speak—toast—over and increase the appeal and popularity of their sound systems” (Sullivan 7). Engineers would then rearrange instrumental elements and add effects like reverb, echo, and an array of sounds (8). Sullivan adds, quoting Erik Davis, that “good dub sounds like the recording studio itself has begun to hallucinate” (9). This hallucinatory quality appears in some of Johnson’s work, like the aforementioned “Inglan is a Bitch” in which lyrics give way to increasingly discordantly warped notes with a jarring effect which then echoes the lyrics describing the experience of a migrant who works his whole life—“mi dhu day wok and my dh unite wok / mi dhu clean wok and mi dhu dutty wok” (38)—only to be laid off short of retirement benefit eligibility, despite there being “wok in abundant / yet still, dem mek mi redundant” (39). Immediately following the end of the last stanza, the guitar strumming becomes increasingly warped and unrecognizable,

manipulated with reverb, and punctuated with a brief rewind sound effect. The riddim seems to suddenly start over mid-beat before both guitar and beat straighten out again to the close of the track. The jarring and restarting speak to the migrant's experience of being suddenly, unexpectedly sacked while the use of reverb gives the sense of floating in an undefined space, an uncertain future.

Dub would have an effect on the development of sound system culture and, as Sullivan notes, shape linguistic culture as well (11). The element of speech in dub made it a form that celebrated Patwah and everyday speech in a social system that privileged so-called "proper" or "correct" English. The form provided another opportunity for social commentary, similar to soca and calypso. In dub toasting, notes Christopher Partridge, deejays were social commentators and "toasting or 'chatting' ... functioned homiletically as a conduit for morals, practical advice, proverbs, education about history, and even religion ... the sound-system event is one during which there is a sharing of collective experiences" (112). This is the model from which dub poetry would grow worldwide. Speaking to collective experiences of injustice would become Johnson's ethos. In sound system culture, as the legendary deejay I-Roy explains, toasting became "a way of protesting against certain physical and mental things that we Jamaican people have suffered" (qtd. in Hebdige 88). Johnson carries this over from Jamaica to Britain to speak to the injustices experienced by Caribbean and Asian diasporans and Black Britons. Toasting and dub poetry became subversive forms—"liberationist discourse" in Partridge's terms—that challenged racist oppression in the Caribbean and in the diaspora at large.

Language is a major component of this subversion and Partridge's analysis of the language of dub poetry is worth quoting at length:

In Rastafarian terms, because it is performed in 'Babylon' from within the community of the righteous oppressed, it is, by nature, subversive. Outside Jamaica—and particularly within white societies used to standard English—this is further emphasized by the Jamaican creole wording, which ... gives it an almost sacralized gravitas. Just listening to the language one is encouraged to think from a different perspective ... although dub poetry is meant to be heard, and thus most effective when performed, when in print, the careful use of nonstandard, approximately phonetic transcription ('eye creole') helps both evoke a sense of rhythm (particularly if the reader has already heard it) and, indeed, also to engage the reader politically. (200)

"Inglan is a Bitch"

"Inglan is a Bitch" serves as a remarkable example of what Partridge describes. Obviously, to refer to England as a bitch is a political statement,

but to also creolize the very word “England,” the supposed emblem of civilization, culture, law, and the English language (leaving aside for now the many versions of English spoken in England), is to be subversive. Similarly, London becomes “Landan” and underground (that icon of the city) becomes “andahgroun.” Other notable examples of what Partridge calls eye creole and I am describing as Patwah include lines like “dere’s no runin whe fram it” and “wen dem gi you di likkle wage packit” (37). As Mervyn Morris notes, the phonetic spelling of the words on the page indicates that the poetry is “meant to be *heard* [and so] many lines yield little meaning until sounded” (190).

Of course, what ultimately makes the genre is the *pairing* of music and poetry, so much so that the riddim is a core part of the poetry, not merely an atmospheric backdrop. Both elements are crucial. Oku Onuora explains in an interview with Morris in the early 1980s that dub poetry “has a built-in reggae rhythm—hence when the poem is read without any reggae rhythm (so to speak) backing, one can distinctly hear the reggae rhythm coming out of the poem” (qtd. in Morris 189). To continue with the example of “Inglan is a Bitch,” which Johnson has described as a ballad (Davis 164), we note that the pace, pauses, and internal rhymes follow a reggae riddim and that the rhymes that would be near rhymes in received pronunciation “standard” English become truer rhymes in Jamaican Patwah. For instance:

dem have a likkle factri [pause] up inna Brackly
 inna disya factri all dem dhu is pack crackry
 fi di laas fifteen years dem get mi laybah
 now awftah fifteen years [pause] mi fall out a fayvah (38)

The first and third lines of the stanza include internal pauses that pace the riddim. The almost true rhyme of “Brackly” and “crackry” in Patwah would be nowhere as close—“Brackley” and “crockery”—in received pronunciation standard English. While “laybah” and “favyah” are near rhymes in Patwah and as “labor” and “favor” in received pronunciation standard English, the extension of the vowel sound “ay” lengthens the words and contributes to the intrinsic riddim of the poem.

In the Rosso documentary Johnson describes what brought him to his work in the genre and, particularly, to writing in Jamaican Patwah:

There were a lot of things which were happening around me on the streets, happening to young Blacks, to old Black people, older Blacks, things which I wanted to write about, but I couldn’t communicate fluently that experience within the English language. I found the English language too dead, too sterile to communicate the violence of that experience and so I naturally resorted to my first language, the language of the group to which I belong, about whose experience I wanted to write, which is the West Indians. I resorted to Jamaican Creole. (*Dread Beat an’ Blood*)

In other words, to use Kamau Brathwaite's term, Johnson used "nation language" (5). Nation language is the language of community, a language of resistance to the hegemony and hierarchies of Eurocentric cultures exported and cultivated by colonization and imperialism. It is language that makes dub poetry an art form for those who speak and understand it, rather than those who claim to set the standard for poetry. As Christian Habekost points out in his study of dub poetry,

For dub poets, the use of Patois/'Patwa'/Jamaican language is crucial, not only as a means of indigenous expression in African-Caribbean poetry but also as a programmatic statement ... 'Creole English vs. Standard English' is extended to mean 'language of the people vs. language of the establishment' ... [dub poets] see themselves as subversive linguistic agents in the continuous struggle against notions that denounce Creole as ... 'broken English.' (63)

Delivered in Jamaican Creole in the toasting tradition, accompanied by dub beats, and characterized by internal rhythms, dub poetry was circulated quickly as it was pressed onto vinyl, played on sound systems, and became an almost instant musico-literary form informed by ongoing events and resistance to oppression. These messages can spread quickly as the form is accessible. As Johnson observes in an interview with Burt Caesar, "a lot of people who wouldn't have bothered to maybe come to a poetry reading, or even buy a book, were attracted to the music" (67). He adds, "if I'm going to write poetry about the experiences of black people, the ordinary folk, like my mother, should be able to pick up one of my poems, read it and understand it without having been immersed in the classical tradition, the so-called Great Tradition" (72).

In his introduction to *Voiceprint: An Anthology of Oral and Related Poetry from the Caribbean*, Gordon Rohler outlines the tensions surrounding the use of Patwah and other Creole languages in poetry. Before the embrace of the oral tradition originating in the 1970s, he explains, "the debate concerned the viability of 'dialect' as a medium for poetry, and was an extension of the troubled issue nexus between education, speech, class, status and power. Creole dialects, thought of as belonging to the semi-literate and poor," were more commonly associated with a "folksiness" that the wealthy could sentimentalize while maintaining their social status (1). "Nowhere has the 'dialect' versus 'standard' polemic been more bitter than the question of whether serious poetry can grow out of a dialect base," he adds (1). As dub poetry developed, it addressed the experiences of Jamaican and Caribbean migrants and over the decades Jamaican Patwah became one of predominant linguistic threads in what has been described as Multicultural London English as it was combined with the speech of other groups in the city.

British dub poetry, like Johnson's, speaks to a specific imagined community, a nation of Caribbean migrants rejected by what had been their "mother country," and subsequent generations of Black Britons of all diasporic backgrounds. It responds to Britain's attempts to other Black Britons, the disenchantment of youths, the disenfranchisement of their parents, and the postcolonial promise-breaking of anti-(im)migrant rhetoric and legislation. Writing in 1960 George Lamming observed that, figuratively speaking, "most West Indians of my generation were born in England," which is to say that the idea of being united under the identifier West Indian crystallized in this period as different islanders realized that "the water which separates us can make no difference to the basic fact that we are West Indians; that we have a similar history behind us" (214). While West Indians in Britain were forming diasporic bonds, politicians, media outlets, and white supremacists were reifying an idea of a white Britain that excluded migrants of color and framing Commonwealth migrants as illegal immigrants. This process included promoting images of housing dereliction and prostitution in neighborhoods still impacted by World War II bombings, treating Black students as less intelligent, studying the supposed absenteeism of Black parents and supposed delinquency of Black youth, and spreading depictions of supposedly Black street crime. Dub poetry is one literary genre directly speaking back against these depictions.

"Sonny's Lettah"

By the early 1970s, this image of Black street crime was concentrated in the symbol of the mugger, which John Clarke, Stuart Hall, *et al.* closely analyze in *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*. Mugging, as a discursive construct, had come to be

unquestionably identified with a specific class fraction or category of labour (black youth) and with a specific kind of area ... the classic urban 'trouble spots', presenting problems of welfare support, of crime prevention and control—but also of social discipline and public order ... where the squeeze on welfare and public expenditure, on education and social support, most effectively bites ... Overwhelmingly, in the large cities, they are also the black areas. (Clarke, Hall, *et al.* 338)

The construct of Britain in crisis—economic, ideological, cultural—bolstered conservative rhetoric and helped to usher Thatcherism in with an emphasis on "more policing, tougher sentencing, better family discipline, the rising crime rate as an index of social disintegration, the threat to 'ordinary people going about their private business' from thieves, muggers, etc., the wave of lawlessness and the loss of law-abidingness" (Hall 55). Johnson's work from the 1970s speaks to these

constructs and the real, material impacts they had on people's lives. In the poem "It No Funny," for example, Johnson writes "people sayin dis / people sayin dat / bout di youf af today / how dem carryin on a way / an it noh funny" (28). "It Dread Inna Innglan" speaks to the positions young Black men are put in by over policing in their communities as it is a call for justice for the aforementioned George Lindo and "All Wi Doin Is Defendin" reflects on "doze days / of de truncheon" and "doze nites / of melancholy locked in a cell," promising that those days are over as a war to end the oppression is coming. In "Di Great Insohreckshan," discussed below, Johnson again uses this language of war to describe the 1981 Brixton uprisings: "wan an two innocent get mar / but wha / noh soh it goh sometime inna war" (58).

Major tensions grew from excessive policing of Black communities and the effects of ever restrictive immigration legislation. The Immigration Act of 1971 (implemented on January 1st, 1973) expanded Britain's ability to deport Commonwealth citizens and introduced the word "patial," "a word apparently not previously in any dictionary, but rather coined by an official in the Home Office" (Cohen 18). The term and its accompanying legislation allowed right of abode to Commonwealth citizens with parents or grandparents born in the UK, unsuubtly increasing the number of whites in the Commonwealth with rights to live in the UK. (By October 1981, the British Nationality Act of 1981, which was implemented on January 1st, 1983, used the concept of *jus sanguinus* for the first time so that people born in Britain, but not of British parents, would not automatically be considered British.) This context shaped Johnson's desire to write, as he reflects to Caesar: "my initial impetus to write...was an urgency to express the anger and frustrations and the hopes and the aspirations of my generation growing up in this country under the shadow of racism" (64).

As the rhetoric of Black street crime took hold, it was contrasted with Britain's representation of law and order as a national institution. Paul Gilroy explains that "adherence to [the rule of law] symbolizes the imagined community of the nation and expresses the fundamental unity and equality of its citizens. Beyond this general level, the importance of law and constitution in Britain is understood to be a unique and important cultural achievement" (*Ain't No Black* 74). It is in this way that acts beyond the law are often rhetorically treated as outside the sphere of Britishness. When political discourse routinely situates poverty and crime as particularly Black social issues, the control of the law is directed at Black communities, which are then construed as outside the sphere of Britishness. Police disseminated and reproduced their own questionable figures of "Black crime," elevating the idea "to sociological credibility, even analytic status, and mobilized it not only in the struggle to police the

blacks themselves, but also as part of securing the consent of white citizens to police practices which they might not otherwise find acceptable” (Gilroy, “Police and Thieves” 146). In Rosso’s documentary, Johnson situates himself within this context: “I think we have a very important struggle on our hands in this country at this time and I want to be a part of that struggle. There’s a vast array of political forces varying from the National Front right up to Maggie Thatcher and the Tory party who are trying to put blacks in a position of demoralization... I don’t know what contribution I can make to whatever is happening here, but I am a part of whatever is happening” (*Dread Beat an’ Blood*).

A rhetorical focus on Black criminality discursively constructs Black citizens as alien to the nation using racist claims masked as supposed arguments about culture. Thus, laws that are supposedly designed to protect rhetorically construct criminality. A prime example of this is “sus” law (“suspected person”), which allowed police to treat young Black men as suspects without crimes under an outdated 1824 Vagrancy Act that allowed “sus” searches. Speaking in his capacity as a mentor to young men as the Library Resources and Education Center Officer at the Keskidee Centre, Johnson observes that “[a] lot of the guys at Keskidee have been in trouble with the police. Many of them have grievances against the police for wrong conviction and being picked up standing at the bus stop waiting for a lift, for a bus to come and being picked up and all that, and that experience is not an experience that is particular to them but it is a general experience of Blacks in this country” (*Dread Beat an’ Blood*).

In a 1979 debate concerning amendments to the act, Parliamentarian John Fraser, a representative for one of the constituencies covering Brixton, argued for the abolishment of the “sus” offence in the Act because of “the grossly unsatisfactory nature of the offence of being a suspected person” and because “[i]n London, a substantial proportion of those arrested are black. In one age group the figure is about three-quarters. That figure is wholly disproportionate to arrests of black people generally” (1809-1810). Fraser also illustrates the absurdity of the law: charging people with being suspect, “not of committing a crime or even attempting to commit a crime, but of ‘frequenting or loitering in a place of public resort with intent to commit an arrestable offence’” (1809). Fraser notes that “sus” law is found among laws—such as sleeping rough and seeking alms—that are designed for “suppressing the symptoms of poverty” (1809).

Johnson’s 1979 poem “Sonny’s Lettah,” subtitled “(Anti-Sus Poem),” responds to the frustration with “sus” and police brutality. Regarding that poem and the album on which it was released, Johnson notes to Caesar, “I think it captured the mood of the youth of the period ... a lot of people

could identify with [it] because [‘sus’] was so prevalent an experience in the black community. You know, even Christians whose children would only go from home to Sunday School would find themselves in police stations being charged with ‘attempting to steal from persons unknown’” (69). “Sonny’s Lettah” is an epistolary poem, opening with the sender’s address, which, paired with the subtitle, tells the audience a great deal: “Brixtan Prison / Jebb Avenue / Landan south-west two / Ingran” (25). Spelling out SW2 as “south-west two” allows an audience to appreciate the rhyme of “avenue” and “two.” For Dorsía Smith, “Johnson ironically uses the private letter format to publicly critique an unjust law” (153). The epistolary form shapes the poem’s illustration of what “sus” laws do to families: this is the letter Sonny must send their mother to explain their incarceration, situating Sonny and Jim as members of a family—an older brother looking out for a younger sibling in a difficult city. As Ashley Dawson points out, Johnson’s portrayal of Sonny counters “the stereotypical views of black criminality and violence that were essential components of the moral panic that attended popular authoritarianism” (63). Sonny and Jim’s story is the story of many Black British youths: the two are targeted as they are going about their business (waiting on a bus), Jim immediately knows it’s about “sus” and mugging so he defends himself saying he isn’t thief, the police are carrying batons from the start signaling their threat, they grab Jim with no preamble, and the police are amused when Jim struggles, revealing police brutality as a source of entertainment for police.

The music that accompanies the poem is characterized by two riddims that I think of as the reflective riddim and the action riddim. Most of the poem is spoken against the reflective riddim, which is characterized by a slow reggae riddim overlaid with long harmonica notes evoking prison blues. It is the background for Sonny’s slow telling of what has happened to them. The action riddim stanzas are faster and more dramatic as they detail the police brutality the men experience and Sonny’s reaction. Robert Stewart describes the poetry on this album as a progression in Johnson’s work: “the music more obviously served the poems, rather than the poems subserving the music...Johnson’s voice was now calmer but surer; calmer but dreader” (82). The music on “Sonny’s Lettah” most definitely serves the poetry as it highlights the events Sonny must relate to his mother. The alternating between the two riddims is punctuated by strategic moments of speech with no music, short single beats, and brief, crisp silences. These patterns start when Sonny describes the policemen’s amusement to Jim’s resistance to arrest. For instance, a single beat punctuates the end of Jim’s defense against being held for “sus”— “Jim tell him fi let goh a him / far him noh dhu notn / an him naw teef, / nat even a butn” and on that beat the music drops away (26). The

silence that accompanies the lines that follow emphasizes the seriousness of the moment: “Jim start to wriggle / di police start to giggle” (26). In listening to the experiences of young people, like those he mentored at the Keskidie Centre, and in having his own experience with wrongful arrest Johnson understood that “young blacks weren’t prepared to be shoved around and pushed in a van and taken to the station and charged with sus” (*Dread Beat an’ Blood*). For Jim to defend himself is for him to stand up to racist state-sponsored oppression. Johnson’s depiction of the police giggling at Jim’s protests and attempts to be released speak to the cruelty of “sus” arrests, the terrible relations between police and Black communities, and the inflated sense of power the policemen have.

As Sonny tries to describe what happened next, he stutters, repeating “Mama / mek I tell yu whe dem dhu to Jim,” into silence. Throughout the poem the use of repetition shows the Sonny can’t bring himself to say what must be reported via his letter. These pauses, David Austin argues, “compel us to dwell and linger in the moment long enough to ponder with the poet” as this poem is meant to be heard and “can only be inadequately represented but not reproduced on the printed page” (27). In particular, his repetition of “Mama” throughout is plaintive. The music returns on the policeman’s first blow, on the word “tump” (thump) in the following lines: “dem tump him in him belly / an it turn to jelly.” This stanza is set to the action riddim with its faster pace paralleling the experience of police brutality and speed with which the altercation escalates. The stanza details the beating Jim experiences at the hands of the policemen as he is hit in the stomach, on the back, in his ribs, on his head, and in his testicles. Immediately following “dem kick him in him seed / an it started to bleed” the poem is again punctuated by a single beat, the music drops away, and Sonny addresses his mother directly: “Mama / I just coudn stan-up deh / an noh dhu notn” (26). As he starts to describe his fighting back against the police the action riddim starts again. Sonny jabs one policeman in his eye, hits another in the mouth, and kicks the third in the shin. When he hits this third policeman in the face the policeman falls:

mi tump him pan him chin
an him drap pan a bin

an crash
an ded. (26)

The space between “bin” and “an crash” on the page is heard more between “an crash” and “an ded” in the recording, but “crash” is punctuated by a single beat while the seriousness of the line “an ded” is highlighted by the silence accompanying it. The shock of the policeman’s death is clear in the abruptness of these two lines. As the policeman’s

death sinks in for the audience, a long, ominous harmonica note sounds. The two following lines, “Mama, / more policeman come dung” are accompanied by another long harmonica note and light guitar strumming, the only stanza in the poem to have this accompaniment, which suggests a long prison sentence and reinforces the seriousness and injustice of Sonny’s position for Sonny has only returned the beating the police were meting out to Jim. A single cymbal beat punctuates the space between “dung” and the next line, “an beat mi to di grung,” before the reflective riddim picks up one more to the close of Sonny’s letter.

Dub poetry in Jamaican Creole reclaims a form that has come to be closely associated with Britishness in the way that a national literature is supposed to symbolize nationhood. British poetry was exported throughout the British empire as part of the hegemonic project of imperialism. Poetic rhyme schemes associated with the Romantic poets and Shakespeare were taught as the standard in colonial schools. In an interview for the BBC documentary *Reggae Britannia*, Johnson says

We wanted to be British, we wanted to be fitting and to become a part of the society but we found ourselves in a racialize [sic] environment and this is where reggae came in. Reggae afforded us our own independent cultural identity. We were rejected by the wider society, so this was our music, this was our culture. For my generation, we were the rebel generation and we refused to tolerate what our parents had tolerated. Listening to the imports coming in from Jamaica, you could keep in touch with what was happening in the society, you could keep in touch with the language. (Marre)

Caribbean migrants to Britain had been raised in a system that taught them Britishness and, depending where their births and migrations fell on the timeline of citizenship legislation, held British citizenship. Police brutality and unjust “sus” laws showed Black Britons that, though the colonial system had encouraged their parents to consider themselves British, Britain itself would treat them as outside the sphere of Britishness and as targets rather than protected citizens.

Two years later “sus” laws facilitated “Swamp ’81,” a mass stop and search police operation, the name of which appears to originate in a comment Margaret Thatcher made the year before she was elected Prime Minister: “people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture and, you know, the British character has done so much for democracy, for law and done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in” (n.pag.). The “British character” is drawn upon in an attempt to define a deeply historic concept of Britishness exclusive of Black Britons while also claiming to be fair by calling upon democracy and law. Within the first four days of the campaign 943 people were stopped and searched by police (Gilroy *Ain’t No Black* 104).

“New Craas Massakah”

A string of events into the 1980s continued to reveal tensions between Black communities and the police, which are thought to have led to the retributive Swamp ’81 campaign, and added fuel to the 1981 Brixton civil disturbances. The first event was a fire in a house on New Cross Road in Deptford that January, which caused the deaths of thirteen young people (another victim of the fire died by suicide two years later), and came to be known as the New Cross Massacre because it is believed to have been the work of neofascists who petrol bombed the house full of young Black men and women attending a party. Ros Howells, one of the contributors to Mike and Trevor Philips’ *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain*, explains that “[w]hether it was a deliberate attack on the black community or not that was how it was seen” (340). Another contributor, Darcus Howe, former editor of *Race Today*, similarly tells the Philipses that

[t]he suspicion was that it was a racial attack. A lot of that was happening in the country at the time, in the East End of London, everywhere. So it seemed perfectly reasonable to believe that the place has been fire-bombed. I genuinely believe that, and everybody believed that at the time. A policeman told Mrs Ruddock [whose house it was] on the night of the fires that there was a fire-bomb—from his mouth came the words. (337)

Paul Gilroy notes that the term “black party” to represent loud, sound system-fueled debauchery “had become such an entrenched sign of disorder and criminality, of a hedonistic and vicious black culture which was not recognizably British” (*Ain’t No Black* 102). The police discounting a racial motive and failing to investigate thoroughly, as well as either the indifference of the media or its negative portrayals of victims, and the silence of the ruling class concerning the deaths and the community’s grief, inspired thousands to demonstrate in a march from Deptford to central London in March 1981. The community was especially frustrated over Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s and Queen Elizabeth’s silences over the New Cross Massacre, particularly when compared to their swift condolences to families and victims of a fire at a discotheque in Dublin a few weeks after the fire in Deptford. According to Mike and Trevor Philips, “[f]or West Indians the Deptford fire became emblematic of the treatment that the black migrants and their children had endured for thirty years” (324). To the police, the strategic route of the march past institutions of Black oppression and through Black neighborhoods was an embarrassing symbolic defeat. A month later the police responded with “Swamp ’81.”

Johnson's 1983 poem, "New Craas Massakah," subtitled "(to the memory of the fourteen dead)," imagines what the young people experienced in the fire. Like "Sonny's Lettah" it is characterized by more reflective sections and more active sections. However, while the active stanzas describe the scenes of the party and the fire to an easy-going reggae riddim, the reflective stanzas in "New Craas Massakah" are straight cultural criticism accompanied only by the slight echo of Johnson's voice. For Peter Hitchcock, the criticism in this poem "evokes a poignant aesthetic of song and solidarity—the 'Other' talks back, and dialogically" (8). The active stanzas, which repeat three times with variations, first describe the party, the coming and going of young people, the dancing and the music. When the crash of a petrol bomb enters, it is sudden and unexpected but the riddim is unchanged, illustrating that it must have taken a moment for the young people in the house to realize what was happening:

di dancin
 an di scankin
 an di pawty really swingin

 den di crash
 an di bang
 an di flames staat fi trang (52)

The lines in the active stanzas are short and straightforward, heavy with present participle verb forms describing the simple fun of a house party and then contrasting with the short, sharp onomatopoeias like "crash" and "bang" of the sudden attack. The cultural analysis in the reflective stanzas is an incisive critique of life in Britain. Johnson reflects that some people were surprised that this kind of thing

couda happn to wi
 inna disya Great Britn
 inna Landan tiddey
 and a few get frightn
 an a few get subdue
 ...
 far disya massakah mek wi come fi realise
 it couda be mi
 it couda be yu
 ar wan a fi wi pickney dem
 who fell victim to di terrah by nite (53)

The shock of the fire has far-reaching, traumatizing impacts on the whole community. Lines like those in the second stanza above, argues Jerome Branche, show how both the fire and Johnson's poem "served as a chilling reminder of the vulnerability of black life to anonymous sources of racist terror and underscored the perception among blacks as to their

unwelcomeness in England” (75). Though some may be subdued by fear, thousands came out for the march two months later, following the botched handling of the investigation and discriminatory press coverage. Johnson describes Black Britain turning “a fiery red...wid rage like di flames af di fyah” (54). That rage is channeled—“wi refuse fi surrendah”—as institutions which Britain holds emblematic of its society let the community down. The media (free press) publishes “innuendoh” or “prapahganda” and the police (law) have no answers about what happened. The two institutions, then, represent the “massa” in the last word of the poem’s title. “New Craas Massakah” was released in 1983, two years after the fire and protest, and is written, as its subtitle suggests, as an elegy. Johnson asks his audience to reflect with him when he asks, “yu noh remembah / how di whole a black Britn did rack wid grief...yu noh remembah / how di whole a black Britn did rack wid rage” (53-54) and to mourn the unjustness of life in Britain when he observes, “wat a terrible price wi haffi pay ... jus fi live a likkle life / jus fi struggle fi suvive” (55). This grief and rage, the frustration of structural racism, and the alienation of over-policing and immigration legislation manifested in the 1981 Brixton uprisings.

“Di Great Insohreckshan”

In April 1981, at the height of the “Swamp ‘81” campaign, violence erupted in dramatic clashes between youths and police. These continued through the summer when hundreds of young people attacked police, burned cars and buildings, and looted in Brixton and nearby areas. The title of Johnson’s 1983 poem, “Di Great Insohreckshan,” speaks to the importance of the April 1981 Brixton uprisings. As Dilek Sarikaya argues, in this poem, “[i]nstead of dealing with the frustration of being marginalized and disempowered, Johnson is concerned with the affirmation of black power with precise emphasis on the Brixton riots which have a great contribution to igniting the fires of resistance” (173). There had been a long history of uprisings and there would be others throughout 1981, but Brixton was distinctive for two reasons: first, the revolution was televised—people throughout the country could see dramatic footage of buildings burning and young people fighting policemen in riot gear; secondly, protestors used petrol bombs, which some people ascribe to the example of protestors in Northern Ireland, an association which then implicitly paints protesting British youth as “terrorists.” It was “an instant audio-visual presentation on their television sets of scenes of violence and disorder ... the like of which had not previously been seen in this century in Britain ... demonstrating to

millions ... the fragile basis of the Queen's peace" (Scarman 1). Brixton, thus, is a highly symbolic locale for Caribbean and Black British communities as it represents both the state's oppression and the community's resistance to it. As indicated above, spontaneous disorderly protest—mass conflict that police dubbed "race riots"—has been conflated with mugging—individual crime—by the term "street crime" so that "they become indistinguishable manifestations of the same basic difficulty: the black population" (Gilroy, *Ain't No Black* 106).

The protests that occurred that summer were not the first of their type in the city's history, nor would they be the last; however, as a decade in general the 1980s seem to have been characterized by them because of their visibility and their historical factors—recession, the movement from welfare state to control state, the coming of age of an increasingly politicized generation with a new relationship to the British nation, decades of work by community organizers and local-level politicians to improve circumstances, and further development of globalization. These "riots" would be characterized as random, spontaneous deviance or crudely reactive, but there was something more purposeful to them: participants in the uprising made comments to reporters that indicate that the "riots" were in fact in protest of the community's limited access to the rights of citizenship, including over policing; the high selectivity in terms of what property was destroyed by participants (a shopping complex versus a welfare rights center); crowd censorship of participants who attempted to attack the wrong targets or of participants who tried to fight amongst themselves; hostility to the journalists from media outlets known for their negative representations of Black communities; and that the violence was self-contained and did not generally spread beyond symbolic community boundaries (Gilroy, *Ain't No Black* 238-243). The "riots" were gestures of political resistance the ruling class viewed through the lens of crime. The conservative response was to condemn the civil disturbances on the basis of their criminality: arson and other forms of destruction of property, theft (looting), violence. Gilroy notes, importantly, that the state's ongoing refusal to acknowledge a political element to some aspects of crime is indicative of "a response by the state to collective political action which it does not wish to legitimate" ("Police and Thieves" 150).

Regardless, most analyses of the events—such as those by cultural critics like Gilroy and Hall—take state-sanctioned oppression and over-policing as primary causes of the political resistance; other, interrelated causes include systemic poverty, poor housing, unemployment, a discriminatory educational system, and widely spread racial discrimination. Even the official report following the inquiry into the disturbances, *The Brixton Disorders 10-12 April 1981: Report of an Inquiry by the Rt. Hon. the Lord Scarman, OBE*, also simply called "The

Scarman Report”—a document written by a member of the lawmaking ruling class after months of inquiry and the receipt of evidence from a range of interested parties—found that “oppressive policing over a period of years, and in particular the harassment of young blacks on the streets of Brixton” to be an overwhelming cause and that “the disorders, like so many riots in British history, were a protest against society by people . . . who saw in a violent attack upon the forces of law and order their one opportunity of compelling public attention to their grievances,” while still acknowledging that even these two arguments could not describe the situation in full (1-2).

Johnson’s social commentary on the uprisings in “Di Great Insohreckshan” is again incisive, as both the best poetry and the best Caribbean music tend to be. Renaming an event framed as a “race riot” as a great “insohreckshan” is an act of resistance in itself, while the poem’s celebration of the Brixton uprisings and delivery in Patwah resist the hegemony of the British state. This reframing is reinforced in stanzas celebrating actions which the state views as an affront to its values of law and order or respecting private property. Protesters in the uprising were deliberate in their choice of vehicles and buildings to burn, as Johnson describes in the poem with lines like “wi mash-up plenty police van,” “dem a taak bout di powah an di glory / dem a taak bout di burnin an di lootin / dem a taak bout di smashin an di grabin,” or “wi bun dung di George [a public house] / wi nevah bun di lanlaad” (58-9). Johnson rightly identifies the important place the Brixton uprisings would have to Black British communities and in the nation’s history, pinning the cause on over-policing and Swamp ’81:

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 trully an historikal occayshan (58)

Johnson uses phonetic spelling, true to the dub poetry form, but his choice of capitalization is also compelling. Johnson capitalizes “Brixtan” but does not capitalize the name of the month or the word “babylan”—his phonetic spelling of Babylon. Babylon represents the oppressive nation state and its agents, the police. This absence of capitalization speaks to his resistance to the state-sponsored oppression. After the Brixton uprising, disturbances “spread all owevah di naeshan” throughout the summer in Southall, Toxteth in Liverpool, Handsworth in Birmingham, Chapeltown in Leeds, Bolton, Luton, Leicester, Nottingham, and elsewhere. The point of the fight to “mash-up di Swamp Eighty Wan,” as Johnson puts it in this

poem, is to “mek di rulah dem anastan / dat wi naw tek noh more a dem oppresshan” (58). The actions of the protesters are not only to release frustration, as some observers would claim, but had larger, symbolic meaning. As the poet-griot, Johnson captures the significance of this moment in his work.

Looking Forward

Ultimately Johnson’s poetry is not only historical record or cultural criticism, both of which it is, certainly. It is also the lyrical voice of hope for Britain’s oppressed communities in its vocalization of resistance from within the former metropole of the British empire. “Di Great Insohreckshan” ends with the observation than the state, via the police, will “goh plan countah-ackshan” with “plastic bullit an di waatah kannan” but this “will bring a blam-blam” (59). “New Craas Massakah” calls for the fourteen young people to be remembered and holds investigators accountable for their lack of answers. “Sonny’s Lettah” closes with Sonny telling his mother “don’t get depress / an doun-hearted. Be af good courage” (27). “Inglan is a Bitch” closes with the repetition of the inescapability of the hard life in England but then asks “is whe wi a goh dhu bout it?” (39). The Brixton uprisings as a response to state-sponsored oppression seem to answer this question: resist.

A note on the text

Postcolonial Text’s online publication facilitates sharing links to recordings of the dub poetry discussed in this text. Live hyperlinks to poems posted to YouTube.com appear throughout the article so that the reader may pause and listen to the poetry. Of course, I do not own the rights to this music and have no control over its availability.

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